

2015

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Recommended Citation

Lawson, Kelley, "Never You Mind What They Say, It's Still Not Okay To Be Gay" (2015). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 202.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.198>

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Never You Mind What They Say, It's Still Not Okay to be Gay

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Abstract

The Gay Rights movement of the United States (U.S.) has made progress in the past few years with the overturning of bans on openly gay service in the military and gay marriage nationwide. Queer identity is being portrayed in more positive ways in the media and becoming an accepted form of identity in many areas of the country.

Traditionally many Religious Right Organizations in the U.S. have been opposed to Gay Rights. This research explores the responses of the Conservative Christian organization Focus on the Family (FOTF) to this increasing normalization of queer identity. By analysis of documents on their website this study asks if the messages around queer identity are becoming more accepting. The purpose of this research is to find out if there have been any changes in the tone of messages on gay rights. The study finds that FOTF is not becoming tolerant of queer identity. They have three main responses to this change in national opinion. FOTF claims their religious freedoms are under attack, that there is a radical political agenda around queer identity, and finally the God intends for people to be straight, married and gender conforming.

KEYWORDS: Queer identity, gay rights, Christian conservatives, Focus on the Family

Introduction And Researcher Positionality

Focus on the Family (FOTF) is the eighth highest revenue producing religious-right organization in the country. According to a 2012 *Alternet* article it was founded with the intent to “offer biblical solutions to family problems” (Brown, 2012).

Rightwingwatch.org describes FOTF as “the largest international religious-right group in

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the United States, a multi-media empire that includes its own campus and zip code in Colorado Springs, Colorado” (rightwingwatch.org). Established in 1977 by James Dobson, FOTF’s media empire includes a daily radio show hosted by Dobson and broadcast in 164 countries, as well as sales of books, CDs, videos and magazines. Before Dobson stepped down as president in 2003 he was a powerful player in right-wing Christian politics, with a record of advising past president Reagan and George H. W. Bush on family matters (Rightwingwatch.org). FOTF’s current president is Jim Daly. FOTF is involved in many areas of traditionally conservative Christian politics including, private school vouchers, tax credits for religious schools, anti-abortion legislation, and the area most relevant to this research, the prevention of what they call “special rights” for homosexuals.

In the last 20 years the gay rights movement in the U.S. has come a long way with many positive changes taking place. In 2010 the ban on gays serving openly in the military, called Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT), was lifted. In June of the 2015 the Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed in 1996 allowing states to prohibit marriage between same sex couples. Within the past two years well known celebrities like NBA star Jason Collins and Olympian Catilyn Jenner are publically embracing their queer identities. For at least a decade we have seen shows on television with queer characters portrayed in a positive light. Hate crimes against queer people can be prosecuted under the Matthew Shepard Act. Many schools and universities include queer identities as a part of their curriculum on diversity. Large U.S. corporations like Target, Apple and Starbucks proudly proclaim their support for queer friendly policies while offering benefits to same sex couples. Politicians on every level

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support legislation recognizing all types of queer identity and are forced to state their position on gay rights.

These changes are exciting to see. I remember the Oregon Citizen's Alliance's (OCA) influence on Oregon politics in the 1990s. The OCA was Conservative Christian political activist organization founded by Lon Mabon. During the mid 1990s the OCA were at the height of their power. At the time I was a telephone interviewer and was shocked how easily people were ready to say they disliked gay people - Why shouldn't they? Measures were brought before voters to enact legislation to protect children from homosexuals. Their behaviors were considered to be "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse and were to be discouraged and avoided." This was the language of Measure 9 in 1992. The failed vote was close. Gays and lesbians were something to fear as well as people children needed to be protected from. Sadly this point of view was not new to me. In my Southern Baptist upbringing I was taught God frowns upon homosexuality; it is a sin. There is no possible coexistence between religion and queer identity. In order to maintain one's role as Christian, the only option was to denounce one's queer identity. I did not know any gay or lesbian people in my youth, so I had no reason to reflect deeply on the information. Being gay was just one thing on a long list of things not approved of by Southern Baptists.

