



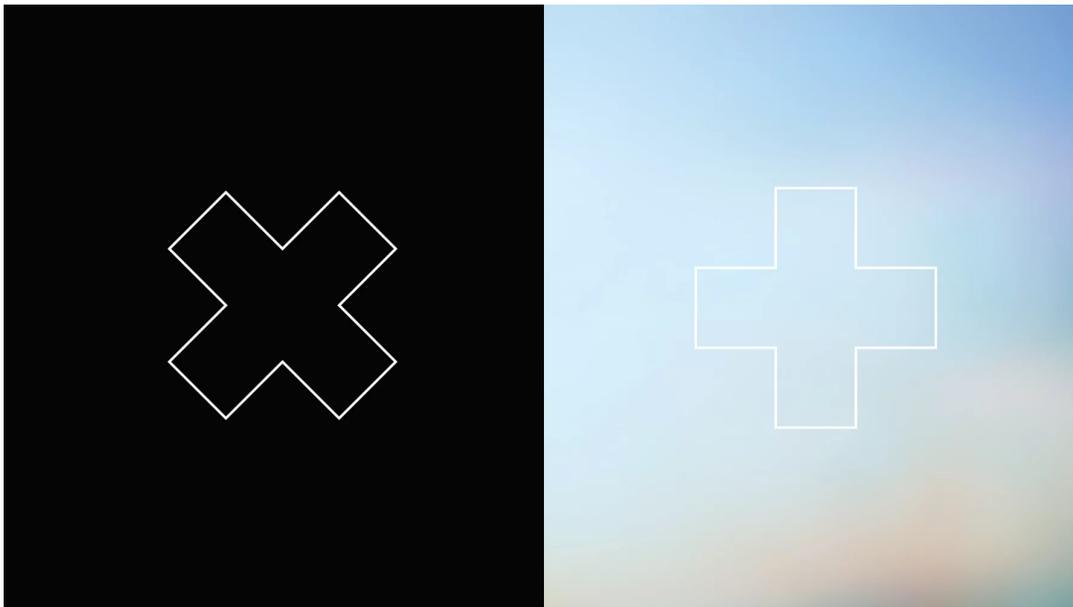
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What Comes After the Ex-Gay Movement? The Same Thing That Came Before.

Old-school evangelical leaders once knew the value of “care” over “cure.”

GREG JOHNSON SEPTEMBER 20, 2021



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“You know, Mike, I used to be gay,” I said.

Mike stopped moving his paintbrush as the words fell clumsily from my mouth. He was painting the St. Louis apartment I called home in the summer of 1997 as I began working toward my PhD in

historical theology.

He'd asked me about my schooling, and we got to talking about faith. Mike had explained to me how he felt he could never go to church because he was gay.

"I know they say that's not supposed to happen," I went on, after dropping the bombshell. "But that's my story." Mike stared at me with interest as he set the paint can down, gently balancing his brush on its edge.

Looking back on this encounter, I can see that it had all the trappings of what became known as the ex-gay movement, of which I was once an eager proponent. Most notable is my use of the ex-gay script: "I used to be gay." The phrase implied that I wasn't gay anymore. I had a testimony, a story to tell about leaving homosexuality behind.

To be clear, my sexual attractions at that moment were drawn as exclusively to other men as ever. I was still at the top of the Kinsey scale that researchers since the 1940s have used to classify sexual orientation. What made me ex-gay was that I used the ex-gay script. I was trying to convince myself that I was a straight man with a disease—a curable one—called homosexuality. A condition that was being healed.

My terminological maneuver was an integral component of conversion therapy. Alan Medinger, the first executive director of Exodus International, [described](#) it as "a change in self-perception in which the individual no longer identifies him- or herself as homosexual." It was all about identity. The testimony made the man. And, within my ex-gay framework, I wasn't lying; I was claiming my new reality.

I was an ex-gay.

