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## From Whence Cometh Our Help?

by Ralph Blair

**From Whence Cometh Our Help?** is Dr. Blair's keynote address at the 25th annual eastern and western connECtions of Evangelicals Concerned, in the summer of 2004.

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Once upon a time there was a psychologist who had never matured beyond the use of inkblots. One day he was showing his collection of inkblots to a new patient from the Religious Right.

"What do you see when you look at this inkblot?" the psychologist asked.

"That's sodomy," said the patient, "sodomy and the gay agenda."

"And what do you see when you look at this other inkblot?"

"I see sodomy and the gay agenda."

"And this one?"

"The gay agenda. And sodomy!"

"And this one?"

"Sodomy and the gay agenda."

"And this?"

"Lots of sodomy and the gay agenda!"

The psychologist concluded his protocol and diagnosed: “Obviously, your problem is that all you think about is sodomy and the gay agenda.”

The patient was indignant. “What do you mean ‘my problem?’ You’re the one with all the dirty pictures!”

Now, to be fair, I could just as well have told you about the psychologist’s *other* patient—he had only two. (You can’t build much of a practice on inkblots.) His *other* patient was from the Religious *Left*. When *he* was shown the same collection of inkblots, *he* saw nothing but Gay Pride and the oppression of “God’s GLBTQQ&P children.”

Very often what *we* see as obvious is not so obvious from another person’s point of view. But sometimes we’re *oblivious* to what *should* be *obvious* from *anyone*’s point of view. We can even be oblivious to what is obvious from the advantage of a revelatory point of view.

Batman and Robin. Obvious? Or are you oblivious? Hick and Eleanor? Obvious? Or are you oblivious? Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan. Obvious? Or are you oblivious to the anachronism of those projections of same-sex romance back into the ancient world? The Three Stooges. Obvious? Or would you prefer to be oblivious?

Sherlock Homes and Dr. Watson—speaking of the obvious, or are you oblivious—Holmes and Watson went camping on the Dartmoor. At nightfall they pitched their tent and crawled inside for a good night’s sleep. In the middle of the night. Holmes shook Watson awake. He shouted: “Watson, look at the sky! What do you see?”

Rubbing his eyes, Watson replied: “I see stars, millions and millions of stars.”

“And what does that tell you?” Holmes asked, looking for deductions even in the middle of the night.

“Well, Holmes, astronomically it tells me that there are millions of galaxies.”

“Yes. Yes. And?,” Holmes pressed impatiently.

“And astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, it tells me that God is all powerful. Chronologically, it tells me it’s about 3 in the morning. And meteorologically, it tells me that we’ll have a nice day tomorrow.”

Holmes said nothing.

Watson finally asked: “Well, Holmes, what does all this beauty tell you?”

“Watson, you fool! It tells *me* that *someone has stolen our tent!*”

Sometimes we do miss the obvious. We’re oblivious. We don’t see what’s happened. We don’t see what’s happening. We don’t see it because we’re not looking for it. Or we’re looking for something else. We’re not expecting anything we’re not expecting. Maybe we don’t *want* to see it. Mesmerized by distracting spectacle and the merely theoretical and preoccupied with our own little self-centered concern for having “a nice day tomorrow,” we miss *what’s up*—or, in the case of the missing tent, what’s *not*.

Listen now to an ancient antiphonal psalm of ascents. It’s Psalm 121. The psalm is about *what’s up* and what or Who is *really up there*.

I lift up my eyes to the hills -  
From whence comes my help?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
Maker of heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot slip -  
He who watches over you  
won’t slumber;

Indeed, He who watches over Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The Lord watches over you -  
The Lord is your shade at your right hand;  
the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The Lord will keep you from all harm -  
He will watch over your life;  
The Lord will watch over your coming and your going, both now and forevermore.

Wisely, the psalmist's question is a *rhetorical* question. The psalmist poses the question in order to post the answer. And the answer lies within the frame of the question.

To ask "From whence comes our help?" is to acknowledge we're in *need* of help. As Jesus remarked: "How fortunate are those who *know* they *need* God!" (Matt 5:3)

To ask "From whence comes our help?" is to acknowledge there's a real *source* of help. "How fortunate are those who know they need *God!*"

And, to ask "From whence comes our help?" is to imply we're ready and willing and able to *accept* and *receive* God's help. Do we in EC acknowledge that EC needs help? If we mean to be true disciples of Christ, meeting together as a Christian community, do we frankly admit our need for help. And do we grant that any *real* help comes ultimately *only* from the Lord?

