

Right Wing, Wrong Bird: Why the Tactics of the Religious Right Won't Fly with Most Conservative Christians by Joel C. Hunter (Distributed Church Press, 2006) 190 pp.

Plagued with scandals and defections, the Religious Right's Christian Coalition has been in the dumps. Then, amazingly, on October 1, a levelheaded, fair-minded and generously compassionate evangelical – atypical of previous Coalition leadership – was chosen as its new president. But by November 21, before he could begin to serve, Joel C. Hunter found himself out of office. Sadly, yet not surprisingly, the harsh old antigay guard had second thoughts about Hunter. Maybe they'd finally gotten around to reading his good book.

His book is a welcome relief from the Coalition's rants; he's sharply critical of much in the Religious Right. That's not to say he's pro-gay. But there's little on homosexuality in these 190 pages. Evangelicals, he says, are “not against gay marriage [nb: no sneer quotes] because we are hatemongers”. Rather, opposition is because it “doesn't fit the pattern laid down in Genesis 2:18-24”. He adds: “We are also against polygamy, polyandry, and bestiality for the same reason.” But since Adam and Eve were the only humans around when that “pattern was laid down”, polygamy and polyandry were impossible and Adam had already rejected bestiality. As polygamy was common in the Bible, and never forbidden, prime patriarch Abraham married his half-sister and took a concubine. Our experience of “falling in love” was not why the ancient Jews married – brides being obtained by purchase or by capture and for economic gain in these families. Young teenage brides were the norm. And then, there was that Mosaic law of levirate marriage. Actually, “the biblical definition of marriage” is really quite foreign to us today.

In his penultimate chapter, “Ask Dr. Hunter,” he briefly responds to “40 Frequently Asked Questions About Religion and Politics.” Question 29: “What's a biblical response to gay marriage?” He repeats: “the ideal in Genesis.” He notes that the other problem “is how can you best love people who don't fit into your moral paradigm? How can you best respect them?” Question 31 asks: “Why do conservative Christians ignore most social issues besides abortion and homosexual rights?” Citing someone's quipping that “Conservative Christians seem to be focused below the belt”, he states: “If you just want to get fired up on hot-button issues, these will be the hot-button issues. But if all of life is important to you, then you have to really extend yourself to non-sex related issues.” Christians, he argues, need to get involved in issues of poverty, the environment, and justice “for the good of all”.

Hunter is precise and perceptive in suggesting why “the current strategy of the religious right won't fly with most conservative Christians.” The right is “wrong [in] tone (too polarizing/enemy creating)” and “too limited in emphasis and issues”. It's “focused on political wins rather than spiritual results”, “too linked to one political party”, “not deep enough intellectually” and it's “aim is not service, but power.” “So,” he says, “we are looking for new leadership, but no ‘WACKOs’ need apply.” “WACKO” spells: “Wants only what is good for his or her own group. Angry; hot-button issues oriented. Christian in name, but not Christlike in nature. Knocks others who are different. Only interested in winning, not in growing spiritually.” That list's on target – and applicable, as well, to why so much of

GLBTQ strategy on the religious left won't fly with conservative Christians, including gays. Both antigay and pro-gay political leadership is insufficiently savvy and loath to be self-critical.

Hunter counters what he calls the Myths of the Religious Right. Up against the Myth that “It's High Time the Majority Had Its Way in This Country,” he counters with James Madison's warning about the majority's tendency to oppress minorities and sees Madison's Constitutional concern to be in agreement with “our evangelical view” that “all people are self-centered, acting in self-interest.” He grants that secular humanism is a real problem, but observes that “evangelical alarmists” turn the language of spiritual warfare into “images of conspiracy and attack”. On another Myth, that “We Ought to Go Back to the Good Old Days When Christians Ran Things”, he recognizes this as based in naïve nostalgia.

Aware that “something in us will not let any of us govern very well”, Hunter alludes to sin. He cautions it's “an illusion ... to believe that governmental power is better because a believer holds it. History shows no such correlation.” He sees that “the social gospellers underestimated the enormity of sin” but so, he sees, does the Religious Right.

