

Transcript of an interview with Rowland Croucher, author of 'Beyond Stereotypes: Christians & Homosexuality (The Evangelical Alliance Working Group on Human Sexuality), Australian Evangelical Alliance, 2009, 108 pages.

My thesis (RC): Evangelicals who believe in 'the supreme authority of the Scriptures' have come a long way in terms of freedom for slaves, equality for women, and grace for the divorced, and are now on a similar journey as they relate to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people.

Interviewer (to Evangelical Church Leader): Remember when, just a couple of generations ago, we used to fight about Christians not dancing, not drinking alcohol, not remarrying after divorce, not working on Sabbath/Sunday, not giving leadership roles to women etc.? What's the current situation?

Evangelical Church Leader: *Wow, yes, times have changed haven't they? Significant paradigm shifts have occurred in all these areas – and others. Now we allow divorced people to be leaders, even pastors; now many Christians drink alcohol – hopefully in moderation; these days we can cope with whatever people do on Sundays (they can even enjoy themselves!); and yes, we have women in leadership at every level in our denomination. (And once we could make an excellent case from the Bible against these positions).*

I: OK let's talk about sex. In your evangelical tradition, what's prohibited?

ECL: *That's simple, really: no sex before marriage, no adultery after marriage, no sex between people of the same gender.*

I: *So fornication, adultery, homosexual sex are out. Which is worse of these three areas of sinfulness?*

ECL: *They're all equally sinful.*

I: Are they? Has your denomination had a task-force on homosexuality?

ECL: *Yes, every denomination has.*

I: On adultery?

ECL: *No, we leave discipline in that area to local churches, unless pastors are involved, and they're disciplined according to best-practice protocols.*

I: Fornication?

ECL: *Our pastors preach against it, and do pre-marriage counseling in this area, and that's about it.*

I: Do you know the incidence of church members (especially young people) who marry in your churches who've had sexual intercourse before their wedding-day?

ECL: *No, but I guess it would be a majority.*

I: Not only is it a majority, but according to surveys among pastors who really know their people, it's somewhere between 70-90% in mainline evangelical churches in Western countries. Now, if all three areas of 'sexual sinfulness' are to attract attention/discipline, wouldn't you think that area would too?

ECL: *Sure, when you put it like that.*

I: But it doesn't eh? Why is that?

ECL: *I frankly don't know.*

I: I'll tell you. The rationale is not theological but personal – they're our children! The problem is not what we believe, but what the Chinese call 'face'!

I for one call that gross hypocrisy: no wonder thoughtful people despise churches for such 'selective indignation'. [1]

In my work as a counselor-of-clergy (and others) over the past 25 years, theological and pastoral issues surrounding the complexities of this subject have come up hundreds of times. It's currently the # 1 issue-of-contention in churches around the world. Here are just two very common cries-from-the-heart I hear regularly:

* 'Rowland, I want to be faithful to the Scriptures, but when I counsel homosexuals pastorally my "proof-texting" approach isn't working. When asked what my position is I've used the old mantra about 'hating the sin and loving the sinner' but the response is always 'But then why don't I *feel* loved by people who say that?'

* Or: 'I'm nineteen, and have been sent to you by my pastor and parents. My father is an elder in the church I've attended all my life. Last month I finally 'came out' and told my family I'm gay. I think I've always been that way, I didn't choose to be erotically attracted to other guys, but women just don't turn me on at all. I'm a committed Christian and want to be faithful to God's Word, but this whole thing is tearing me apart. I've recently heard of two young

people like me who've committed suicide because they couldn't cope with the negative responses they got when they came out. What am I to do?'

'Sometimes I feel like the most liberal person among conservatives; and sometimes like the most conservative among liberals. How am I to fit together my religious past with my spiritual present?' (Philip Yancey [2])

I can relate to that. Theologically, I'm evangelical in roughly the same way Bishop N T Wright is: 'I believe in the authority of Scripture. I believe in the appropriate sub-authority of tradition – respecting the wisdom of the church as it has wrestled with issues. But I also believe passionately in the importance of reason. ' [3] .

(An important little digression. A woman parishioner was married to a diagnosed psychopath, who beat her and her children, sometimes to the point of their being hospitalized. I talked with them both, and he denied it all. Eventually, she said 'I can't stay: I can cope but I don't want to bring up my children in this fearful violent home.' I agreed with her, and eventually she divorced her husband. By the way, he had a gun, and threatened to shoot me. Question: on what grounds did I have the authority to encourage her? The Bible? Not on its own: there's no 'exception clause' in terms of divorce for domestic violence, only for adultery. Tradition? No: the church has been predominantly patriarchal. Reason? Well, yes, but sanctified by grace. I did what I believe Jesus would have done. The majority of Christians – even conservative Christians these days – agree with that approach in this sort of situation. Keep this analogy in mind as we discuss this other great paradigm-shift).