In all my many years as a clinician, I've never been able to help anyone who did not admit to needing help. Even Jesus could do no miracles where the needy were resistant. (Mark 6:5) Philip Yancey says he's convinced that "God goes where he's wanted."

G.K. Chesterton knew that we all have, as he put it, "a general view of existence whether we like it or not; it creates and involves everything we say or do." That's true. We all have a point of view—a point from which we try to see. But we blind perspective when we squint, using only the Left eye or only the Right eye or only a "queer eye." As Christians, our prayer for a proper point of view must always be: "Be *Thou*, my *vision*, O Lord." Said Flannery O'Connor: "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. For me, the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that." Her testimony should be ours, too. Is it?

I see that a summer weekend for "ex-gay" Christians rejects the "marriage model" for those in "the gay lifestyle." That's no surprise. It's said that *they* must follow the demands of the heterosexual norm. As "ex-gay," they must be either celibate for life or marry someone to whom they're not sexually attracted. Conferees are invited to bring their *own* hopes for change—as if the organizers have not already set the agenda well within their own definition of "change." And who is so naive as to think that well-founded psychosexual data will be permitted to challenge the superficiality called "ex-gay" ideology? I doubt it'll be a weekend for being changed. It will be a weekend for being *short*-changed. And that's a shame. Where's the Good News in that?

I see that a summer weekend for "rainbow Christians" rejects the "marriage model" for "queer families." That's no surprise. It's said that *they* must *not* follow the demands of the heterosexual norm. As "queer," they must reinvent the sex wheel to suit themselves. Conferees are invited to "Bring your own ideas,"—as if the organizers have not already set the agenda well within their own ideas. And who is so naive as to think that well-founded psychosexual data will be permitted to challenge the superficiality called "queer theory?" I doubt it'll be a weekend for

the rainbow of God's Promise. It'll be a weekend for rainbows of Gay Pride. And that's a shame. Where's the Good News in that?

Neither "ex-gay" advocates nor "queer theorists" acknowledge that they're the ones in need of help. Both groups say that those who need the help are those who oppose *them*.

Well, here *we* are at a summer weekend for Christians who happen to be gay. I trust *we* don't reject the "marriage model" for Christians who happen to be gay. Christians who happen to be *same*-sex oriented have just as much need for the *sane-sex* stabilizing structures of marriage as anyone else.

It's the agenda of the founder of *this* 25-summer-long series of connECtions to provide conferees with the very best connections to psychosocial and biblical understanding—shorn of all superficial and short-sighted short-changing and short-cuts, no matter how much the self-appointed culture mavens try to push us Left or

Right or stifle us into a vague void of "spirituality." It's our job to push back, as Flannery O'Connor said. And as another Christian has observed, some anti-Christian pushing comes "as punches." He notes, though, that many Christians have been "slugging right back." (Chris Armstrong)

Well with what *do* we push back? Our ignorance? Our own opinions? Our acting out against our upbringing? Happily, you've not been invited here to be thrown back upon only your *own* abilities to cope, left to your *own* devices, your *own* stories. After all, what we call "our stories" are remnants of selective memory too often stuck in grievance and grief and grudge to be of any real use.

Each of you has been invited here to bring your *needs* for reconciling your self (including your sexuality) to a high calling in Christ—with no add-on libs or legalisms. You've been invited here to see once more how liberating it is to realize that, in Christ, we're not *on our own* for, in Christ, we're *not our own*. We're *Christ's* own. It's with His grace and peace that we get to push back in love and resist without resentment.

Christians who happen to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender or straight, must all acknowledge that—whatever may be *others'* needs for help from the Lord, *we* are in need of help from the Lord.

"It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer." And "standin' in the need of prayer is *standing in the need of supernatural help*—help that comes *only* from the Lord!

The first prayer we're all "standin' in the need" of prayin' is a prayer of confession of sin. The second is a prayer of thanksgiving that God is not put off by broken people but gathers them up in arms of love. The third is a prayer of petition that we might truly glorify such a God in all that we say and do—all in Jesus' name, all for *his* sake.

In prayer, we answer the basic question: "From whence comes our help?" Our answer to this question determines all else, just as God's answers to our prayers determine all else.