Hunter rightly argues: “Christianity is strongest when its only force is persuasion; civil government's ultimate strength is its ability to use force.” He urges Christians to be “highly suspicious of political man”, adding: “Nowhere in the New Testament does it exhort individuals to political dominance. By contrast political power relationships are forbidden by Christ or transformed into an act of service (Matthew 20:25-28).” Noting: “Establishing ‘Christian values’ was not the ultimate goal of Christ; people have always been His goal”, he warns of that foremost attitude of the Pharisaic mind: “I thank you that I am not like other men”. “Self-righteousness can be institutionalized” and the tendency of “the group [is] to be the center; ... the standard of measure.” He hopes “Christians in ideological conflict with the world can model what the world has seldom seen – persons placing a limit on how much power they will stockpile.”

Of course, what he endorses can call for support of civil rights for gay people, even marriage. While granting that Scripture “is open to a variety of interpretations” and that the church has misread it on many matters, and that “not every part of the Bible has the same relevance to every situation”, he does not revise his view that the Bible is totally negative on all homosexuality. And still, he concludes: “the most important focus a Christian can have” in politics is to live out Jesus' summary of the Law: Love God with all one has and love our neighbors as ourselves. Hunter's focus is Jesus' focus. But, clearly, it's still not the focus of Christian Coalition.



For I am persuaded, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8

RECORD

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Four EC keynoters are among the authors of the 50 “landmark” books of the past 50 years, according to the 50th Anniversary issue of *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of American evangelical Christians. Books by Rosalind Rinker, Charlie W. Shedd, Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty rank among “The Top Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals” over the past half-century. Each of these four authors keynoted both eastern and western summer conferences of EC.

In a David Letterman-type countdown, Rinker’s *Learning Conversational Prayer* is ranked Number One! Say the CT editors: “In the 1950s, evangelical prayer was characterized by Elizabethan *wouldsts* and *shouldsts*. Prayer meetings were often little more than a series of formal prayer speeches. Then Rosalind Rinker taught us something revolutionary: Prayer is a conversation with God. The idea took hold, sometimes to much (e.g., ‘Lord, we just really wanna ...’). But today evangelicals assume that casual, colloquial, intimate prayer is the most authentic way to pray.”

With *The Stork is Dead*, the editors say that Shedd’s “sex advice for teens in 1968 ...got evangelicals talking about the topic four years before *The Joy of Sex* was published” and with *All We’re Meant To Be*, “Scanzoni and Hardesty outlined what would later blossom into evangelical feminism.” CT adds: “For better or for worse, no evangelical marriage or institution has been able to ignore the ideas in this book.”

According to CT, these 50 books, published since World War II, “have altered the way American evangelicals pray, gather, talk, and reach out.” The editors “asked dozens of evangelical leaders for their suggestions, and they sent in their nominations. Then we vigorously debated as a staff as we ranked the 50 books.” Other authors on the list include: Corrie ten Boom, Paul E. Little, Lesslie Newbigin, Elisabeth Elliot, J. I. Packer, John Stott, C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, A. W. Tozer, Philip Yancey, Paul Tournier, Carl F. H. Henry, F. F. Bruce, Philip Jenkins, Dallas Willard, Rick Warren, Kenneth N. Taylor as well as Tim LaHaye, D. James Kennedy and James Dobson.

Given the media attention to evangelicals and issues of homosexuality, along with the many (both pro and con) books published on homosexuality in the past several years, it is to be noted that none of these books made it onto the list.

Ted Haggard, head of the National Association of Evangelicals and senior pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs resigned both posts in the wake of a male prostitute’s accusing him of engaging in gay sex and using illegal drugs.

Although the gay press has caricatured Haggard as rabidly antigay, he never made attacking homosexuals a hallmark of ministry, as has the Religious Right. Indeed, at great personal risk, he stood up to antigay churches that demanded he rescind his invitation to a (GLBT) Metropolitan Church choir’s participation in a massed Easter service and he commended the Supreme Court’s overturning of sodomy laws.

