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On gay rights, keep fighting or adapt?

By Tom Krattenmaker

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You get the sense, observing the shifting cultural landscape, that we've reached a point on gay rights that is similar to that moment in a football game, or an election, or a relationship, when you know it's over even though it's not over.

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By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

It appears increasingly obvious that social acceptance of gay men and lesbians and insistence on their equal rights are inexorable. If the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" weren't enough to signal the turning point, or the classification of several gay-resisting Christian right organizations as "hate groups" by the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), there came news that Exodus International was ending its involvement in the anti-homosexuality "Day of Truth" in U.S. high schools.

"We need to equip kids to live out biblical tolerance and grace," Exodus President Alan Chambers explained, "while treating their neighbors as they'd like to be treated, whether we agree with them or not."

Add it up, and you see a decision point at hand for socially conservative Christian groups such as the Family Research Council that have led resistance to gay rights. Do they fight to the last ditch, continue shouting the anti-gay rhetoric that rings false and mean to the many [Americans](#) who live and work with gay people, or who themselves are gay? Or do they soften their tone and turn their attention to other fronts?

Prayerful discernment and simple Christian decency would strongly suggest the latter. The alternative looks worse by the day — a quixotic battle more likely to discredit its fighters and their fine religion than win any hearts and minds for Jesus. Christianity has far worthier causes than this.

For all its drama and rally-the-troops appeal, "fighting to the end" is a sure loser. More and more Americans — young people in particular, Christians very much included — know gay men and lesbians and see how the anti-gay talking points and caricatures fail to square with the reality under our noses.

But the Bible says ...

"Young Christians increasingly have family members who are gay, have people in their lives who really matter to them who are gay, and that changes how they approach these issues," says Gabe Lyons, author of the new book *The Next Christians* and a leader and chronicler of the new generation of evangelicals. "This doesn't mean their convictions on the matter have changed, but in this new environment, people don't want to see their friends being discriminated against; they don't want them labeled as someone who should be feared and blamed."

Of course, rubbing some people the wrong way is of little concern if you're convinced you're representing the Straight from the Bible, Capital-T Truth, as conservative Christian organizations are quick to assert. The problem is that such a stance is increasingly difficult to maintain as society begins taking a more complex look at what the bible says and doesn't say about sex, and as growing ranks of unchurched Americans ask why it even matters what the Bible says.

[Boston University](#) biblical scholar Jennifer Wright Knust demonstrates in her new book, *Unprotected Texts*, that the Bible's lessons on sex and marriage are highly nuanced, heavily contextualized and often contradictory. The writings of the [apostle Paul](#) and modern interpretations of the Sodom and Gomorrah story guide much of conservative Christian thinking on sexuality. But other parts of the bible veer in dramatically different directions, Knust points out — appearing to legitimize polygamy or sex with slaves or, 180 degrees in the opposite direction, elevating celibacy as the proper Christian practice. Knust says it is highly misleading for marriage traditionalists to portray their stance as the biblical stance. "When read as a whole," she writes, "the Bible provides neither clear nor consistent advice about sex and bodies."

In explaining its withdrawal from the "Day of Truth," Exodus International outlines a smart way forward for conservative Christian groups — one that does not require that they sacrifice their core beliefs. Note that Alan Chambers did not announce a change in his organization's philosophy that people can be saved from homosexuality through faith in Christ. What he did signal, though, was a change in tone and emphasis, and in doing so he invoked a foundational Christian principle: Treat

others as you wish to be treated.

Contrast that with the words of certain other Christian right leaders. Family Research Council leader [Tony Perkins](#) continues his steady drum beat of dark warnings that homosexuals are radical, unwell and out to destroy Christianity and the family. [Chuck Colson](#), best known for his admirable prison ministry work, has described same-sex marriage as "the greatest threat to religious freedom in America."

Is Colson claiming that the religious liberty of a subset of Christians is abrogated if those Christians do not get to dictate the law of the land on marriage? It's doubtful that many people outside the conservative Christian camp will hear much truth in that assertion. And as Colson's recent experience demonstrates, maintaining this stance can only paint you into a corner in the new context.

Colson is a leader of a project called the Manhattan Declaration, which is mounting a vigorous defense of conservative values. A key plank in that, as you might guess, is opposition to gay marriage — and that has become the bone of contention in a news-making brouhaha over Apple's decision to ban the [Manhattan Declaration iPhone app](#).

The cultural tide

After the app's initial launch, Apple started receiving protests that the declaration promoted hate and homophobia and decided to remove it from the virtual shelves. Say what you will about the fairness of those charges — Does opposing same-sex marriage automatically constitute "hate"? — this is the jam in which gay-rights fighters increasingly find themselves as they strive to withhold a cherished right from a certain group of Americans based on their identity.

[Conservative](#) Christian leaders ought to be very careful about their rhetoric going forward — careful not to continue giving the impression that being Christian is in large measure about opposing gay rights, and careful not to let the public expression of their faith become primarily associated with something that looks, sounds and feels like hate to growing segments of the population.

Fighting to the end might sound gallant, but it's not a road to glory so much as a ticket to infamy — an infamy akin to that borne by the likes of [Bull Connor](#), [George Wallace](#) and other villains of civil rights history. Is that any hill for Christians to die on?

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