Jesus told his disciples to take heed that they listen to the *right* voices. (Mark 4:24a) One observer comments: "In today's culture, whose mass media convey lush embodiments of the thorns (thistles) [that choke the sown seed of God's word] (vv. 18-19) [Jesus] invites persons whose eyes and ears are easily assailed by trash to exercise their prerogative of selectivity." (Lamar Williamson, Jr.) The trash is all around us. It's dumped by both antigay and pro-gay polluters. Their name is Legion—and that's never been a Christian endorsement. Said Kierkegaard: "The crowd—that is the lie!" Jesus calls us to enter into the Kingdom of God by the narrow gate. But once through the gate and within the Kingdom, as Genie Price rejoiced: we're in "The Wider Place."

We're being pushed around by the Right and the Left. And if we don't hold to the truth of Christ's Gospel, we'll be crushed by the clamor for "another gospel" that's no gospel at all. Instead of our "contending for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints," as Jesus' kid brother Judah urged first-century Christians to do—and as the church has always had to do—we're tempted to be merely culture warriors and worry warts, pious prudes or pansies for Pride.

So, on one hand, we must push back against the crush of old legalisms from the Fundamentalist crowd and the self-assured Religious Right.

Focus on the Family finds that the biggest problem for which its preacher fans seek help on the Focus preacher hotline is their own use of porn. It would seem that antigay preachers have their hands full without messing in the lives of gay men and lesbians. The divorce rate is the highest in "The Bible Belt." And yet, the opposition to marriage for same-sex couples is also highest in "The Bible Belt." What's their problem? The Bible? I don't think

A Pentecostal youth minister claims he has no problem when most of the kids in his church steal Christian CD music from the Internet? He says it's like stealing a Bible or "spreading the gospel." Yet he'd have a problem if a kid come out as gay? What's his problem? The Bible? I don't think so. What part of "Thou shalt not steal" does he not understand?

So as Christians who happen to be gay, we must be very careful about looking to the reactionary conservative church establishment as though that's "from whence our help can come." We must always check whatever we're told there by the whole counsel of the word of God and by that ancient rule of "faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints."

And we must pray as Robert Louis Stevenson did: "Lord, enlighten us to see the beam that is in our own eye, and blind us to the mote that is in our brothers'. ... Let all here before Thee carry and measure with the false balance of love."

On the other hand, we must push back against the crush of neo-legalisms from the crowd of pro-gay Sensualists, Secularists and Cultural Relativists and the self-assured Religious Left.

Veteran journalist David Aikman notes: "If you ever wanted proof that anything to do with Jesus Christ would be controversial in a culture that seems hell-bent on rejecting Christianity, *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson provides it." Aikman well understands that people are "profoundly threatened by the possibility, however remote, that Christianity is true."

Too many voices in the GLBT establishment are equally hostile and ignorant when it comes to Christian faith. And yet what would they offer to replace it? The short-sighted sophistry of cultural relativism? Tolerance for everything but *Christian faith*? Queer theory? Drag shows? Circuit parties of sex and drugs and angry protests at any hint that there might be something sadly self-destructive about them?

Harvey Fierstein says it "rocks"—an LGBT book club featuring "explicit full-frontal color photos," *The DaVinci Code* and titles like *Hard* and *Quickies*<sup>3</sup>. Is *this* what "rocks" folk who've been to The Solid Rock? *The Advocate* plugs as "Super-mega gay!" a comedy "featuring bearded drag queens, scorned women wielding power tools, and hunky blond guys?," a movie of a guy raising money for his boyfriend's fashion show by dealing drugs, and Colin Farrell in "full-frontal, in a big way." Is all this what's "Super-mega gay!" for Christians who happen to be gay? We're not called to be prudes. But we *are* called to be prudent, to consider the unintended consequences—"wise as snakes, harmless as doves."

So as Christians who happen to be gay, we must be very careful about looking to the so-called "gay community" as though that's "from whence our help can come." We must always check whatever we're told there by the whole counsel of the word of God and by that ancient rule of "faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints."

And here, too, we must pray with RLS that we give full attention to the beams in *our* eyes before we try to extract the specks from the eyes of others. And we must “carry and measure with the false balance of love.”

We’re all fallen in a fallen world. So we’re always in need of help. But some seem so naive. Even the saved don’t seem very savvy. We all need to be as savvy as Tallulah Bankhead who said: “Dawling, I’m as pure as driven slush.” We’re all Tallulahs! But not all are “out.”