The emergence of Exodus International in 1976 had set evangelicals on a hopeful path toward curing homosexuality. Founder Frank Worthen [explained](#), "When we started Exodus, the premise was that God could change you from gay to straight." What followed was a decades-long experiment on hundreds of thousands of human test subjects. The movement [collapsed](#) after Exodus president Alan Chambers's 2012 statement that more than 99 percent of Exodus clients had not experienced a change in their sexual orientation.

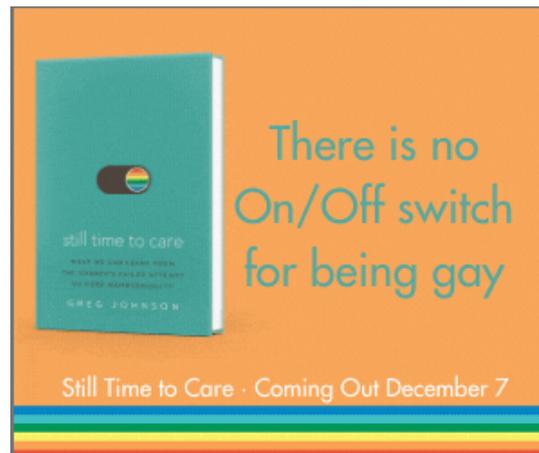
Although the paradigm of cure failed, it still walks undead among us, as some within major denominations try to institutionalize its approach. Recent debates among conservative Anglicans and Presbyterians over whether someone can claim a "gay identity" are only the latest round of similar disputes that have echoed in church corridors for years. After all, renouncing a homosexual self-perception was an essential first step in conversion therapy.

One effect of this approach was that it mandated that non-straight believers hide behind a mask, pretending to be anything but gay. It was part of the reparative process.

But this theological innovation was a relatively recent development. Before there was an ex-gay paradigm of cure, there was an older orthodoxy that included a Christian paradigm of caring for believers who aren't straight.

I've wondered whether Henri Nouwen had his own homosexuality in mind when he wrote of the difference between care and cure. In the biography *Wounded Prophet*, Michael Ford [documents](#) how Nouwen discussed his experience as a celibate gay man with his close circle of friends. Nouwen had tried psychological and religious methods of orientation change, but to no avail. He knew that out of obedience to God, he couldn't let himself engage in sexual relationships. But his path was filled with loneliness and unfulfilled longings and many tears.

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In *Bread for the Journey*, he wrote, “Care is being with, crying out with, suffering with, feeling with. Care is compassion. It is claiming the truth that the other person is my brother or sister, human, mortal, vulnerable, like I am.”

“Often we are not able to cure,” he insisted, “but we are always able to care.”

Evangelical leaders, including John Stott, helped lay a foundation for a pastoral paradigm of care. Stott—the theologian and writer labeled the “Protestant Pope” by the BBC—argued that sexual orientation remains a part of one’s constitution. As Stott wrote in *Issues Facing Christians Today* back in 1982, “In every discussion about homosexuality we must be rigorous in differentiating between this ‘being’ and ‘doing,’ that is, between a person’s identity and activity, sexual preference and sexual practice, constitution and conduct.”

For Stott, a homosexual orientation was part of the believer's identity—a fallen part, but one that the gospel doesn't erase so much as it humbles.

This posture runs even further back than Stott. C. S. Lewis spoke in a 1954 letter to Sheldon Vanauken of a “pious male homosexual” with no apparent contradiction. Lewis's lifelong best friend Arthur Greeves was gay. Lewis called him his “first friend” and made it clear to him that his sexual orientation never would be an issue in their friendship. They vacationed together. The compilation of letters Lewis sent to Greeves, collected under the title *They Stand Together*, reaches 592 pages.