Re homosexuality, Wright goes on to say: 'The more I've been on the edge of the debates the more I'm aware of the complexity of the issues.' which is why, he says, he hasn't (yet) published anything substantive on the subject. [4] I'm also not ready to write a major piece on this topic, so my approach here will have a tentative flavour about it.

However, when I read the Australian Evangelical Alliance's *Beyond Stereotypes* I realize that I'm on the progressive end of the evangelical spectrum. I was for some years a member of the Council of the Victorian Evangelical Alliance, and was invited in the 1980s to be Australian national director for the EA. I know

most of the people on this working group – a couple are close/good friends. They have done a good job – over three years – to produce this 108-page study-guide which, as far as it goes, is thorough, readable and irenic.

‘Evangelical’ clergy/pastors/scholars can *very roughly* be categorized four ways. Judgmental fundamentalists tell me ‘I preach the Word. I don’t compromise. It’s then up to individuals to respond or not: that’s their choice.’ (Crazies in this group – like the Westboro Baptist Church people – hold up placards at gays’ funerals proclaiming ‘God hates fags’). Conservative Evangelicals: ‘Scripture is clear: even though a homosexual’s orientation might not be *chosen*, their only life-choice is to be celibate.’ Progressive Evangelicals tend to identify with Tony Campolo’s well-known advice (paraphrased): ‘Even if our approach is to affirm the authority of Scripture, we must do more than simply exhort these people to be celibate.’ More radical Evangelicals: ‘The Bible has to be interpreted in its socio-cultural context. The same-sex liaisons behind the biblical prohibitions related either to exploitative sex or sexual rites in pagan religious contexts. A homosexual ‘orientation’ as such wasn’t known back then.’ [5]

Now that’s all dangerously simplistic of course. The nuances within each approach can’t be confined to one generalizing paragraph. And note I’m not talking about people like Bishop Spong who are certainly not ‘Evangelical’ in the sense I’m using the term.

Three of the ‘working-group’ which produced *Beyond Stereotypes* were clergy, three laypersons; five men, one woman. None were (of course?) practising homosexuals, though one of them – Debra Hirsch – confessed to having lived for a while as a lesbian.

On the first page of the Preface, the authors deplore ‘simply arguing about texts’ and express a ‘deep concern that the church was often handling the issue in a judgmental or unloving [way]’. But they also deplore a ‘cavalier’ approach to ‘the truth’ (p.v). This grace/truth tension pervades the whole book. Many times we come across something like this: ‘We acknowledge that homosexual people have been needlessly hurt and made to feel that God’s love is withheld from them. This is a great wrong.’ (p.5).

Their conclusions are standard ‘conservative evangelical’. Like:

* 'Genetic determinism for sexual orientation is unlikely' (p.29). (My note: yes, scientists haven't found a 'gay gene' but they haven't found a heterosexual gene either).

* 'There is no research that proves that upbringing or early development is responsible for the direction of sexual orientation in adults' (p.32). (Though I have found Elizabeth Moberly's notion that homosexuality is a reparative drive, an attempt to repair a lack of affection from significant others of the same sex useful in some – but not all – counselling situations).

* Then we confront the explosive question 'Can sexual orientation change?' Spitzer's 2003 study of 'aversive therapy' with 200 subjects leads our working-group to conclude that yes, 'if there is a will for change, change is possible – though not necessarily easy and not necessarily complete.' (One of the important questions we face here, of course, is the longer-term effectiveness of such 'therapy'. I for one am pessimistic, having listened to stories of people who submitted to 'aversive therapy' in the 1980s and 90s. Spitzer is very critical of the way conservative groups use his research [6]).

* The section dealing with the biblical material begins, commendably, with an affirmation that all – whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-gendered or straight – are made in God's image and are deeply loved by God. But Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 cannot be simply dismissed as a matter of 'pre-modern ignorance' (p. 38). Although ceremonial, sacrificial, food, hygiene etc. laws have been superseded by 'the coming of Jesus and the inauguration of a new age' (p.38), what of the 'moral law' and behavior described as an 'abomination'? Well, Jesus inaugurated 'a time of grace. [to the adulterous woman] he offers both forgiveness and a call for repentance' (p.40).

* Jesus 'took people back to first principles and reaffirmed the divine plan of male-female complementarity.' (pp.41,42). (It's interesting that Jesus' comment about eunuchs 'born that way' – Matthew 19:12 – isn't, I think, mentioned).

* 'Paul' (1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10) 'was not homophobic. Same-sex sexual activity is listed along with a range of [other sins] – adultery, theft, greed, drunkenness, slander. Christians have been wrong to single out homosexual sin for special condemnation' (p.43). Romans 1:26-7 'refers to

homosexuality. not pederasty (homosexual relationship to children).'. Paul calls homosexual activity 'unnatural'.

* In terms of the law of the land, our authors affirm that Christians of all people should encourage fairness – whatever our opinion of same-sex unions, divorce, the protection of children etc.