A fallen world can be a very tough place. It can mean lots of trouble. Damon Runyon once quipped: “Life is tough, and it’s really tough when you’re stupid.” Life’s not less tough for Christians. What would Christian faith be worth if it merely tranquilized? But for those who lack the *intelligence* of faith, life’s even tougher. In a *Newsweek* interview last month, author Madeleine L’Engle was asked what she thought of people who say that “faith [is] anti-intellectual.” She snapped: “They’re not very bright.” But Jesus warned that the children of darkness can be more street smart than the children of light. So: Watch out! “A word to the *wise* [may be] sufficient,” but for some of us, it may take *more* than “a word” to suffice.

Well, here we are, meeting as Christians have met for generations in summer camp meetings. As sojourners in this world, they met under tents in the wilderness, as did the ancient Jews. They met openly as Christian. Sadly, some were hiding their homosexuality. In our camp meeting, are we more “camp” than Christian? If we’re more obviously gay than we’re obviously Christian, maybe its because someone has stolen *our* tent. Has *our* tent gone missing? Tents are being stolen Left and Right. And, if our tent *is* missing, how much are we missing it?

What if there’s no need for anyone’s *stealing* our tent. What if, just like those on the Right and the Left, we have gone off and set up residence, not simply *in* this world, but *of* it? Have we folded our tent and put down roots in *this* world’s way of looking at everything? Have we assimilated to *this* world’s values and *this* world’s lifestyle?

Have we, even in EC, like Lot, pitched our tent toward Sodom? Sodom’s sin was not homosexuality. But Sodom’s sin was conceived *homosexually*. We are not personifications of sin because we’re homosexual. But we certainly can *sin homosexually*. We can use others as means to our own ends. We can make gayness the be-all and end-all of our lives—more obsessively than even the Religious Right can make our gayness the be-all and end-all of *their* lives. They should get a life of their own. But let’s us, too, get a Life—a Life with a capital “L.” Are we “In the Life” as the term is used in gay TV or are we “in the Life” that’s our Lord. Can we say with Paul: “For me to live is Christ!” That’s what *we’re* to be about.

Well that’s why I started EC and these summer connECtions. At the first year’s connECtion, keynoter Rosalind Rinker said: “Jesus is here!” Jesus is here! That’s why *I’m* here. I pray that’s why *you’re* here. If our home churches don’t understand us, Jesus does. And Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible tells us so. If “the gay community” doesn’t understand us, Jesus does. And Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible tells us so. Here, with Jesus and *his* folk who happen to be gay, we may be understood and loved by one another.

Since we began, in 1975, our first name has been “Evangelicals.” We began with the Evangel! We must continue with the Evangel! The Evangel is the Good News that, as Paul put it, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself!” (II Cor 5:19)

God’s never in the self-seeking crowds—Right or Left. God’s in His self-sacrificing Son, the Suffering Servant. (Isaiah 53) If you want God, don’t look to the Right. Don’t look to the Left. God’s never in all *that noise!* God’s in “the still, small voice” that whispered “What are you doing?” to a pouting prophet who thought he’d been left all on his own. (I Kings 19:9-18) The Lord reminds us, as he reminded Elijah, that He has reserved thousands who have not bent their

knees to Baal. We need not kiss up to false prophets—Right or Left. God's not the one who asks: What's in all this for *me*? God's the One who asks: What's in all this for *us*? Indeed, God *was* in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself! We're not saved by the "stars and stripes" paraded on the Right. We're not saved by rainbow stripes paraded on the Left. It's "by His stripes [that] we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

So we're to join together to proclaim *this* Good News to those who have never heard it—and never would hear it through the din of damning preachers and deluded propagandists. EC is for *them*. We're to proclaim this Good News to those who have lost their "first love" for Jesus. As little children, they sang "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so" and they gave their hearts to Jesus. Then, when they realized they were gay and came out, they were duped into thinking that they could no longer count on Jesus unless they stopped being "that way." Then they were told by others that they'd be better off without "all that Christian crap." EC is for *them*. For they have suffered long enough—you have suffered long enough—with what is, after all, in so many cases, a seemingly *unrequited* love for the Lord. But *He* hasn't rejected them. He hasn't rejected *you*. *Others* have.