In the United States, as the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York announced the birth of the gay rights movement, orthodox Protestants were already asking what positive vision Scripture gives for people who are gay. The 1970 pseudonymous InterVarsity Press book *The Returns of Love: Letters of a Christian Homosexual* mapped out a path of care and was promoted by Stott. The book's celibate gay Anglican author explained that he was still a virgin at the time he wrote it.

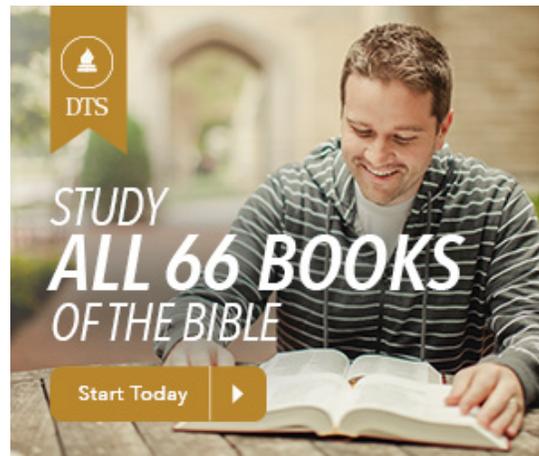
Evangelicalism's leaders knew there was a history of abuse with which to reckon. In a 1968 letter to a European pastor, Francis Schaeffer lamented the church's complicity in marginalizing gay people. The pastor had seen no fewer than six gay people commit suicide, and he sought Schaeffer's counsel. “The homophile tends to be pushed out of human life (and especially orthodox church life) even if he does not practice homosexuality,” lamented Schaeffer. “This, I believe, is both cruel and wrong.” Indeed, Schaeffer's ministry became a magnet for gay people wrestling with Christianity.

Such leaders saved their disgust for abusive religious leaders. When Jerry Falwell Sr. brought up the challenge of gay people with Schaeffer in private, Schaeffer [commented](#) that the issue was complicated. As Schaeffer's son, Frank, [recounted in an interview](#) with NPR and also in his book *Crazy for God*, Falwell then shot back a rejoinder: “If I had a dog that did what they do, I'd shoot it.” There was no humor in Falwell's voice.

Afterward, Francis Schaeffer said to his son, “That man is really disgusting.”

“Sexual sins are not the only sins,” Stott wrote in *Issues*, “nor even necessarily the most sinful; pride and hypocrisy are surely worse.”

In 1980, Stott convened a gathering of Anglican evangelicals to map out a pastoral approach to homosexuality. They led with public repentance for their own sins against gay people. In a [statement](#), these leaders declared, “We repent of the crippling ‘homophobia’ ... which has coloured the attitudes toward homosexual people of all too many of us, and call our fellow Christians to similar repentance.”



It was a staggering confession at a time when popular opinion was still biased strongly against gay people. This was not the 21st century, when many Christian leaders repent in order to look relevant and inclusive in a culture that celebrates all things fabulous. Stott and these evangelical leaders must have been truly grieved for the ways they had injured their neighbors and siblings in Christ. The statement called specifically for qualified nonpracticing gay people to be received as candidates for ordination to ministry.

Five years earlier, many were shocked by Billy Graham's similar comments in a news conference, some of which were reported in 1975 in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Graham had been asked whether he would support the ordination of gay men to the Christian ministry. Graham had replied that they "should be considered on individual merit" based on certain qualifications. Specifically, the article mentioned "turning away from their sins, receiving Christ, offering themselves to Christ and the ministry after repentance, and obtaining the proper training for the job."

The gospel of Jesus Christ offers a positive vision for gay people. "In homosexuality," Lewis explained to Vanauken, "as in every other tribulation, [the works of God] can be made manifest." He continued: "Every disability conceals a vocation, if only we can find it, which will 'turn the necessity to glorious gain.'"

Lewis [asked](#), "What should the positive life of the homosexual be?" That's the question any gay person who comes to faith in Jesus will ask.

Too often the answer we hear is simply "No."