* 'We affirm that monogamous heterosexual marriage is the only form of partnership approved by God for full sexual relations today. Erotic homosexual relationships are sinful' (p.56). It may not be possible to determine with certainty the 'causes' of a person's sexual orientation, so we should avoid condemning those with a homosexual orientation. On the other hand we face 'the reality that many aspects of human physical and social life need to be redeemed'. So we must avoid blanket 'condemnation and also commendation'. (p.57).

The book concludes with two appendices: Deb Hirsch's 'conservative-to-progressive' and Bill Lawton's 'radical' approach to these key questions.

I commend the working group for doing the hard work of facing the tough issues, and providing excellent discussion questions.

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Now for some of my main concerns (I'll write more on these and other issues when I've done further research/reflection on them. Meanwhile see [7]):

1. Hermeneutics: 1-1. Suffering vs. Proof-texting. In the Gospels Jesus uses 'the Bible' to counter the temptations of the Devil and the criticisms of the 'Bible people' – the religious leaders. Jesus' teaching about the poor and marginalized is done via example (partying with them) and parables. Why? Theologian Jurgen Moltmann has given us one of the best rationales for a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' about proof-texting on matters of social justice: 'In Christian theology suffering must precede thinking. Christian theology becomes relevant when it accepts solidarity with present suffering.' [8] Why? Because it's possible (probable?) that one can know the Bible but miss the point. I hear a very different hermeneutic from those who work with AIDs patients than from over-educated, white, heterosexual predominantly male

elites. (The authors of *Beyond Stereotypes* belong to this group. There is little indication – except for Deb Hirsch and the out-of-sync Bill Lawton – that they had immersed themselves in the ‘gay scene’ to hear the stories of these often marginalized people. I would have recommended also that a couple of GenX’ers with their ‘why the fuss about all this?’ approach should have been invited on to the panel).

1-2. More specifically, the two common contexts in the ancient world addressed by the same-sex prohibitions – cultic sex, and exploitative sex, for example with slaves – are, according to the majority of non-conservative commentators, the background to the prohibitions against same-sex liaisons. The life-long exclusive/faithful commitment of two persons of the same sex was extremely uncommon in the ancient world (except occasionally among aristocratic elites).

1-3. The radical re-orientation of the early Christians towards Levitical prohibitions – eg. the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts – surely addresses not only forbidden foods etc. , but everything else in the Holiness Code as well. See Keith Dyer’s article [5] for an excellent discussion of this important point.

2. Aetiology: (a) Most theological and social conservatives believe a homosexual orientation is somehow caused by one’s own choices or factors in the person’s environment; (b) most scientific researchers believe homosexuality has an ‘in-utero’ origin. Most of the twin studies seem to favour the latter view. See [9] for a useful summary of the pros and cons. I reckon the jury’s still out on this one (but the gays and lesbians I talk to overwhelmingly believe they were born that way).

3. Should churches discriminate against homosexuals in terms of ministry leadership etc.? Only if people who are guilty of ‘sins of the spirit’ – greed, hypocrisy, slander etc. – are treated the same way!

4. As a pastor/pastoral counsellor, whom should I ‘bless’? Only one category of persons actually – those made in God’s image. I tend not to bless institutions (they’re inherently degenerative, as sociologist Robert Merton used to say). I hear all sorts of crazy confessions, every week. But I can’t think of anyone I’m not prepared to bless. I reckon Jesus today would still do that with people on the margins: and no one is more marginalized – indeed traumatized – than

‘GLBT’ people who have been rejected by their biological and/or church families.

5. How can I, a heterosexual (currently ‘coming out’ as an ex-Pharisee), who’s been very happily married for 53 years tell anyone they have to accept their lonely/celebrate existence due mostly to factors utterly beyond their control? (The priest and the Levite in Jesus’ parable would certainly have had their conservative theology all sorted out. but the wounded wayfarer is still bleeding on the Jericho Road.)

6. Finally, how should we behave towards one another during paradigm shifts? With great humility, love and tolerance.

Conclusion: The Lord has yet more light and truth – and grace – to be discovered in his holy Word. Let us be patient with our conservative friends as they catch up with ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ about relating with grace to our GLBT brothers and sisters.

[1] Note: you’re wondering who did the research on that 70-90% figure? I did, with hundreds of pastors at dozens of pastors’ conferences.

[2] Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, 2001, p.5

[3] YouTube video – <http://jmm.org.au/articles/22687.htm> . But I – Rowland – would add – ‘and also personal, empathetic experience – of God and others’. I reckon we won’t get anywhere in debates on this subject, without this dimension.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] See this excellent article by evangelical New Testament scholar Dr. Keith Dyer –<http://jmm.org.au/articles/20763.htm>

[6] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwE6_dLweYo

[7] Use the search facility for this website to study the pros and cons of the issues.

[8] See e.g. *Hope and Planning* (1971), *A Theology of Hope* (1964)

[9] http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_caus3.htm