Now there were some other gay *religious* groups back in 1975, so: Why did I start a *new* group? Because none of them was a deliberate reaching out to connect with *evangelical* Christians, gay or straight. Most were theologically quite liberal. And some were even syncretistic of much of what they should have been critical in the so-called "gay community."

Since most of the vocal opposition against gay people was coming from conservatives, (and that's still true) what good were liberals at getting through to the opposition? They weren't speaking the same language. Forget about being on the same *page*, they weren't even in the same Book. So if an effective social action effort were ever to get going, it would be by people who, except for homosexuality, were in basic agreement with these opponents. And that's no less true today.

That's why fights over gay issues in mainline denominations don't get anywhere. They're fights between social liberals and social conservatives over social issues.

Let me illustrate. Among both supporters and opponents of Gene Robinson, I have seen no interest in anything but his partner's anatomical parts. Have you? Does he preach the Gospel? What do you know for sure about *that*? Apparently nobody's interested—neither supporters nor opponents. Does he preach that Jesus died to save us from our sin and death? Does he believe that Jesus was raised from the dead? Do you know anything about him on *these* questions? I've seen nothing on anything but anatomical parts. In Christian ministry, isn't preaching the Gospel rather more to the point than the minister's partner's anatomy? And if there's no Gospel preaching, what's with all the interest in the genitalia?

But more important than my concern for effective social action was my concern for the pastoral needs of evangelical Christians who happened to be gay and for the pastoral needs of their families, friends and pastors. It's been for those *pastoral* purposes, as well as for social change, that we've kept EC going and have sponsored well over 50 of these summer connECTIONS.

Now notwithstanding all the many miracles God has wrought through the faithful witness of so many who've served in this ministry, we all must ask: Is there something we're missing? In this 25th year of connECTIONS, is there something we're missing? Is there something we're missing *about* something we're missing? Are we in need of returning to basics? Are we in need of repentance? Are we in need of revival? Christians are always in need of a return to basics,

repentance and revival. Throughout church history, second generation organizations have tended to drift from their moorings and individual Christians have tended to lose their “first love.”

Perhaps painful disappointments, frustration and anger with home church ignorance and hostility still distract us. Perhaps a church’s cruelty clouds our clearer judgment. Perhaps we’ve done a poor job at forgiving those who have failed us. Maybe we fixate on hurt, frustration and fear. And so we’re stuck in grudge and grief and we can’t stop acting out in one way or another. We end up in lifestyles that leave the Lord outside, waiting to be let in to dine with us with whom so many of his so-called followers refuse to dine. And so, sulking, we eat alone.

From what was to have been the counter-cultural “tent of the congregation” of Gospel-grounded disciples who happen to be gay, have any wandered off, tripping obliviously down “yellow-brick roads” that dead-end in distraction, delusion, destruction and death to all the Lord would have for us? Where we were to have met as Gospel-grounded gay people in the counter-cultural “tent of the congregation and done according to all that the Lord commanded” (Ex 39:32), have we done simply what suited ourselves? Where “a cloud [was to have covered] the tent and the glory of the Lord God [was to have] filled it” (Ex 40:34), has there been little but the gaudy faux glory of Pride? Where we were to have been a tented colony of heaven, pitched for self-*giving* love (Phil 3:17-21), have we ditched our tent and settled for the self-*indulgence* of the Gay Culture? Gay religious history is our warning.

Listen to some of these notions from a queer journal of a mainline Protestant denomination. They’re typical of the genre. Says one of the writers: “As a queer man, the queer community usually takes priority.” He claims “his lover” comes next, yet he goes on to praise “*casual sex*.”

Rejecting what’s been worked out in the crucible of long human experience, another of the writers insists that “Without readily available frames of reference, you have to trust your own experience.” He says he goes with “my own paradigms ... my own internal authority.” Would he urge homophobes and “ex-gay” pushers to trust *their* “own internal authority?” He goes on: “I do not see [our denominational caucus] as a place concerned about defining a moral code, but rather as a place to respect the personal authority that people from the margin bring to their quest for a personal, authentic moral questioning.” But *he* defines *this* as what’s moral! He demands that GLBT people get to define “the divine however they define the divine.” As he puts it, it’s all about “how the minority culture *sees* life.” *Sees* life. Again: that inescapable matter of a point of view! But even as he denounces what he calls the majority’s “one size fits all” ethic, he imposes his own “one size fits all” ethic. He closes by proposing a self-centeredness that, he claims, brings “new life abundant.” But isn’t “new life abundant” what Jesus already offers in self-surrendered life?

