

Interview with Scott Rae

By Mark Powell

AP What do you think are the ethical issues that the church needs to be aware of today?

SR Well, do you have all afternoon? I think that there are several which the church is under educated on. I think that you could go a long time in a lot of our churches and never know that there's anything morally problematic about abortion. We just don't talk about it very much. I get why we don't talk about it because we don't want to rip off bandages from old wounds on women who have had abortions. The cost of that is that people think that our silence means that we don't have anything to say about it. That's a pretty high cost.

I still think that we have a lot of sacred/secular dichotomy that puts believers who are in the professions or who are in the workplace feeling like they are second-class spiritual citizens when it comes to their ability to faithfully follow Christ and to meaningfully serve Him in their various vocations.

AP What do you think has contributed to this sacred/secular divide?

SR Well, I think we've forgotten one of the most important contributions from the Reformation, and that is Luther's notion of the worldly calling - that you don't have to be cloistered, that you don't have to be a priest or monk in order to have a genuine calling to something of eternal significance. And the reason why I think it's reasserted itself is because we have a truncated view of what counts for eternity. That ultimately comes I think from a truncated view of human persons and a truncated view of salvation. Human beings are more than just souls on a stick. You know, our bodies matter. The incarnation tells us that the physical world matters deeply to God and that He's in the

process of redeeming all of the world.

AP Mark Dever has said that we have a 'democratic stewardship' to be involved in the public square and in politics. How do you think that applies to specific ethical issues?

SR Well, I think he's right about that and I like the way he puts that in terms of "stewardship" because we have an opportunity to be involved in shaping public policy.

But I would maintain a distinction between being involved in public life and being involved in politics. Those aren't the same things. Politics is a sphere of public life, but I'm involved in public life when I'm involved in my neighbourhood, my workplace, my community association, my children's sports or being on the Parent and Teacher Association in the local public school. Politics is a professional aspect of public life that I don't think everybody is called to - I think you have to be wired in a certain way to be able to do that. But I'm called definitely to be in public life and the Bible is very clear that Christian faith has an intrinsically public dimension to it.

AP You often hear that because of the separation between church and state, that Christians shouldn't bring their values or their morality or their worldview into the public square? How would you respond to that?

SR I think that the Bible is against a privatised faith that is only about my own walk with Jesus and the world can go to hell in a handbasket, but I'm walking with Jesus. Now don't get me wrong, my walking with Jesus matters a lot! But I think the right answer is, "Well, I'm flourishing in my work, my kids are doing great, my marriage has never been better, I'm getting along with my neighbours...all of that, it seems to me, is the right answer to

that question as to how my spiritual life is because if it's true that all of life is spiritual then, it seems to me, that that's part of the right answer to that question.

AP So, all of life being spiritual, why is it that we've seen in the West a polarisation on issues that twenty or thirty years ago would have been seen as being common ground?

SR Well, tragically, we're seeing that polarisation in the church as well as in the culture at large and I think there have been several factors at large which have been involved in this. One is that I think that there has been an increasingly aggressive secularism that has been spreading through most of the cultures of the West for at the past thirty years. I mean, think about how frequently the secular agenda appeals to the courts, not to the legislature, in order to get their agenda passed - those are just naked power plays.

But, you're right, there's less common ground. I don't know about in your political system in Australia, I suspect it might be the same, that people can't win in their party because to win in their party you have to appeal to those more extreme edges. That's certain true in the US and we're seeing this now already with the people in the Democratic Party who are lining up to oppose Donald Trump. I mean, they are as far to the Left as any candidates have ever been in US history.

AP Yes, there was the recent case of the Democratic Senator from New York advocating for late-term abortion and infanticide...

SR Well, to say that it allows for infanticide is too strong, but they repealed the born alive rule, which means that any child born alive—whether it's from a botched abortion or not—has to be given full care and treatment. And it is true that infanticide has become more widely practised. But I think there is less common ground, that's true.

AP It seems that the sharp end of the stick is going to come with what we experience in educational institutions, especially when it comes to government funding and employing LGBTIQ staff. How do you think we need to respond as Christians to those kinds of challenges?

SR It's a really good question. Where I teach at Biola University, which is surrounded by half a dozen Christian colleges, all of which have a marksmen's scope upon our chests. The way we have combated that is first and foremost to build bridges with the LGBT community and particularly with the LGBT caucus in the state capital. California is committed to being a vanguard for LGBT rights and they would like to see all Christian colleges give up their stand on marriage and sexuality.

And about two years ago they set a three-year goal to see that happen.

This bridge building has borne fruit because some legislators and their staff have come to campus several times and we've introduced then to all kinds of folks, we've introduced him to same-sex attracted students and met with staff, and we've said ask them any questions you want, and they've asked them point-blank, "If you had your time over again would you come to school here again?" And all of them have said, "Yes unequivocally" because what they want is a place where they can work out their sexuality but also a place where they can do that and their faith is taken seriously. And you can't do that in state universities.