Responding to inquiries from *The New York Times*, Ralph Blair said: “The Ted Haggard thing is sad. His letter to his church is heartbreaking. It’s no doubt true, as he wrote: ‘the public person I was wasn’t a lie, it was just incomplete.’ It was as incomplete as was his and his church’s preparation for what he and so many others have been ‘warring against ... all of my adult life,’ as he puts it. In my over 40 years of counseling gay Christians, I’ve repeatedly heard all of this. Not surprisingly, Haggard says ‘from time to time,’ what he calls ‘the dirt that I thought was gone would resurface.’ He tried to deal with it with the only tools he had – or was allowed to have – in his subculture. He says he ‘sought assistance in a variety of ways, with none of them proving to be effective in me.’ Whether he tried denial, prayer, exorcism, therapy, the so-called ex-gay solutions or what-have-you, nothing, of course, ever got rid of a discovered sexual orientation that isn’t his fault. Sadly, now, in the midst of this painfully public scenario, he’s been forced to see it as his fault: ‘I created this entire situation.’ No. While he, of course, made the foolish decision to go to a gay prostitute, it’s been the willfully ignorant religionists who’ve set the stage for this entire situation – for Haggard and thousands of other Christian gay men and women and their families.”

“Reparative therapy” advocates protested outside the American Psychological Association’s convention in New Orleans in August. They urged the psychologists to reclassify homosexuality as a mental disorder and promote “reparative therapy.” The APA released this statement after the protest: “For over three decades the consensus of the mental health community has been that homosexuality is not an illness and therefore not in need of a cure. ... There is simply no sufficiently scien-

tifically sound evidence that sexual orientation can be changed.” The statement went on to express concern that the position of the protestors promotes “an environment in which prejudice and discrimination can flourish.”

Contrary to claims by both antigay and progay activists, the 1973 revision of clinical nomenclature on homosexuality was not the result of gay activists’ political pressure on the APA. The *entire* scope of mental disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* was subjected to a two-fold, science-based, criterion that, by definition, disqualified the continuing inclusion of homosexuality. To qualify as a mental disorder in the *DSM*, there had to be both invariable subjective distress and invariable social dysfunction. Clearly, such a criterion invariably applies to, e.g., depressive disorders, anorexia nervosa, paranoid personality disorder, panic disorders, dementia, schizophrenia, etc. It does not invariably apply to every neighborhood “Adam and Steve” or “Sarah and Eve”.

Yet another former Exodus “ex-gay” leader is writing a book about the movement’s failures. Darlene Bogle, who authored *Strangers in a Christian Land: Reaching Out with Hope and Healing to the Homosexual* (Chosen Books) and directed an Exodus ministry, is writing a book celebrating her acceptance of her sexual orientation. She is now partnered with another woman in a committed, loving relationship.

Other leaders who, over time, left the “ex-gay” movement include: Guy Charles, John Evans, Michael Bussee, Gary Cooper, Jim Kasper, Roger Grindstaff, George Bennett, John Paulk, Rick Notch, Jeff Ford, Greg Reid, Ann Phillips, Ben Tousey, Wade Richards, Shawn O’Donnell ... and the long list goes on and on.

At this fall’s 24th annual convention of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, a panel looked into so-called “reparative therapy” for homosexuals. Psychiatrist Jack Drescher gave an historical overview of attempts to treat homosexuality as a mental illness and discussed the American Psychiatric Association’s scientifically-based dropping of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. He criticized those who argue for a patient’s autonomy to choose reparative therapy. “They say, ‘no harm in trying.’” But, he noted, it’s “the perfect set-up for the patient blaming himself.”

“Pure Passion” is an “ex-gay” TV show on two religious television networks this fall. It is produced by David Kyle Foster, a reformed prostitute, who says that there are no homosexuals – they’re heterosexuals who fall for the lie that they’re homosexuals, and by Alan Chambers, head of the Exodus “ex-gay” organization.