Isn’t something missing in all this stuff. Where’s the Gospel? Where’s Jesus? Where’s the cross? Where’s the life of daily dying to sell?

Sadly, in this *queer spirit* gospel there’s no Good News at all. But it’s typical of where the gay religious movement winds up when it turns for help to Gay Pride instead of God’s Providence and God’s Peace.

Psychologically, of course, pride is self-justification—a defense mechanism. Pride boasts of what it doesn’t believe. Self-centeredness is preoccupation with a self that can’t stand itself. So it pretends to be something else. In isolating self as something special it gets entrapped in isolation that reinforced self-obsession. It then brings down upon itself the aversion of others that’s recycled by personalizing into yet more self-obsession and isolation. And fueled by foolish fantasies of the fortunes of others, it becomes an idolatrous obsession of unrequited self-worship. The answer to this mess lies in the unmerited mercy of a sovereign God. Instead of puffing up a



rationalizing pride in no *achievement*—pride of birth, nationality, race, sexual orientation—there can be a grateful reception of the free grace of God. Said Spurgeon: “Be not proud of race, face, place or grace.” Pride is not an appropriate response to God’s grace. Praise is. But biblically, pride is no mere *symptom* of The Fall. Says Maurice Boyd: “Pride *is* The Fall.”

Well we really don’t have to walk away from evangelical faith simply because some of the evangelicals give us lots of crap. Many evangelicals *are*, of course, capable of dumping lots of crap. Aren’t *we* capable of dumping lots of crap? But lots of crap was what the cross was all about. Christ came to save us all from all the crap we dump on each other—and all the crap we dump on Him. But, thank God, the crap can’t cancel the cross; the cross cancels the crap! That *is* the Evangel.

Evangelicals are also capable of lots of *care*. Last week, while speaking in London, I met an evangelical Anglican vicar—a married heterosexual—who’s starting a network of evangelical heterosexuals for the support of gay people. He calls the group, Accepting Evangelicals.

Surprised? You shouldn’t be. The evangelical church and the Religious Right are not the same thing. Still, as a sociologist points out: “Most of those who disparage evangelicals in general terms really don’t know what they are talking about.” (Christian Smith) Leaders of the Religious Right admit they’re frustrated with evangelicals who won’t push the Right’s antigay Constitutional Amendment. Lou Sheldon of the Traditional Family Values coalition complains that the evangelical churches are asleep on this issue. *Christianity Today* reports that, among evangelicals, fewer than half say a candidate’s support of marriage for gay couples would be a reason to vote against him or her.

Evangelicals, just like gay people, are not clones of one another. Sociologists and historians note the “wide diversities” of the evangelical faith within a “conceptual unity of basic Christian doctrine.” (George Marsden) This is useful information for those who think of all evangelicals as enemies.

The evangelical faith and the evangelical communities are, in fact, so diverse, that a theologically conservative church historian has written a book in which he criticizes evangelicalism for being such a *fragmented abstraction*. He faults evangelicalism for “affirm[ing] a lowest common denominator set of convictions and practices.” (D. G. Hart)

Evangelicals do overlook denominational differences and many details of doctrine in order to worship and work together in ministry around what Christians have held in common for two thousand years. Serious Christians who happen to be Calvinist or Arminian or Wesleyan or Lutheran or Charismatic or Quaker or Baptist or Holiness or Pentecostal—in an array of churches and organizations—come together for worship, evangelism, discipleship, charitable service and social action. But the variety is a strength of evangelical faith, not a weakness.

All evangelicals look to the Bible for authority and to Jesus alone for salvation from sin. But in many matters, evangelicals do not see eye to eye: on the exact nature of biblical inspiration, the sovereignty of God, details of creation, atonement, sanctification, liturgy, baptism, the destination of the unevangelized, the meaning of heaven and hell, capital punishment, speaking in tongues, praise choruses, and on and on. (Cf. Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum*, Baker, 2002) So don’t expect all evangelicals to see eye to eye on homosexuality.

