

Kevin Comes Out on Gay Marriage

Media and Christian reaction to Mr Rudd's recent announcement regarding his change of mind on gay marriage has included speculation and cynicism about its timing. One ungracious reaction threatened an unlikely and unauthorised complete Christian rejection of him at the polls. Both of these reactions distract from dealing with the important content and process involved in the announcement. Mr Rudd's 'coming out' on the gay marriage issue should be respected as a considered Christian statement of his conscience and account of his change of mind on the issue two weeks before it is put to a vote. As such the statement will be helpful, if not necessarily completely persuasive, to many Christians struggling with the issue: wrestling over it with family and loved ones, friends and colleagues, Christians and non-Christians, in poignant pastoral situations, like Kevin's Pentecostal former staffer.

I'd like to comment on Mr Rudd's arguments in the following order: biblical/theological, empirical, and political.

Biblical and Theological Issues

Kevin Rudd argues from Aquinas' accommodation of faith and reason to reject oppressive, biblically literalist or fundamentalist perspectives. It is true that faith does seek understanding, but this tradition of the three big A's of theology—Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas—still prioritised Scripture, using reason to understand it, while *standing under* it.

Rudd is right that Scripture has been used or rather abused to support slavery. Certain 'fundamentalists' took *ad hoc* counsels on surviving in slavery situations to argue that it endorsed the institution. Slavery, like divorce, was permitted because of human hardness of heart – it was not God's original or final purpose (Mt 19:8-9). William Wilberforce and his collaborators rightly rejected 'wooden' readings of slavery texts in the light of the prominent themes and direction of Scripture that supported the emancipation of slaves. The continuance of slavery was incompatible with their being created in the image of God – 'am I not a man and a brother?' - and redeemed from the slavery of sin in the Gospel.

However, Rudd exaggerates that women could be bashed within an inch of their lives without being able to get a divorce. Jesus clearly upheld Moses' permission regarding women's rights to divorce (Matthew 19) as an expression of the love command and the need to minimise harm. However, he also upheld the original, created purpose of marriage for *all* people, not just Jews or Christians, as one man and one wife for life.

William Webb's book *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* shows how Scripture was ahead of surrounding cultures on slaves and women, but was strongly counter-cultural in its opposition to homosexual practice. This was based on universal, natural, creational understanding of our sexual ecology, and of the basic equality, unity and complementarity of male and female (Gen 1:26-28; 2:23-25).

Rudd might also ask regarding gay marriage, “WWBD?” That is, “What would Bonhoeffer (his hero and mine) do?” Rudd sees Bonhoeffer as a model for Christian political action. How did Bonhoeffer interpret Scripture on this issue? Just as he has done previously regarding Aborigines and refugees, Rudd could no doubt take his bearings from Bonhoeffer’s biblically based ‘view from below’, from the perspective of those who suffer, like the Jews in Hitler’s Germany.

Rudd is right to seek to minimise the suffering of the gay community, and his government did so with my support and most Christians’ support, including the Australian Christian Lobby, by eliminating discriminatory legislation. But Bonhoeffer clearly upheld Scripture’s prohibition of homosexual practice. He saw our embodied humanity, expressed as male and female, as something not simply subject to the social re/constructions of ‘man come of age’. Instead, it is an expression of God’s trans-cultural creation mandate to all people for all time, linking the generations, as a form of generational justice. (See the chapters by Max Champion and Kevin Rudd in *Bonhoeffer Down Under*, ed. Gordon Preece and Ian Packer (www.atfpres.com).)

Empirical Issues

Kevin Rudd has obviously wrestled with these. The most critical issue for him and me has been the issue of children. He’s right. In fact, in proclaiming the rights of consenting gay adults and the State to re-define marriage, our society has been blind to the fact that marriage is normally a package deal including children. We have developed the new ‘ism’ of Adultism. Despite the authorities Kevin cites, other equally eminent authorities and studies indicate problems for children of gay parents. The jury is still out on this empirical issue.

Rather than getting into the game of “this study says, that study says”, it is clear from the Australian Ambrose Survey of late 2011 that while respondents were split roughly 50-50 on gay marriage, 73% of these believed it is best for children to be raised by both parents, one of each of the opposite sex. The heroism of many single parents, including Rudd’s does not deny this. In fact, many would be the first to recognise it. President Obama, while supporting gay marriage, as a child of a single-parent home, abandoned by his father, saw the need for his fatherhood initiative (on which my friend Dale Kuehne sits) to encourage the role of both sexes, especially the neglected role of men, in parenting,.

Further, the rights of children (and parents) to know their biological kin is safeguarded by UN conventions on children’s rights. This knowledge is very significant for children’s identity and sense of heritage. In situations of surrogacy for gay parents, this is highly problematic. Elton John’s and his partner David’s second child will have two mothers: an egg supplier and a gestational carrier. By legal contract, as with the first child, the mother/s have no legal right to contact their child. But this is a denial of the human rights of the child and the parents. (Not to mention it is extremely confusing!). In this emerging surrogacy ‘industry’, there are concerns also over the evident, gross exploitation and commodification of many poor Indian (and western) motivated by desperation and poverty.

However, Rudd has a valid concern that given many state authorities have already allowed (non-commercial) surrogacy and adoption for gays, the Commonwealth should encourage the most stable relational context possible for these children, i.e. marriage. This is true, but unfortunately gay partnerships and marriages are much less stable than heterosexual partnerships and marriages, in that order.

The jury is also still out on the empirical issues of being 'born gay'. No gay gene or gay 'brain' has been discovered, only hypothesised and promoted and sensationalised in the media. There may be a significant genetic component in sexual inclinations, and some are conscious of gay inclinations from an early age, which should lead us to be pastorally sensitive. But we are all also responsible for what we do with various orientations we may inherit. Many gays resist and deny this popular rhetoric of genetic determinism.

Political and Church-State issues

Here I think Rudd is on his strongest ground. We live in a secular, pluralist society where most people, even some religious people, get married outside churches. Tim Keller notes that many younger Evangelicals, appreciating the Anabaptist critique of Christendom's coercion of non-Christian society, disagree with homosexual practice but not necessarily state-based gay marriages. I am an Anglican Anabaptist and on the record (on ABC Religion & ethics online) as open to having separate state and religious marriages. It is likely, though not necessarily *inevitable* that we will have gay marriages soon. (But inevitability is a poor and bullying category confusion of futurology and chronology with morality—"sit down and shut up you're in the way of the future!"). Nonetheless, it is best that we prepare as Christians to separate state and church marriages.

However, concerns about the whole range of the vulnerable, those from below, the voiceless, the children, surrogates and gays themselves make me hesitate about simply conceding politically and compel me to continue discussing this issue. I understand ACL's concerns over whether Mr Rudd's genuine desire to safeguard church rights to their own rites for heterosexual couples will be fully safeguarded. The European Court is unlikely to back up Mr Cameron's guarantee of the rights of the Church of England in this regard if gay marriage is approved by the House of Lords. Family First in New Zealand has recently had its charitable status taken away, with considerable financial consequences, due to its opposition to gay marriage.

Finally, I have concerns that allowing the State to redefine the millennia-old institution of marriage, rather than merely regulating and legally recognising it, is a form of *statism*, a 'Big Brother' intrusion into the bedrooms and cots of the nation, and an impulsive denial of the wisdom of the ages, across all cultures.

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