No sex. No dating. No relationships. Often, no leadership roles.

That leaves people like me hearing that we have, as Eve Tushnet [explained](#) in a 2012 piece in *The American Conservative*, a "vocation of No."

What is a calling of "Yes"? What is the positive Christian vision the gospel gives for gay people?

When I look at the lives and ministries of Lewis, Schaeffer, Graham, and Stott, what stands out most clearly is that they bring a vision of Jesus: Jesus, in his saving power. Jesus, who washes us and makes us clean. Jesus, who brings us into God's family. Jesus, who covers shame and forgives sin. Jesus, who calls us by name. Jesus, who sees us all the way down and still wants to be in relationship with us. Jesus, who suffers with and for us. Jesus, who challenges us to live for his kingdom. Jesus, who gives new life with all its joy. Jesus, who is that treasure in a field for which we sold everything. Jesus, who is that treasure that can never be taken from us.

This is Jesus, whose inbreaking kingdom sweeps us up into something he is doing in the cosmos, something larger than ourselves. In Christ, we find ourselves in a larger narrative.

This is not Jesus as a means to an end of heterosexual functioning and comfortable family life. This is God himself as the end for which we were made. With this real God, the locus of hope is found not in this life with heterosexuality, but in the coming age, when we shall stand before our Savior.

Without that relationship with a Savior, there is no point in speaking of a biblical sexual ethic, either to straight or gay people. No gay people are going to embrace such an ethic unless they fall in love with Jesus. A heart smitten by grace is not only willing but also eager to follow the one who died for us.

Schaeffer, Stott, and Graham all stated on occasion their shared belief that some people are born gay. All of these Christian leaders also held to the historical understanding of the biblical sexual ethic. This certainly meant committing to a life in line with God's creational pattern—his design. Not one of them supported sexual unions for believers outside of a monogamous marriage between two people of different sexes. But they approached gay people from a posture of humility.

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Their vision did not flatten people into our unwanted sexual urges. Instead, they recognized that a same-sex-oriented believer's biggest struggle may be not with sexual sin but with the ability to give

and receive love. So they emphasized the need for the community of the church; for deep, long-term friendships; for brotherhood, to be known even in celibacy.

Stott, himself celibate, [explained](#): “At the heart of the homosexual condition is a deep and natural hunger for mutual love, a search for identity and a longing for completeness. If gay people cannot find these things in the local ‘church family,’ we have no business to go on using that expression.”

Lewis, Schaeffer, Graham, and Stott also viewed the homosexual condition as an unchosen orientation with no reliable expectation of a change in this life. They showed great concern for the emotional and relational needs of gay people. Schaeffer insisted in his 1968 letter that the church needed to be the church and help “the individual in every way possible.”

In his [NPR interview](#), Frank Schaeffer described his father’s Swiss ministry, L’Abri, as a place “where homosexuals—both lesbians and gay men—are welcomed.” He added: “No one’s telling them they’ve got to change or that they’re horrible people. And they go away, you know, having found my father wonderfully compassionate and Christlike to them.”

Schaeffer [foresaw](#) significant cultural changes when, in 1978, an Orthodox Presbyterian Church congregation in San Francisco found itself sued for releasing a gay employee who had violated the church’s code of conduct. In *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, Schaeffer said it would be silly for other churches to think they might not face the same challenge.

Still, Schaeffer and Graham didn’t recommend us-verses-them approaches. Just weeks before the 1964 presidential election, a gay sex scandal rocked the nation. President Lyndon Johnson’s top adviser, Walter Jenkins, was arrested a second time for having gay sex in a YMCA restroom. Graham called the White House to intercede for Jenkins.

In the [recorded phone call](#), Graham charged Johnson to show compassion to Jenkins.

