When evangelicals change with the culture

By Randall Balmer
August 15, 2013

The closing of the doors of Exodus International earlier this summer doesn't just signal a sea change in evangelical thinking about homosexuality. It also highlights some evangelicals' dubious claims of adherence to immutable convictions.

After 37 years, Exodus—which advocated "reparative therapy"—finally gave in to scientific evidence and changing cultural attitudes. In announcing the move, president Alan Chambers issued an extended apology. "I am sorry for the pain and hurt that many of you have experienced," Chambers said, addressing the gay community:

> I am sorry some of you spent years working through the shame and guilt when your attractions didn't change. I am sorry we promoted sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatized parents.

Exodus International was formed as an evangelical ministry to gays in 1976, the year before Anita Bryant rallied evangelicals behind her Save Our Children campaign. Bryant's efforts began as an initiative to overturn an ordinance in Dade County, Florida, that had banned discrimination against gays, and she played to popular fears. "Gays can't reproduce," she warned darkly. "They have to recruit."

The success of the Save Our Children campaign (the ordinance was defeated in a popular referendum by a two-to-one margin) emboldened conservative evangelicals. Jerry Falwell credited his appearance at one of Bryant's rallies as his introduction to political advocacy. Bryant's crusade, in fact—together with attempts to stop the rescission of tax benefits for segregated schools—helped provide the impetus for the emergence of the religious right in the late 1970s.

Soon, religious right leaders began criticizing what they called "the gay lifestyle," a phrase that implied, incorrectly, that sexual orientation was volitional—that individuals can choose whether to be gay. (I remember a gay friend scoffing at that notion. Given the popular opprobrium in the 1980s, he said, why would anyone

choose to be gay?) Falwell and others cited the AIDS epidemic as God's judgment on the "gay lifestyle."

In the midst of it all, Exodus forged ahead. The organization's message that gays could "overcome" their homosexual impulses drew wide support, financial and otherwise, especially from politically conservative evangelicals. Reparative therapy, however, was rarely benign. Treatment ranged from counseling to shock therapy. The goal was to help individuals reject the "gay lifestyle" simply by choosing not to be gay.

Exodus and similar programs occasionally trotted out trophy success stories, gays who claimed to have been "cured." But the reparative therapy movement suffered a greater number of recidivisms and embarrassments. Chambers, after announcing the cessation of the organization, acknowledged that 99 percent of those who endured gay-conversion therapy failed to shed their same-sex attractions. "There have been people that we've hurt," he told the Exodus gathering. "There have been horror stories."

Exodus also had to contend with changing cultural dynamics. A Gallup Poll in May 2013 found that 59 percent of Americans believe that lesbian and gay relationships are "morally acceptable," an increase of 19 percentage points since 2001. And despite their protestations, evangelicals are not impervious to cultural change.

Case in point: divorce. When I was growing up as an evangelical in the 1950s and 1960s, divorce was considered the defining moral issue. Anyone who was divorced became a pariah in evangelical circles. Many had their church memberships rescinded; at the least they were shunned. I remember my mother telling me that our family could never support Nelson Rockefeller for president because he was divorced.

But evangelical attitudes changed with cultural trends. By the late 1970s, the divorce rate among evangelicals was roughly the same as the rest of the population, and evangelicals suddenly were forced to confront the issue. There was also this catalyst: the candidacy of Ronald Reagan, a divorced and remarried man, for the presidency. Religious right leaders were so eager to embrace Reagan that they brushed aside what would previously have been a disqualifying circumstance.

The change in evangelical attitudes toward divorce was dramatic. In the 1970s, *Christianity Today* had at least eight articles denouncing divorce. That number

dropped to zero after 1980. Today, the ranks of divorced evangelical leaders include such luminaries as Charles Stanley and the notorious Benny Hinn.

Evangelicals like to assert that, because of their fidelity to the Bible, their convictions are timeless. But this certainly is not the case. Generational transitions also play a role. As late as the 2008 presidential election, old-line religious right leaders like James Dobson and Chuck Colson insisted that the main moral issues were abortion and same-sex marriage. A younger generation of evangelicals, however, saw things differently, detecting a much broader spectrum of moral issues, including war, hunger and especially the environment. They have evinced little interest in matters of sexual orientation or in taking a stand against gays and lesbians.

No matter how vigorously they protest, evangelicals are swept along by cultural currents together with everyone else. “We’ve fought the culture,” Chambers declared in his valedictory address to Exodus, “and we’ve lost.”

Our weekly feature Then and Now *harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by Edward J. Blum.*