But gay men and lesbians, burned by Fundamentalism and the Religious Right need not lock themselves out of the evangelical faith because of their same-sex orientation. They need to look beyond stereotypes to encounter, for themselves, the diversity that’s the historic evangelical faith—“the oldest orthodoxy” (J. I. Packer). And others, who know evangelicalism only from

hostile and non-comprehending media, need to look beyond, to know for themselves, the Evangel in that evangelical diversity and to meet the Christ that Evangel proclaims.

More and more evangelicals are accepting us as true siblings in salvation and sanctification. That there are still many in the family who have problems with us is no different from what's found within all families. But families can change with better understanding. We gave ourselves the time it took to come to terms with ourselves. We can extend the same courtesy to others.

Even among those who remain uninformed and uncomfortable with us, they're not *all* saying we'll "fry in the fires of hell" for our gayness. We really don't have to choose only from among the hotheads of Right-wing antagonism and the hot beds of Left-wing queer theory and circuit sex. Our choices are not "the frying pan" or "the fire."

Over our 25 summers of connECtions, the pool of evangelicals from which I invite our fully supportive keynoters, has gotten much larger. There are now more players than parts. And we've had well over half a hundred keynoters so far.

"You've got the best of the evangelical leaders as keynoters past and future. That is very significant." That's what a prominent evangelical Episcopal priest wrote to me in declining a connECtion keynoting invitation due to her summer schedule. And who would have predicted, twenty-five years ago, that one of our keynoters for 2004 would be an editor-at-large for *Christianity Today* (Randall Balmer)?

Even after their public support of EC, our keynoters have continued to enjoy good standing within the wider evangelical community. Even *after* Lew Smedes spoke at both our connECtions, Fuller Seminary named a chair in Christian Ethics in his honor and *Christianity Today* has chosen Lew's posthumous memoir as one of this year's ten best books. Incidentally, none of the winning books is associated with gay bashing. And even *after* Ken Medema sang at both our connECtions, he still sings at conferences in the wider evangelical world. Even *after* Tom Key performed his C. S. Lewis program at our eastern connECtion, he went on to headline evangelicals' centenary celebrations for Lewis at Wheaton College and Oxford.

I have given papers at meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society, the Christian Association for Psychological Studies, and other evangelical organizations. And I haven't been kicked out yet. Tom Hanks of Other Sheep and I are still members in good standing in ETS. And we're not the only ETS members who are supportive of gay folk.

For almost 30 years, our quarterly *reviews* have gone out *gratis* to some 2,000 evangelical institutions and individuals across the

country and around the world. Only a handful has asked to be removed from our mailing list. And so often, apparently after someone's "done the Lord's work" in ditching one of our reviews into the nearest dumpster, we get requests from the evangelical library's staff to supply a replacement copy. When we've been negligent, we get repeat requests. Bob Jones University wrote for permission to put our reviews into its computer base for easier access by BJU students!

Now, of course, there are many evangelicals who oppose us. Fifty years ago many evangelicals opposed the black civil rights movement. But black Christians did not exchange their gospel inheritance for a mess of religious liberalism just because some of their fellow evangelicals could not or would not understand their needs. And neither should we. Look: We don't put our faith in other evangelicals. We put our faith in the One who's proclaimed in the evangel.

Sociologists say that evangelical Christians constitute the largest of the five groups of American subcultures. One in four Americans self-identifies as evangelical. We may assume that

one in four gay Americans has so identified or would, but for rejection in their home churches and the ranting of the Religious Right. They are our mission field. We can be a Godsend to them if we don't weary of our evangelical identity and mission. As "Jesus climbs the charts" with more and more young people, who will be there to climb with those who've not been prepared by their parents, peers and preachers to deal well with same-sex orientation? If we in EC aren't there for them, who will be? There are a few others—but, frankly, not many.

We cannot afford to be oblivious to any of this. If we are oblivious, we hurt ourselves and we hurt those to whom we might minister.

From time to time, of course, a few people who've come to EC have complained about our name—as have antigay Christians. So they tell us we should change our name. It doesn't seem to occur to them that there might be some very good reasons to keep the name.

In 1999, ECWR president Jan Rich spoke out in defense of our "evangelical" identity. Writing in her presidential column, she noted that she and I had discussed the voicing of complaints about our name. She wrote: "Ralph believes strongly (and I concur) that there are plenty of other organizations that do not identify as 'evangelical' that could be safe havens" for those who don't like our name. She added, from her own experience: "There are those, including myself, who were saved in fundamental churches who would never have risked exposure had the word 'evangelical' not been included in the name." She explained that "as far as the [ECWR] Web site goes, the most common word used to find us is 'evangelical.' "

Why should we surrender the good name of the "Good News"—the Evangel—to those who have preached "another gospel" lacking in grace? There's no better rebuttal to abusers of gays and grace than to reclaim the *evangel* for the truth that it is.