Asked about homosexuality at a 1997 San Francisco crusade, Graham remarked to reporters, “There are other sins. Why do we jump on that sin as though it’s the greatest sin?” He added, “I have so many gay friends, and we remain friends.” Speaking to a crowd of 10,000 that night in the Cow Palace, Graham declared, “Whatever your background, whatever your sexual orientation, we welcome you tonight.”

As Stott emphasized so passionately in *Issues*, the gay person who follows Jesus must live by faith, hope, and love: Faith in both God’s grace and in his standards. Hope to look beyond this present life of struggle to our future glory. But the love by which we must live, he explained, is the love we must receive from Christ’s spiritual family, the church. We must depend upon love from the very churches that have historically failed to give it to people like us.

Church historian Richard Lovelace's 1978 book *Homosexuality and the Church* garnered hearty endorsements from evangelical luminaries Ken Kantzer (a former CT editor), Elisabeth Elliot, Chuck Colson, Harold Ockenga, and Carl F. H. Henry. The book might seem radical in today's climate, but in the 1970s it represented a transatlantic neoevangelical vision. In contrast to homophobia on the right and sexual compromise on the left, Lovelace laid out the gospel challenge:

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There is another approach to homosexuality which would be healthier both for the church and for gay believers, and which could be a very significant witness to the world. This approach requires a double repentance, a repentance both for the church and for its gay membership. First, it would require professing Christians who are gay to have the courage both to avow [acknowledge] their orientation openly and to obey the Bible's clear injunction to turn away from the active homosexual life-style. ... Second, it would require the church to accept, honor, and nurture nonpracticing gay believers in its membership, and ordain these to positions of leadership for ministry.

The church's sponsorship of openly avowed but repentant homosexuals in leadership positions would be a profound witness to the world concerning the power of the Gospel to free the church from homophobia and the homosexual from guilt and bondage.

Only the gospel can open up the humility for such a dual repentance. Yet this was the Christian vision of Lovelace and Henry, Ockenga and Elliot, Kantzer and Colson, Lewis and Graham, Schaeffer and Stott, and a young gay evangelical Anglican who felt too afraid to use his own name, even though he was still a virgin.

Christian fathers and mothers like these had it right. Tragically, I write this as a lament for a road not traveled on this side of the Atlantic.

Already by the late 1970s, a hard shift had begun. As ex-gay ministries in North America multiplied with their expectation of orientation change, they shifted the locus of hope to this life. As the AIDS crisis devastated gay communities in the 1980s, evangelicals embraced the promise of heterosexuality. The secular reparative therapists added a semblance of clinical respectability. The new path to cure pushed out the older path to care.

And then the conservative side in a culture war discovered that we ex-gays were useful. We were proof that gay people could choose to become straight if they really wanted to. And if we could become straight, then there really wasn't so much need for the church to repent of its homophobia. It just required people like me to maintain the illusion that we had changed.

In the aftermath of that lost culture war that radically transformed the sexual mores of the West, there is much for Christians to grieve. Transactional relationships. Disposable marriages. Vastly changed assumptions about sexuality and gender.

But the conservative church's hesitancy to repent has not dissipated. As I watch evangelical churches and denominations fumble their way through discussions of sexual orientation and identity, often enforcing the language and categories of a failed ex-gay movement, we're missing the real battle: The surrounding culture has convinced the world that Christians hate gay people.

Our calling is to prove them wrong.

The world is watching. Our children and grandchildren are watching. They are already second-guessing their faith because they hear all around them that Christians hate gay people, and they can't point to anyone in their congregation who is gay, is faithful, and is loved and accepted as such. Maybe they can point to someone who uses the language of same-sex attraction. But even that is rare. It's still not safe to do so.

I am not saying we are at risk of losing Christians who are attracted to members of the same sex; that's a given.

I am saying we are at risk of losing the next generation.

For those who are listening, an older generation of Christians is still willing and able to help us understand.

Greg Johnson is lead pastor of Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Louis and author of Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality.

Have something to add about this? See something we missed? Share your feedback [here](#).