AP In sport, they say that the best defence is a good offence. How are we as Christians to have a good "offence" in regards to these sorts of issues that relate to public policy?

SR Again, that's a great question. I think for one we have to be informed as to what the issues are. And we have to be able to craft a cogent, coherent, biblically consistent, compelling response that shows that a biblical vision for life, for marriage, for sexuality, for work, for all of life is the most compelling way to promote human flourishing. And we have to do so much better as establishing what we are for as opposed to what we are against.

For the broader church we have to start talking about these bioethics issues, for example, from our pulpits and we have to get out from under the illusion these are only public policy issues. You know, unless you're completely estranged from your family you will walk through the end of life with several loved ones. We've got to be able to know how to do this. Our pastors have got to be able to do this better. You know one in six couples of child bearing age are technically infertile. What are we doing to walk with them?

AP Rob Smith, has referred to transgenderism as the "new black". Why do you think that is and how do you think the church should respond?

SR I think the reason that is, is because we live in a culture of autonomy on steroids. You know, morality is determined by my subjective preferences in our secular culture, and now increasingly, gender is a matter of individual autonomy.

My own view is that gender dysphoria is a result of the entrance of sin. It's not the way God intended it. I'm actually a little surprised that we don't see it a little more often, especially with the breakdown of the family. We have gotten away from the notion that God originally designed two people to parent children, a mum and a dad, both are necessary, and they are not

interchangeable.

I don't think it's an accident that today we have the mental health crisis that we do. We've thrown off the boundaries and restraints in the interest of freedom and self-expression and self-actualisation and when in reality we've got mental health crises that we honestly don't know what to do with in much of the developed world. I don't think that, that's an accident.

AP In regards to euthanasia, the talk is about "bracket creep". How do you think euthanasia laws have changed internationally and in America?

SR The laws themselves have not changed significantly, although more and more places are adopting laws that allow for it. What's changed is the way the debate is being framed today. And it's undergone two different shifts. The first one is a shift from an emphasis on mercy to an emphasis on autonomy. It's very rare today, that you hear the argument for mercy having any traction. The reason it doesn't is because all it takes is for a hospice physician or a hospice nurse on the line and saying, "Tell me how often you have a case where you can't control someone's pain at the end of life?" And the answer is it's rare, if ever. And so, that's pretty easy to debunk.

The argument now is based on moral autonomy. That I've got the right to make life's most significant decisions apart from the state interfering. But that's all well and good unless your autonomy results in harm coming to others. And I think you can make a pretty good argument that by legalising euthanasia—and it's well documented from around the world—that it's increasingly happening without consent. And I don't think it's a stretch to say that people who have been administered euthanasia without their consent have been harmed. I would say they have been murdered.

Now there's another shift that has gone from autonomy to a demographic shift today and I'm finding that people particularly in Europe are more explicitly connecting this demographic landslide of the baby boom generation hitting retirement age and how that will swamp our health care system. And how legalising assisted suicide is seen as being part of the solution to that. Dame Mary Warnock in Britain made the statement, "How can we not legalise assisted suicide with the number of people we're going to have." In fact, she said, if you are demented then you are wasting the resources of the national health service. And given the fact that roughly half of your health care expenditure will be spent in the last twelve months of your life. It's not hard to see. There's nothing cheaper than being dead! And that's how the debate is going to be framed going forward.

AP What do you think are the issues coming over the hill for us that will be the next threat as Christians?

SR I think the next issues are going to be in the areas of genetics and biotechnology. I think particular in view of this new CRISPR cas9 for gene line editing. The CRISPR procedure is essentially a genetic pair of scissors that enables the molecular biologist to snip out and replace - basically a cut and paste mechanism, that will allow people to target very specific parts of the gene line and take out the defective genes and replace them with properly functioning ones. And we now are able to with the CRISPR technology to do this in early stage embryos, as well as sex cells which now enables us to germ line genetic engineering where we are potentially passing traits onto succeeding generations. We ought to be concerned as we still do not know much about the gene line. What exactly are we unleashing on future generations?

AP What are some of the dangers there?

SR One of the earlier gene therapy protocols was for African Americans, and it was a therapy that took out the gene that was causing sickle cell anaemia in blacks. What was found was totally unanticipated in that one of the genetic side effects is that it wiped out the body's resistance to malaria. So, you are robbing Peter to pay Paul here. And nobody saw that coming. And already seen with crisper we've seen a couple of other examples of edits that were made with unanticipated consequences.

AP What advice would you give to Christians in being able to respond?

SR Ultimately this must reflect good theology; it is God's job is to change the culture. Our job is to be faithful to what God has called us to do - in our communities, in our families, to be informed, to talk to our neighbours about these things when we find out our neighbour's daughter is heading to the abortion clinic. Make sure that our churches are safe places for people to talk about these ethical issues because if we lose the battle in the church we are completely sunk.

But ultimately God's not up there biting his nails that human beings are inventing all these things. So, ultimately, God is in control. He's in his heaven. He's not losing sleep over this. Our job is to be faithful. It's God's job to preserve the culture.

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