We are not the truth. We dare not join with those that sociologist Alan Wolfe calls the "switchers"—Americans who try to turn the received revelation of Christ into their own revisions of prejudice and preference, who say: Give us what "we want to hear or we're going elsewhere."

The psalmist asks: "From whence does our help come?" The strengthening answer was, is, and always will be: Our help comes from the Lord who made all there is and so knows all there is for *what* it is and for what it's *not*.

Looking at our keynote Psalm, one Bible commentator says: "It is only here in this sacred mountain place of revelation and worship that he may find the key to coping with workaday life." (Leslie C. Allen) The Psalmist seems to speak with "scandalous presumption" (Allen) "He will not let your foot slip?" One of our keynoters was Nick Wolterstorff, perhaps the best Christian philosopher in this country. His son's foot *did* slip, in the Alps, and he was killed. But even in heart-wrenching grief over one who falls into the valley of death, we fear no evil, for our Lord is with him and with us.

Our Lord's not like the old nature gods and goddesses who sleep during the off-season or lock themselves in their latrines—as Elijah mocked them. And no matter how loony they get over there on the Right or the Left, the Psalmist promises that not even the lunacy of moonstroke will do us any real harm. And if we're immune from sunstroke, how will we suffer real harm even from the heated hatred of homophobia?

The Lord will watch over our *coming out* and our *going on*, both now and forevermore.

A Christian closet is where we pray, not where we stay. We're to come out of our Christian closets and share the Good News of Christ in what we do and in what we say. For Christians, what's the big deal in coming out as *gay* if we don't come out as *gay for Christ's sake* and *his* mission in Oz? What's boasting in *gay pride* when we get to boast in *Christ's cross*? What good

is a “queer eye” on what to wear, what to eat, what to drink when *we're freed* from all such concerns by him who said “Not to worry!” about clothes and food and drink? Let’s get real!

Christians who happen to be gay won’t be thrusting a middle finger of disdain at enemies we’re to love. We’ll remind friend and foe alike that “all have sinned” and that “the salary of sin is death, but that God’s gift is eternal life in Christ.” And *we’ll* point to Him. And we’ll get on with the privilege of pouring the new wine of God’s ever-flowing and overflowing love into these *new* wineskins of *our* day. (Mark 2:22) We won’t shake clenched fists of defiant self-will while praying “*Thy* will be done.” We’ll tell of Christ’s universe-shaking resurrection, his defeat of all the defiance of death. We’ll point to Jesus and keep on pouring. We won’t thump our thumbs at our egocentric chests. We’ll point to Jesus who subjugates all egos and then submits himself to the Father. And we’ll keep on pouring his precious new wine. Christians who happen to be gay are called to be stewards of what Jesus said were “new treasures as well as old.” (Matt 13:52) We’re counter-culture custodians of the Gospel, rooted in the ancient visions of the prophets of Israel and revealed in fulfillment beyond their wildest dreams. Now we get to proclaim that glorious fulfillment to the latest generation for whom Christ gave his all and for whom he was raised from the dead. We get to proclaim this Gospel to those who are challenged with a sexual anomaly for which they were poorly prepared. And we get to proclaim this Gospel to people of a *social* identity for which they were no less prepared—a social identity that’s only the latest example of the fact that, in Christ, there is absolutely *no relevance* to social identity. (Gal 3:28) To be “in Christ” covers all.

Toward the end of his long life, John Wesley said to his Methodists: “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, but I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. That will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast both to the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out.”

This is true for *any* ministry. So let’s reach out to the disenfranchised as Wesley did, holding fast to the Good News with which we first set out. It may have been as a child singing “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” It may have been at an EC Bible study or retreat when you realized that your being gay or lesbian did not diminish the fact that Jesus loves you. After all is said and done, it was not to queer us or to turn us straight that Jesus went to the cross. It was to bring all the lost and lonely, so long estranged, straight home to him and to his Father and ours.

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2004 marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his nonreappointment to the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, following his public advocacy of monogamous gay relationship within the evangelical Christian community.

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