In my 20s I worked for a student advocacy group. I learned later the director was a lesbian as was the administrative assistant. When the director left the organization it happened to be a gay man who replaced her. These were the first people I was close to who identified as gay or lesbian, and the beginning of my own denouncement of my Southern Baptist teachings. Many victories have been seen in the past 20 plus years, for

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gay rights in Oregon and throughout the country. The Southern Baptists I still know see this change in perspective as a stain on the morality of our country.

For many the rights around sexual preference fall into the category of moral politics. George Lakoff (2002) believes both conservatives and liberals use the concept of morality in their political arguments. This has definitely been the case for FOTF. There is fear in the growing acceptance of queer identity. It can be summarized in the following quote from Dobson:

“[The homosexual] agenda including teaching pro-homosexual [sic] concepts in the public schools, redefining the family to represent “any circle of people who love each other,” approval of homosexual adoption, legitimizing same-sex marriage, and securing special rights for those who identify themselves as gay. Those ideas must be opposed, even though to do so is to expose oneself to the charge of being “homophobic”” (Dobson, 2000).

Fetner (2008) says the function of the Christian family is to pass on faith’s doctrine and values. For many years there was a nationwide disdain for queer identity. According to Christian conservatives moral failings require legislative action to protect families. The politics of the 1960s and 1970s focused on women’s rights, abortion rights, and gay rights. These types moral issues never go away. I grew up in a time when abortion rights were strong. Though many disliked living in a post Roe v. Wade world little could be done. “If you don’t like abortion then don’t have one” was the only recourse for people against the practice. But within the last five to 10 years states are passing measures to undermine a woman’s right to choose. Political candidates garner huge donations and support from anti-choice organizations like FOTF. Political power bought

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with big dollars steadily pick away at abortion rights. I fear the same will be true for sexual identity politics. Many say when my parent's generation dies out rights for gay and lesbian folks will be firmly fixed, replaced by a generation who see queer identity as normal, right and natural. I hope this is the case but must admit I am very skeptical. This research was born from my desire to know if religious-right organizations like FOTF are becoming more accepting of queer identity, or are the negative messages I received about queer identity in my youth still the overarching policy taught for their followers. This content analysis answers the question using FOTF's own documents.

Overview Of Literature

This thesis specifically examines FOTF's website for their position statements on queer identity. Books and articles about queer identity and Christianity were other writings of interest for this project. The goal was an attempt to understand political strategies around queer identity and conservative Christian organizations in the U.S. All the literature reviewed here was written within the last 10 to 20 years to illustrate the change in philosophies as well as political actions of both movements over time. The literature in this paper looks at the religious-rights history against gay rights, a timeline of gay rights victories, and the political strategies in a time when public opinion is shifting away from limitation of gay rights.

Fetner (2008) traces the synergetic relationship between gay activism and the religious-right to the birth of the evangelical movement of the 1920s. Prior to the 1970s the main ideals of evangelicals were isolation by staying out of the political sphere. The secular world was considered to be full of harmful influences (Fetner, 2008). Evangelical

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time and money was spent building their own social networks and “institutions that supported their own values and ideology.” Evangelicals taught loved ones to “act in a way that would make them worthy of salvation” (Fetner, 2008). Building religious schools and churches of their own protected them from the outside influence of the world. It was the politics of the 1970s that drew Christian evangelicals to the Right. By this time, an empire of religious schools, summer camps, television broadcasts, and magazines existed. The Right wanted the money these religious powerhouses generated. Many moral political issues, including rights for women, abortion and gays were in the headlines. In the mid 1970s Anita Bryant, a well-know actress and singer, was recruited to use her celebrity to repeal an antigay discrimination ordinance in Dade County Florida. Bryant’s campaign, along with the mobilization of gay activists after the Stonewall Riots, the beginning of the modern gay rights movement, cemented a political relationship between the religious-right and the gay right movements. It is a relationship that still exists today.

