

Responding to Revisionist Theologies of Sexuality

Theological debate on sexuality and gender has typically been cast in terms of a division between ‘traditionalism’ and ‘revisionism’, where the former is aligned with those identified as ‘evangelical’ and the latter with those aligned to ‘liberalism’. This Workshop will show that a more nuanced approach is now needed if those who wish to uphold a biblical understanding are to make their case in an effective way. In particular, it will seek to demonstrate how classic evangelicals can best answer revisionist approaches that might distinctively be defined as: exegetical, canonical, thematic, therapeutic, illuminist and intradenominational.

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1.0 The Blurring of Former Dichotomies and the Need for a More Clearly Defined *Classic Evangelical Approach*

1.1 *Historic Dichotomies*

Evangelical = Traditionalist v. Liberal = Revisionist approaches to LGBTQ+. E.g.:

Dan O. Via (‘Nontraditional’) & Robert A.J. Gagnon (‘Traditional’) *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003).

Preston Sprinkle (ed.), William Loader, Megan DeFranza (‘Affirming’), Wesley Hill & Stephen R. Holmes (‘Traditional’), *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*. (Zondervan, 2016)

1.2 *Attempting to Dissolve Historic Dichotomies: ‘Affirming/Accepting/Including’ Evangelicalism*

Maintaining ‘evangelical’ self-description despite embracing revisionist approaches to key biblical texts, theological understandings and hermeneutical approaches on LGBTQ+. E.g.:

David Atkinson (1994), Michael Vasey (1995), James Brownson (2013), Steve Chalke (2013), David Runcorn (2013), Matthew Vines (2014), Mark Achtemeir (2014), Tony Campolo (2015), Jen Hatmaker (2016), Jayne Ozanne (2016), James Jones (2016), David Ison (2016), Vicky Beeching (2018), Steven Croft (2022).

Accepting Evangelicals UK - <https://www.facebook.com/acceptingevangelicals/> Part of One Body One Faith since 2021 - <https://www.onebodyonefaith.org.uk/news/1b1f-ae/>

1.3 *Responding to the Challenge: Emphasising Classic Evangelicalism*

- Thomas Oden – *Classic Christianity* (1992): ‘consensual ecumenical teaching’ based on primacy of Scripture, and apostolic, patristic and credal doctrine.

- Oliver Barclay (UCCF Gen Sec 1964-80) - *Classical Evangelicalism* (1997):
 - Exemplified by John Stott
 - ‘Original, biblical, apostolic Christianity’
 - Reformation framings
 - Bebbington’s Quadrilateral (Biblicism, Crucicentism, Conversionism, Activism + *Christocentricity*)
 - Distinct from Fundamentalism
 - Distinct from Liberal Evangelicalism re:
 - Primacy, reliability, sufficiency and final authority of Scripture
 - Substitutionary atonement
 - Necessity of new birth
- Gregory Alan Thornbury (Union University, Jackson, Tn.)
 - *Recovering Classic Evangelicalism* (2013)
 - Exemplified by Carl Henry, plus John Stott, J.I. Packer
 - Propositionalist/foundationalist epistemology (v. postfoundationalism of ‘Evangelical Left’, e.g., Stanley Grenz, John Franke, Kevin Vanhoozer)
 - Biblical inerrancy v. Barthian ‘dynamic infallibilism’ (Bruce McCormack)

1.4 Advantages of ‘Classic’ as Qualifier

- Avoidance of party-political/secular ideological connotations of Conservatism
- Emphasis on tradition *and* enduring relevance of ‘original, apostolic, biblical’ Christianity:
 - Lat. *Classicus; classici* – typical or definitive of a class of things (OED)
 - Effortlessly contemporaneous with all ages (Augustin Saint-Beuve)
 - A mature representation of something, ‘with history behind it’ (T.S. Eliot)

2.0 Classic Evangelical Approaches to Sexuality and Gender from Recent Years: Case Study: the Evangelical Alliance UK

2.1 Core statements

...marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman enter into exclusive relationship for life. Marriage is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations and homoerotic sexual practice is incompatible with His will as revealed in Scripture... We commend and encourage all those who experience same-sex attraction and have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from homoerotic sexual practice. (*Biblical & Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, 2012, Affirmations 3 & 7).

We affirm God’s love and concern for all humanity, but believe that God creates human beings as either male or female. Authentic change from a person’s given sex is not possible and an ongoing transsexual lifestyle is incompatible with God’s will as revealed in Scripture and in creation. (*Transsexuality*, 2000, p.85).

Whilst we seek to support those struggling with gender dysphoria, we can resist and oppose forms of transgender ideology which offer alternative, radically secular ideas about what it means to be human. (*Transformed*, 2018, p.29).