A study commissioned by the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that children benefit when their parents – whether straight or gay – can marry or enter into civil unions. The report was published in the medical journal, *Pediatrics* (July). Appended to the report were the concurring positions of several other professional associations, e.g., The American Medical Association, The American Academy of Family Physicians, The American Psychiatric Association, The American Psychological Association, The American Psychoanalytic Association and the National Association of Social Workers. Arizona’s voters rejected an antigay marriage amendment in November – the first state to do so. **At the same time, voters supported so-called “defense of marriage” amendments in Colorado, Idaho, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin.**

The South African cabinet of President Thabo Mbeki has approved a bill “that will legalize same-sex marriage in compliance with the Constitutional Court ruling.” The bill must now be presented to Parliament, but the high court’s order must be implemented by the end of the year.

Rates of marriage for heterosexual couples go up where marriage for gay couples is legal. Although Senators Bill Frist and Sam Brownback and other Religious Right foes of gay marriage continue to predict that gay marriage will be bad for straight marriage, in the decade after Denmark, Norway and Sweden passed their pro-same-sex partnership laws, heterosexual marriage rates have actually risen: 10.7% in Denmark, 12.7% in Norway, and 28.8% in Sweden. And the divorce rates have fallen in all three countries. Researchers Darren R. Spedale and William N. Eskridge, Jr. report these statistics in their new book, *Gay Marriage: For Better or For Worse? What We’ve Learned from the Evidence* (Oxford University Press).

President George W. Bush accused the New Jersey Supreme Court of engaging in “activism” in its decision to support civil rights for same-sex couples. But Justice Barry T. Albin, writing for the majority, stated: “A court must discern not only the limits of its own authority, but also when to exercise forbearance, recognizing that the legitimacy of its decisions rests on reason, not

power. We will not short-circuit the democratic process from running its course.”

While giving the New Jersey Legislature 180 days to come up with provisions for gay couples that are in line with those for heterosexual couples (e.g., benefits under workers’ compensation laws, survivors’ benefits, spousal privilege in criminal trials, equitable financial and social benefits for children reared by same-sex parents, etc.) The justices ruled unanimously that the state’s Constitution demands full legal rights for committed same-sex partners. The Court said that the state’s legislators can call same-sex relationships “marriage” or some other term.

“In 1947, the county clerk in Los Angeles refused to marry Andrea Perez and Sylvester Davis. They were of different races, and a California law said that ‘all marriages of white persons with Negroes, Mongolians, members of the Malay race or mulattoes are illegal.’ Thus begins Adam Liptak’s essay in *The New York Times* (October 29). He goes on to report that the next year, in a 4-3 vote, California’s Supreme Court struck down this racist law. But, he notes, 29 other states had such laws on the books and no other state’s jurists changed the law until the U. S. Supreme Court overturned all these laws in a landmark ruling, *Loving v. Virginia*, in 1967.

The Dean of St. Albans, who was forced out of a promotion to Bishop of Reading after a worldwide Anglican protest, has been united in civil partnership with his longtime companion, a fellow Anglican priest. Under guidelines of the House of Bishops, Dean Jeffrey John is not barred from entering a civil partnership. But Anglican leaders in Africa and Asia are in an outrage and have complained to Canterbury. Christopher Herbert, Bishop of St. Albans, said he believed that civil partnerships were “a matter of justice.” Over seven thousand other gay couples in the U.K. have registered their partnerships with the government.

“Our society doesn’t deprive homosexuals of the right to marry. They are perfectly free to marry someone of the opposite sex, aren’t they?” Ever hear people use this argument? asks Misty Irons at www.MusingsOn.com. “But,” she points out, “if you are gay and married to an opposite-sex partner, your marriage is about as radical a departure from the definition of traditional marriage as any. Because you are calling what you have a ‘marriage’ even though it fails to accept the most fundamental purpose of why the institution of marriage exists in the first place, which is to curb promiscuity by providing a legitimate, socially responsible outlet for the human sex drive. ‘It is better to marry than to burn with passion’ the apostle Paul once wrote long ago.” Irons is an

evangelical Christian with a Westminster Seminary master’s degree. Her support for gay people has cost this heterosexual woman and her minister husband much grief from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Pope Benedict XVI has “reaffirmed” the celibacy requirement for Roman Catholic priests. Some Catholic priests are married. They are the already-married clergy who have moved to Catholicism from Anglicanism and other Christian denominations. In the early church, of course, celibacy was not a requirement for ministry. It was at the Council of Elvira, AD 295-302, that mandatory celibacy was imposed.

“Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination” is the U. S. Roman Catholic bishops’ new “outreach” guideline statement on gay Catholics. It was researched for four years, though openly gay people were not directly consulted. It calls same-sex relationships “disordered”, urges gay Catholics not to make “general public self-disclosures” of their “inclination”, and says that gay Catholics who are sexually active should not take the sacrament. It also says that gay Catholics are welcome to come to church. “Welcoming yet challenging” is how it’s put. Bishop Kevin Boland of Savannah acknowledged that, for gay Catholics, this message would be “very difficult to accept, personally. ...To apply this pastorally”, he said, “can be very difficult.” The statement does not consider homosexuality a choice and does not recommend “reparative” therapy or other efforts to change the orientation.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has dismissed charges against a minister who conducted a same-sex blessing service for a couple of women – one a Presbyterian, the other, a Buddhist. The charges against the Rev. Janet Edwards of Pittsburgh were dropped for what the ecclesiastical tribunal noted was a procedural error in timing.

A lively debate on the wisdom of mixing Christian faith with specifically political positions drew a capacity audience to Bethel University this fall. The two debaters – both evangelical Christians – were *Sojourners* founder Jim Wallis and Greg Boyd, pastor of Woodland Hills Church. Wallis, author of *God’s Politics*, and Boyd, author of *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, each rejects the Religious Right. Said Wallis: “This country is hungry for a moral center. Don’t go left, don’t go right, go deeper. Be political, but not partisan. Vote your values, but those who say there are only two values [opposing abortion and gay marriage] are too narrow. ... To be a Christian means to care about social justice. Gandhi and King didn’t just

RECORD

live the principles: They engaged the culture to fight for them.” Said Boyd: “Jesus never said a word about political issues. Jesus took care to separate his kingdom from this world, and we should, too. We are to serve, bleed and sacrifice like Jesus did. If a fraction of the church acted like he did, it would be the most beautiful and powerful force on Earth. I worry about calling some stands ‘God’s politics.’ ... Republican Christians care as much about the poor as democratic Christians do; they just have different ways of approaching it. Good Christians can agree or disagree on war, abortion, taxes and immigrants.” Adding a note of humor, Boyd said: “Hey, I have my own political views, and they’re all brilliant! But in order to underline my point, I’ll keep my trap shut about what they are.”

Operation Save America called for a boycott of Wal-Mart stores for Black Friday, 2006. The reason for this Religious Right organization’s ire was the fact that, this past summer, Wal-Mart, the world’s largest retailer, joined the national Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

“There ought to be more than just gay marriage and pro-life issues because the Bible is concerned with all of life.” So said the new head of Christian Coalition, Joel Hunter, pastor of Northland Church in Orlando, Florida. He said: “We need to do everything we can to relieve poverty, to heal the sick, and to protect the earth.” He said the Coalition’s “forging some new ground for the evangelical community” and granted: “that’s not going to go automatically and easily.” Hunter is the author of a book entitled: *Right Wing, Wrong Bird: Why the Tactics of the Religious Right Won’t Fly with Most Conservative Christians.*

Onetime music minister and singer Robert Vest’s one-man off-Broadway cabaret performance of “Georgia Boy” unfolds his painful transition from the rural South, through “ex-gay” counseling and a failed marriage to a serious integration of his homosexuality and faith in Christ. Vest, an award-winning vocalist, is on the faculty of the American Musical Dramatic Academy in New York City. For more information log on: www.robertvest.com.