Oregon was not the only place unfriendly to queer identity in the 1990s. This decade also saw the enactment of DADT, a law prohibiting openly gay people from serving in the military, and DOMA, a law allowing states to ban same sex marriage. Conservative Christian political organizations like FOTF were behind the scenes in these victories. Gilgoff surmises the power of FOTF as follows:

“In it’s capacity as a political machine, FOTF is the culmination of a dream nearly half a century in the making. The dream was to somehow persuade millions of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, who’d withdrawn from American public life for decades, to rise above their separatist impulses and

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join the political fray, and in such large numbers that they could tip local, state, and even national elections or flood Congress with enough phone call to stop a bill in its tracks”

(p. 72).

Yet we see the tide is turning. Hirshman’s (2012) interviews include major figures in the gay rights movement discussing the victories that have brought it out of obscurity. The wins are replacing characterizations of sinful, subversive or criminals to respected leaders enjoying status as major players in the American politics. The American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) 1973 decision retracting their opinion of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder can be seen as the beginning of this change in direction. Since then we have seen the overturning of DADT, and DOMA. Now same sex couples to marry in any state.

FOTF’s website is the main source of data available to learn about their current positions on topics related to queer identity. Taken together the articles, books and websites give a detailed understanding of the historical relationship between the religious-right and gay activism, and a glimpse of some of the negative consequences suffered by gays and lesbians throughout a shared history. They also give a detailed examination of some the gay rights victories as well as the religious rights responses to them. This information provides a foundation to understand how FOTF is responding to the increasing normalization of queer identity.

Methodology

My research seeks to answer the question of how FOTF is responding to the

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increasing normalization and nationwide acceptance of queer identity. This study is a qualitative process, and includes library research, an analysis of articles from FOTF's website in addition to books on the topics of religion and queer identity. In taking a qualitative approach the study followed a non-linear process; therefore instead of starting with a hypothesis I develop conclusions and interpretations from my research as it progresses. The study drew from qualitative content analysis, which according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) allows the researcher to sort through texts to gain a deeper understanding of social processes. It is particularly useful for work with non-living data that cannot be influenced by the researcher. Content analysis, an unobtrusive method, assumes the investigative process of non-living things is how we learn about our world. To understand society we look closely at the things already in it (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). To discern what actions FOTF religious asks their followers to take regarding queer identity I chose five articles from their website for my analysis: *FOTF 1, Cause for Concern: Transgenderism*, *FOTF 2, Social Issues: The Right to Counseling for Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions*, *FOTF 3, Social Issues: Judicial Philosophy*, *FOTF 4, Social Issues: School Choice* and *FOTF 5, Social Issues: Revisionist Gay Theology*. I used two methods to decide on the articles. First, I picked the first four articles appearing after typing "cause for concern (homosexuality)" into the search engine on FOTF website. The fifth article was the first option that came up by typing "focus on the family position on homosexuality" into a Google search engine. I was interested in anything highlighting FOTF's position on the normalization of queer identity. I analyzed each article by close reading to ascertain a basic summary and notes section for what each article tells the reader. Then decided on the preliminary themes I found in each article to

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answer my question. Finally, I chose excerpts from each article to answer my question. Once I finished the first article I created a grid to list common themes I found throughout each individual article. Of the five articles I read three themes emerged characterizing FOTF's position.

Findings

There are three main ways FOTF is responding to the increasing normalization of queer identity. First is the claim that Christian's religious freedom is under attack in the areas of transgender rights, school choice and right to treatment for unwanted same-sex attractions. The nationwide pressure to be accepting of queer identity, to essentially allow religion and queer identity to coexist, is discussed in detail. The second way FOTF is responding is the claim of strong liberal political pressures on politicians and even judges for the acceptance of queer identity. Part of this is apparent in the increase of political changes on queer identity handed down by the Supreme Court. FOTF reminds the reader that the body is supposed to uphold the founders' ideas for this country not shift with the opinions of popular culture. The third response from FOTF is the holding to the idea of a God with an Intentional Design for humans. This design is for the long held Christian ideals of straight, monogamous sexual relationships occurring only in a marriage between a man and a woman. The design also calls for gender conforming people desiring a cure for same sex attractions.