2.2 Key biblical texts taken as underlying above Classic Evangelical statements:

- **OT:** *Genesis 1-2; Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13; Deuteronomy 22:5; 23:5*
- **NT:** *Matthew 19:12; 22:23-33; Romans 1:26-27; I Corinthians 6:1-11; I Timothy 1:10*

3.0 Revisionist Approaches and Classic Evangelical Responses

Type	Revisionist Argument	Classic Evangelical Response
<p>1 Exegetical</p>	<p>Contested biblical texts do not mean what they have traditionally been taken to mean. Homoerotic relations and depictions of transgendered practices in biblical contexts are more limited in type, more fleeting, more promiscuous or more overtly idolatrous than faithful, stable same-sex bonds or transgender identities today. Also, certain texts (e.g., Matt. 22:30) suggest that marriage and sex are subject to eschatological change.</p> <p><i>Advocates: Countryman, Helminiak, Loader, Sharpe, Thatcher, Brownson, Vines, Song, Davison, De Franza.</i></p>	<p>A sufficient number of contested biblical texts prohibiting homoerotic relations and transgender identities do in fact bear universal and timeless application, and cannot be discounted in pursuit of an LGBTQ+-affirming theology. Marriage may develop or change in the eschaton, but there is no evidence that sexual relations deemed sinful now will be sanctified then.</p> <p><i>Refuters: Gagnon, Schmidt, Grenz, Hays, Webb, Paul, Yarhouse, Walker.</i></p>
<p>2 Thematic</p>	<p>Biblical macro-trajectories of love, justice, compassion, equality, fidelity etc. supervene micro-exegesis of a limited number of contested texts on sexuality and gender.</p> <p><i>Advocates: John, Stuart, Vasey, Davison, Brownson, Tutu, Scott King</i></p>	<p>Such macro-trajectories are misconstrued if taken to exonerate practices that Scripture more specifically condemns as sinful. This would undermine the authority and plenary inspiration of the Bible, and would raise serious problems for the doctrine of God with respect to divine constancy and/or immutability.</p> <p><i>Refuters: Webb, Gagnon, Grant, O'Donovan.</i></p>
<p>3 Canonical</p>	<p>Contested biblical texts <i>do</i> mean what they have traditionally been taken to mean: Scripture can be homophobic/transphobic. Yet those texts can be bracketed off as culturally captive to outmoded mores. All biblical application <i>de facto</i> deploys ‘canons within the canon’; biblical texts on sexuality and gender are no exception, and when uniformly condemnatory of homoerotic relations and trans identities, can be consigned to history. God can speak through contemporary culture as well as Scripture.</p> <p><i>Advocates: Vio, Wink, MacCulloch, Johnson.</i></p>	<p>Unless specifically abrogated by later biblical texts, we have no right as Christians to ‘decommission’ culturally incongruent verses or passages. All Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), and God’s Word stands forever (1 Pet. 1:25). In any case, subsequent cultural trends might deem such decommissioning misguided.</p> <p><i>Refuters: Gagnon, Schmidt, Webb, Paul</i></p>
<p>4 Therapeutic</p>	<p>Overarching biblical imperatives of wholeness, healing and human flourishing must take precedence when people who might be LGBTQ+</p>	<p>This model falls foul of a consequentialist ethical reasoning that presumes to associate humanistically-construed</p>

	<p>suffer illness, distress or suicidality through seeking to accord with classic Christian sexual morality. God would not want them to suffer; as such, they must be affirmed and supported in embracing an LGBTQ+ lifestyle or identity.</p> <p><i>Advocates: Achtemeir, Vines, Chalke, Beeching</i></p>	<p>therapeutic ‘ends’ with divine intentions towards, and definitions of, wholeness/wellbeing as defined in Scripture. It also aligns suffering too readily with virtue, when it can, in fact, be a corollary or outworking of sin. Christians, however, are called to care for those who suffer in any case.</p> <p><i>Refuters: Butterfield, Hill Perry, Ould, Shaw</i></p>
5 Illuministic	<p>God can directly speak to or otherwise directly convince people who might be LGBTQ+ oriented to embrace an LGBTQ+ lifestyle or identity.</p> <p><i>Advocates: Ozanne, Beeching</i></p>	<p>Prophecies, visions, pictures, dreams and other theophanies can only be deemed divine if they accord with Scripture, which is superior in authority.</p> <p><i>Refuters: Harrison, Grant</i></p>
6 Intrad denominational	<p>Biblical imperatives of bodily unity apply to local, national and international churches/denominations. To preserve this unity at a higher level, such churches/denominations might formally accommodate divergences on sexuality and gender between different congregations, networks and parties through such measures as local options, conscience clauses and alternative oversight.</p> <p><i>Advocates: Green, Welby, Croft</i></p>	<p>Such theological reasoning presumes that matters of sex, gender and marriage are ‘secondary’ by comparison with imperatives of ecclesial unity. Yet Jesus, took marriage to be at least as crucial to Christian community and society (Matt. 19: 1-12). Besides, the unity of a particular <i>denomination</i> is not the same as the unity of Christ’s body/the Church as a whole. ‘Agreeing to disagree’ on a matter of core doctrinal orthodoxy is in any event a false prospectus.</p> <p><i>Refuters: GAFCON, CEEC</i></p>

4.0 Conclusion

- The need to identify varied forms of revisionism, as per the above framework.
- The need to respond to different forms of revisionism with appropriate counter-arguments.
- The need to engage in debate on sex and gender with theological integrity and pastoral grace.

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