The Religious Right’s American Family Association, Family Research Council and other antigay groups are furious with First Lady Laura Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The FRC’s Peter Sprigg says it was “profoundly offensive” that Secretary Rice acknowledged the gay partner of Mark Dybul at his swearing in as U. S. Global AIDS Coordinator and publicly recognized “his mother-in-law.” He said it was also disgusting that the First Lady was all smiles as

Jason Claire, Dybul’s partner, held the Bible. In a *non sequitur*, Sprigg calls President Bush’s appointment of the openly gay Dybul “like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.”

An anti-“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” senior thesis wins a top award at West Point. Arguing that the U. S. military policy against openly gay people is “wrong and harmful to the military”, Alexander Raggio received the Brig. Gen. Carroll E. Adams Award for his senior paper at the military academy. Raggio said his position was informed by his knowing a gay relative.

Brigham Young University has declined to rehire a Mormon philosophy instructor who publicly opposes the Mormon position on marriage for same-sex couples. In an op-ed essay in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, instructor Jeffrey Nielsen wrote: “I believe opposing gay marriage and seeking a constitutional amendment against it is immoral.”

Atlanta’s Lutheran bishop posts an “open letter” on his web site, protesting the gay relationship of one of his synod’s pastors. Bishop Ronald Warren has filed his charges against Rev. Bradley Schmeling. Says Schmeling: “What I hope is that in the disciplinary process, I will be able to tell my story, and shed light on the church’s policy.”

The senior minister at Colorado Springs’ Emmanuel Missionary Baptist Church told his congregation he’s gay. Rev. Benjamin Reynolds has now resigned after 16 years in the pastorate. He had been reared in the church and started to preach when he was 14 years old. Reynolds, a leader in the NAACP, has been a long-time supporter of the rights of gay men and lesbians.

Cincinnati’s Religious Right has withdrawn its challenge against a local ordinance protecting gay folks’ civil rights. The antigay forces had to acknowledge that there was fraud in its gathering of signatures for the November ballot measure. Besides that, polls indicated that the Right’s referendum would likely be defeated at the polls.

“If you’re not electing Christians then in essence you are going to legislate sin. They can legislate sin.” So said Katherine Harris, interviewed in the *Florida Baptist Witness* in August. She was running for the Republican nomination for U. S. Senate from Florida. What sin do non-Christians legislate? “They can vote to sustain gay marriage.”

The UK Christian Handbook – Britain’s comprehensive directory of Christian organizations – has rejected the inclusion of a major gay Christian association in the UK. Writing to the gay group, editor Heather Wraight explained the rejection: “The Handbook is used by a very wide range of people in this country, some of whom would disagree strongly with the aims and objectives of your organisation. We have taken advice about the effect that accepting your advert could have on the image and acceptability of the Handbook, to the customers who are most likely to buy it.”

In response to the exclusionary decision, someone recalled what C. S. Lewis wrote in “After Priggery – What?” in 1945: “To avoid a man’s society because he is poor or ugly or stupid may be bad; but to avoid it because he is wicked – with the all but inevitable implication that you are less wicked (at least in some respect) – is dangerous and disgusting.”

Guyanese health officials have criticized faith healer Ernest Angley for suggesting that people suffering with HIV/AIDS could be cured at his deliverance meetings. Angley, of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, was in Guyana for a series of public “deliverance” services in October. His television program is popular in Guyana.

In Iraq, Shia militias are targeting brutally attacking and murdering suspected gay men, according to the London Observer. The murders are rationalized as “honor killings” within a rigidly Islamic law code. According to the head of an Iraqi gay and lesbian support group in London, his contact with half of the group’s volunteers in Iraq has been lost because of recent raids by militia in Najaf, Karbala and Basra.

AND FINALLY:

Political cartoonist Bruce Tinsley is noting the fact that married people now constitute a statistical minority in America. Mallard Fillmore, his Washington newsroom’s conservative journalist (and duck) has been interviewing liberals on their reactions to this turn of events. One replies: “Some of my best friends are you married people” while a married couple asserts: “As minorities, we now prefer the term ‘People of Marriage.’”