Religious Freedom is Under Attack

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One of the ways FOTF is responding to the normalization of queer identity is the claim religious freedom is under attack. According to the American Civil Liberty Union's (ACLU) Religious Freedom website, the first amendment to the constitution is the right for each person in the United States to practice their own religion or no religion at all (<https://www.aclu.org/your-right-religious-freedom>). The sentiment FOTF expresses is activists have moved far beyond their original goals of tolerance to an expectation for Christians to accept and endorse queer life choices, interfering with their freedoms to continue to denounce queer identity in all forms.

The recent push for acceptance of transgender identity is of grave concern for FOTF. This is demonstrated by an article on their website dedicated solely to warning against the call for protections around queer identity.

“Of particular concern when it comes to the creation of protected class status for “sexual minorities” through hate crimes and employment nondiscrimination laws is the sobering reality that in increasingly secular societies, when “gay rights” collides with religious liberties, religious freedom nearly always loses...Gains afforded to one group will necessarily come at the expense of another.

Specifically, those who hold to a Biblically orthodox view on homosexual or transgender behavior will increasingly find their voices marginalized and then eventually banned for the public arena” (FOTF 1, p. 4).

When considering the right to counseling for the cure of unwanted same-sex attractions FOTF believe the ideals for psychologists put forth by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to “respect the right of others to hold values, attitudes and

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opinions that differ from their own” (FOTF 2, p. 1) are not being upheld when Christian counselors are not allowed to help people in need. When people who “seek professional help to align their thoughts and behaviors with their convictions and faith” (FOTF 2, p. 2) are barred from treatment because Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) are outlawed FOTF believes this is an example of religious freedom as under attack.

When public schools teach being gay is okay yet parents cannot access federal funds to send their children to schools upholding their religious values against the acceptance of queer identity, then religious freedom is under attack. The liberal use of the “Blaine Amendment” an “obscure provision within many states constitutions that prohibit the use of public funds for sectarian schools” (FOTF 4, p. 5) concerns FOTF. Parent readers are reminded of their responsibility for their children’s souls. Christian parents are failing in their mission to raise their children to serve God if they are taught being gay and other queer identities are acceptable life choices. FOTF says “Unfortunately, more and more public schools are promoting homosexuality, sexual promiscuity and other political liberal viewpoints” and the Christian parents accountability to God includes a “responsibility to protect the hearts and minds of their children, a vital part of which is actively choosing the best education environments for their children” (FOTF 4, p. 7).

FOTF also argues Gay Revisionist Theory threatens Christian’s religious freedoms by pushing for acceptance of queer identity and behaviors. “When God is said to sanction what he plainly forbids, then a serious heresy is unfolding before us in bold fashion” (FOTF 5, p. 2) and religious freedom is under attack. FOTF warns:

“No matter where one turns in the culture today, the issue of homosexuality and

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“gender identity” is being hotly debated. The “homosexual rights” ideology continues to seek legitimization – not just tolerance – of homosexual behavior, resulting in changing of societal mores and values that deeply impact Americans in their day-to-day relationships with family members, neighbors and co-workers. Revisionist gay theology take the movement for the legitimization of homosexuality a step further by attempting to redefine homosexual behavior as God-ordained and morally permissible” (p. 1).

Radical Agenda and Political Pressure

FOTF's beliefs align closely with organizations like Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) who believe America has always been defined by faith and religious values. They see these values to be under attack by organizations like the ACLU. This point of viewpoint is pertinent to FOFT's complaints of an increasing radical agenda and political pressure to legitimize queer identity. Religious Right organizations like FOTF have always been outspoken opponents for queer rights. Until recently the politics on the local, state and federal levels have been on their side in limiting gay rights in a variety of arenas including in the workplace and schools. FOTF is concerned as they see public sentiment turning away from conservative religious values.

