

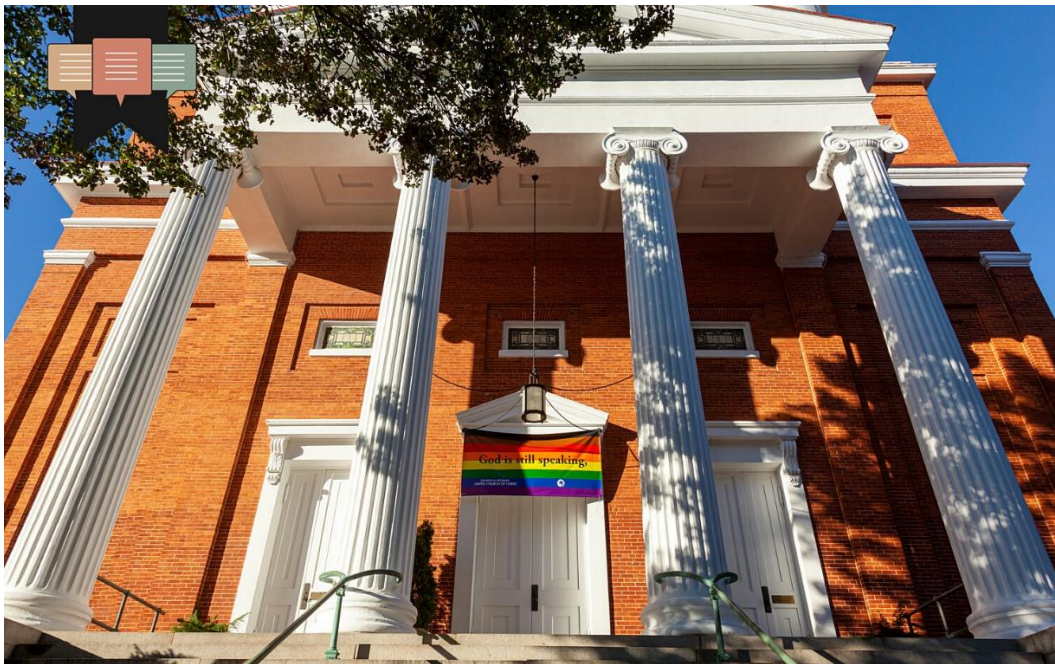
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From Silence to Complexification to Capitulation

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Why evangelical surrender on LGBTQ is almost never a surprise



A rainbow flag stands at the door of the Evangelical Reformed United Church of Christ in Frederick, Md.
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I don't often agree with David Gushee, the liberal Christian ethicist whose "battles," by [his own description](#), have included "issues like climate change, torture, LGBTQ inclusion, and white supremacy." But he spoke the uncomfortable truth when [he observed](#) years ago that when it comes to LGBTQ issues, there is no middle ground: "Neutrality is not an option. Neither is polite half-acceptance. Nor is avoiding the subject. Hide as you might, the issue will come and find you."

I thought of those words, written way back in 2016, in recent weeks as I read of Michael Gerson's [tacit approval of gay marriage](#) and of Dr. Bradley Nassif's [claims that he was expunged from North Park University](#) because he upholds traditional views of sex,

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sexuality, and marriage. These aren't the first cases of a self-described evangelical or evangelical institution moving into the revisionist camp, nor will it be the last. I hope I'm wrong, but I have my mental list of writers, thinkers, schools, and organizations that eventually will make the same move.

I almost wrote "jump" in the last sentence instead of "move," but "jump" is not really the right word. Rarely do evangelical leaders and institutions leap all at once from the open celebration and defense of orthodoxy to the open celebration and defense of (what they once believed was) heterodoxy. In fact, when evangelical capitulation on LGBTQ issues makes the news it is rarely a surprise. There are almost always a series of familiar steps.

First, there is silence. The evangelical leader or publication or institution that used to be clear on matters of sexuality and marriage just doesn't talk about those issues anymore. No matter what controversy erupts or what new cultural pressure cries out for clarification, nothing is said. It's as if the sexual revolution ceased to exist.

Next, comes complexification. Even though the church around the globe, for virtually two millennia, had no trouble coming to settled and universal convictions about these issues, now questions about homosexuality and sexual differentiation become hopelessly complicated. The issues, it is said, demand multidisciplinary expertise such that the only humble conclusion is to be unsure of any conclusion.

Then, there is usually an explicit pivot to other issues. Sex and marriage are set aside as minor ethical conundrums or minimized as a distraction from more urgent concerns. The bigger concerns may be racial justice and poverty (for those left of center) or missions and evangelism (for the more conservative sort), but in either case there is a deliberate move to ignore the swirling sexual vortex threatening to destroy everything in its path.

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head back in the other direction.*

In the next stage, we see more frustration with those pointing out the sin than with those committing the sin. This is often the telltale sign that a change in views has already taken place. The evangelical leader may still boast that he (or she) is a "conservative," but it's only the conservatives that are bothersome anymore. All of the sympathy now leans toward the revisionist side. There is great patience for the "sexual struggler" and nothing but disdain for those who speak of sin, judgment, and the need for repentance.

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Along the way, a canon within a canon develops. This is where leaders will boast of being “red letter Christians.” Jesus is pitted against Paul. The Old Testament is shunted aside as irrelevant (at least) and probably benighted. Scripture no longer functions as an inerrant and unified whole. Careful exegesis disappears in the background as slogans and buzz words take center stage.

At the same time, the arguments become intensely personal and privatized. The public debate at this point is not really about Scripture or the catholic Christian tradition. The discussion is focused on friends we know and people we’ve talked to. We often hear of how traumatized, to the point of possible self-harm, people are in our midst, and how the orthodox position and orthodox churches are to blame.

Finally, the newfound enlightenment is acknowledged and celebrated. When formerly evangelical leaders, organizations, and institutions reach this point, there is much talk about how good it feels to finally be on the side of love and inclusion. Their old way of thinking is quickly dismissed as an unfortunate by-product of having grown up in a fundamentalist family or in evangelical purity culture or—worst of all, it seems—in the Bible Belt.

To be sure, you may not see each one of these staging areas, and evangelical leaders may not move through them in a fixed order by a steady progression. But the movement is unmistakable, and it is unidirectional. Evangelicals who set down the path toward LGBTQ acceptance rarely turn around and head back in the other direction. And once the revisionist jump—that really wasn’t a jump—is complete, the tolerance and inclusion don’t usually last long. Sex is too powerful a thing to allow for competing visions. And so [Neuhaus’ Law](#) almost always proves true: Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be outlawed.



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