

Letter to John Stott

In March 1999 I relinquished the pastorate at Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge England where I had served as senior minister for twenty years. In June of that year I confessed to my wife the long struggle I had experienced throughout our marriage with my underlying homosexual orientation. I explained that I had resigned my pastoral ministry and was planning a two year study-leave so that I could reflect on this matter further. She asked me to correspond with an old friend on the issue: John Stott, the Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, Langham Place in London. Not surprisingly, John wrote urging me in the strongest terms to resist any thoughts of compromise with homosexuality. His letters are confidential but below you will find a slightly edited version of one of my replies.

To: Rev. Dr. John Stott

From: Dr. Roy Clements

20th August 1999

Dear John,

First let me say a sincere thank you for your willingness to correspond with me at this time. In this letter I want to respond briefly to some of your comments in the hope that you will understand where I now stand on the "gay" issue.

Let me begin by saying that I agree with you when you assert that neither the possible existence of a homosexual gene nor the experience of falling in love with someone of the same sex ipso facto provides a moral justification for gay relationships. However, accepting that gayness is, in many cases at least, built into a person's identity rather than a piece of learned behaviour greatly affects one's expectations of change. Changing behaviour is a matter of the will alone. Once moral victory is achieved and conduct is re-educated the person concerned will be more personally fulfilled and happy than before. A change in identity on the other hand involves either a miracle (for which we can do no more than pray, and miracles are by definition rare events) or a painful suppression of that individual's true nature, which can never be a fulfilled or happy outcome and may well generate enormous inward distress. I wish to confess that the latter is my condition.

Such an admission in no way "dehumanises" me as a "victim of my emotions" (to quote your last letter). It is necessary to my personal integrity that I face this truth and the boundaries it places on what I can and cannot do to solve the "problem". In short I do not believe I can be "cured" by behavioural therapy. I am gay and will always be so.

Very rightly you wish to relate my attitude on this issue to Scripture. You admit that the Bible provides no clear discussion of why it condemns homosexuality, but you argue that such a theological rationale is implicit in the Bible's discussion of marriage in Genesis 2, which Jesus reinforced in his discussion of divorce. The trouble is this means we have to work out the informing principles behind the biblical view of marriage and then extrapolate these to the case of homosexuality. Such an ascent and subsequent descent of the ladder of abstraction is notoriously vulnerable to subjective prejudice. You accuse me of rationalising my desire to sin. But (forgive me) you could equally well be rationalising your self-righteousness on this issue. Evangelicals are notoriously prone to the assumption that their reading of Scripture is self-evidently correct. I could interpret your negativity as an example of the kind of psychological defensiveness which often parades itself as moral zeal. How would you rebut the charge?

Both the Bible itself and church history provide ample examples of issues over which sincere, Bible believers have been proven to be in serious error. One drawn from the New Testament itself is the Pharisee's interpretation of the covenant as unconditionally salvific for ethnic Jews. This was contradicted by both Jesus and Paul who re-interpret the OT in a universalist direction to embrace Gentiles too, although this was regarded as heretical by Bible-believing orthodox Judaism at the time. Other examples that could be cited at length are: the Trinity, polygamy, divorce, conversion by

military crusade, transubstantiation, charismatic gifts, slavery, the role of women, creation/evolution, Hell etc. — on all these issues biblical orthodoxy has been divided at some point and on many of them the majority viewpoint within the Church has changed. On at least a couple of these issues you, yourself, have taken a lead in challenging the received interpretation of Scripture and suffered criticism from conservatives who insisted their point of view was so clear in the Bible that anyone who denied it had to be undermining its authority. What makes you so sure that the gay issue is not one more controversy of this sort?

I observe at least two factors which are responsible for Christian disagreement on this kind of issue:

(a) As I have already indicated above, the Bible does not always provide a clear theological rationale for its doctrines which means there is room left for debate whenever one tries to deduce things from the presumed general principles which are held to lie behind the doctrines. On ethical issues like homosexuality, in particular, where there are really very few biblical texts to go on, it not easy to distinguish concessions to culture from trans-cultural universal norms (compare the women and veils debate).

(b) Some obscurantists refuse to admit the influence of extra-biblical knowledge and experience upon biblical interpretation. But such influence is both inevitable and necessary. Thus, 7-day creationists shut their eyes to the scientific evidence insisting their interpretation of Genesis 1 is self-evidently right. Again, on moral issues this is very hazardous. Slavery was once self-evidently acceptable to many of our Bible believing brethren who grew up in a culture which endorsed it. There are still Christians in South Africa who support a racist interpretation of the Bible as you well know.

As I said in my last letter, this does not mean that I wish to surrender to the kind of polyvalent indeterminacy in biblical hermeneutics which is characteristic of extreme postmodern critics like Derrida and Rorty. But it is clear that biblical orthodoxy has often been wrong in the past and may therefore be wrong on this issue too. For a very long while I have deeply unsatisfied by the standard evangelical response to the gay condition, which seems to me to have far more about law than gospel, and is effectively shutting one particular social group out of the church and denouncing them as "sinners" in just the way lepers and the physically handicapped were ostracised from the synagogue in Jesus' day.

I need to rethink my approach on this subject. I had hoped to have the leisure to take a couple of years over this review. But because it is for me an issue of personal lifestyle and well as ethical opinion, it is clear now that it is unrealistic to expect that I shall be able to engage in such a relaxed and objective consideration of the matter.

I know this letter will do nothing to dissolve your anxieties about me. My only plea is that there are times when a man must be true to himself if he is to stop being false to everyone else. It has taken me a long while to find the courage to do that. I am more of a Cranmer than a Luther when it comes to theological debate! But if I must face the flames of evangelical censure I am now ready for the heat.

With much love,

Roy

Final note: In early September 1999, my wife and a small number of Christian friends decided that the possibility of my "coming out" at some point in the future posed an unacceptable risk of scandal. As a damage-limitation exercise, a press release was therefore issued by the Evangelical Alliance in the UK, informing the secular media that I was gay. As a result, a half-page article and large photograph appeared in the London Times newspaper.