When liberal judges, who were never meant to have influence over “the sword or the purse” (FOTF 3, p. 1) are “actively legislating from the bench, especially in the controversial area of social policy” (FOTF 3, p. 2) then religious freedom is under attack. FOTF is deeply concerned with the idea of a “living Constitution” believing it is against the founders' intent to interpret the Constitution “in light of evolving values and societal

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developments” (FOTF 3, p. 2). FOTF supports a “strict constructionist” (FOTF 3, p. 6) type of judge, like Antonin Scalia who “look first at the text and then at the original understanding of the language to discern the meaning of the language.” The belief is this interpretation will serve as a “roadblock to temptation for judicial excursion into personal preferences” (FOTF 3, p. 6). FOTF wants legislation on controversial issues such as abortion, redefining marriage and the protection of religious freedoms left to the people and their elected officials.

In responding to pressure related to acceptance of trans identities FOTF argues “gay activists” themselves kept the transgender community hidden “out of the public eye” lest the face of their movement be tied to “a bunch of drag queens and cross dressers” (FOTF 1, p. 4) who may prevent them from meeting their political goals.

FOTF says:

“...recent years have seen a sea change in attitudes about cultural acceptance of homosexuality. Gay activists now believe that sufficient political gains have been won...that they can turn their attention to adding the “T” for Transgender to the GLB (Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual) acronym that represents their community” (FOTF 1, p. 4).

According to FOTF the APA has bowed to political pressure by going back on their position of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) as a treatable mental illness. Of grave concern to FOTF is the radical agenda to add, “gender identity or expression” to laws for the protection of sexual minorities.

This radical agenda has also negatively impacted people seeking a cure for unwanted same-sex attractions when in 1998 the APA “rebuked” the practice of

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conversion therapy, calling it harmful even though no evidence was given to support the claim. FOTF warns:

“More recently, however, an increasing number of mental health practitioners now believe that a homosexual orientation is an intrinsic part of a person’s identity that can not – and should not – be changed. It is in this largely politically driven context – in contrast to a more objectively scientific or even scriptural context – that many clinicians further hold that any and all therapy practices that have as their goal sexual orientation change are harmful and should be declared professionally unethical” (FOTF 2, p. 1).

FOTF feels it is “evident” is “APA was simply agreeing with pro-homosexual activists” (FOTF 2, p. 2) and the radical political agenda of queer activists is putting political pressure on Christians.

God’s Intentional Design For You

The final way FOTF is responding to the increasing normalization of queer identity are unequivocal reminders to their followers, the Bible says what it means and means what it says about queer identity: it is wrong. It is a sin, end of discussion. The information shared in each text in this analysis upholds the idea of an intentional God and His design for straight, married, gender conforming, Christian men and women.

Great concern surrounds the transgender ideals saying “gender no longer matters” (FOTF 1, p. 2) as this “undermines the fundamental order established by God Himself” (FOTF 1, p. 2). FOTF says:

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“Transgenderism violates God’s intentional design for sex and sexuality and the modern transgender movement is systematically working to dismantle the concept of gender as the bible and the world have always know it to be” (FOTF 1, p. 6).

FOTF reminds their followers God made humans to represent Him on earth. The separation of the sexes is made in part so men and women may procreate and produce other God ordained individuals. “New life is used in Scripture as the deepest and most intimate analogy of God’s relationship with his people” (FOFT 1, p. 5), God has a plan He wants people to follow, therefore gender matters.

When talking about the right to counseling for unwanted same-sex attractions, FOTF worries outlawing SOCE renders psychologists unable to respect the wishes of a client who wishes to follow God plan for “sexual expression.” Their concern is with the APA’s politically correct changes in ideology calling SOCE “harmful, unethical and unsuccessful” and forces psychologists to disregard Christian’s client’s rights to “self-determination and autonomy” (FOTF 1, p. 1). FOTF states religious beliefs around counseling are meant to:

“Uphold the biblical view that God’s created intent for sexual expression is limited to a monogamous, covenantal marriage relationship between one man and one woman” (FOTF 2, p. 1).

FOTF is concedes some Christians may experience same sex attractions but to follow God’s will for their lives one must seek help to overcome them. FOTF says they are “dedicated to defending the honor, dignity, and value of the two sexes as created in God’s image” saying “sexuality is a glorious gift from God, meant to be offered back to Him in

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a marriage for procreation, union and mutual delight or in celibacy for undivided devotion to Christ” (FOTF 2, p. 2).

When addressing the revisionist movement for gay theology FOTF clearly rejects queer activist’s steps to “substantially alter the Christian church and biblical doctrine” (FOTF 5, p. 2). Revisionist gay philosophy attempts to radically rewrite and twist the Bible’s words, calling what is clearly a sin acceptable behavior. FOTF elaborates on God’s intentional design for men and women:

“We are dedicated to defending the honor, dignity and value of the two sexes as created in God’s image – intentionally male and female – bringing unique and complimentary qualities to sexuality and relationships” (FOTF 5, p. 2).

“Revisionist gay theology violates God’s intentional design for gender and sexuality. We affirm God’s design for sexual expression as between one man and one woman in the context of a lifelong, marital covenant. We oppose the ordination of non-celibate, self-identified homosexuals and the celebration of homoerotic sexuality as one of God’s gifts” (FOTF 5, p. 3).

FOTF warns any attempts to reinterpret the Bible’s words around queer identity are to accept lies.

Discussion

The research conducted here examined how FOTF is responding to the increasing normalization of queer identity. The findings gave three main responses to their position on the subject, first was the idea religious freedom is under attack, second is the evidence of political pressure to conform to a radical social agenda in the area of queer rights, and

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finally was the belief queer identity goes against God's intentional design for human beings.

The first concern, religious freedom is under attack, holds there can never be a meeting of Christian values and queer identity. Never has been. Never will be. When popular culture, schools, judges and therapists or counselors are forced to accept the idea of a cohesive relationship between religion and queer identity an apostasy of epic proportions is befalling the Christians of the U.S. The attack is felt when Christians' disapproval of queer identity is dismissed and deemed unworthy of discussion.

This attack leads easily into their next concern, a radical liberal agenda and political pressure to enact controversial social policy is at hand. The shift towards acceptance of queer identity is visible in the culmination of several factors. Schools teaching being gay is okay, judges ruling in favor of queer issues, conversion therapies are being banned, and positive portrayals of transgender identities are seen in the mainstream media. The liberal agenda to accept queer identity is pushed on all Americans regardless of political and religious ideology.

Finally, FOTF reminds people the bible still strictly forbids all matter related to queer identity even if social values have changed. God's design and expectation is for straight, gender conforming people who only have sex only within the covenant of marriage. Gender matters, and Christians must be cured of homosexual feelings to uphold their faith and schools promoting the acceptance of queer identity sully God's clear directions for his people.

Limitations And Implications

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All of FOTF documentation analyzed for this research from their website was written in 2008, much has changed in the area of queer rights in the past five years. Though I doubt their over-arching values have changed, I would be interested to hear about how they are advising their followers as the normalization of queer identity shows no signs of stopping. For example, in response to the Supreme Court ruling legalizing same sex marriage, Dent County in Missouri has voted to lower all flags in the county, including ones on government buildings, to half-mast on the day of the ruling for one year. The intent is to symbolize June 26, 2015 as a day of mourning for the Christian values of the U.S. I suspect FOTF would agree with this reasoning. More up-to-date position statements on their website would reflect reactions around normalizing queer identity.

How is FOTF advising their followers respond to the increasing normalization of queer identity? As I feared what I see on the website is the message: Never you mind what they say, it's still not okay to be gay. Christians wanting to align themselves with God's will must be ready for battle against attacks on their religious freedom. FOTF followers must fight against the radical push for socially controversial politics and never forget God's intentional design for straight, gender conforming followers. The times are changing, but the messages I heard growing up are still strong. A great divide continues to grow in our country around the issue of queer identity and the relationship between religion and conservative politics has no signs of abating.

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