

These aren't the evangelicals you're looking for

By [Dennis Sanders](#)

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A few years ago, I was invited by a Lutheran friend of mine to take part in a group of church planters. I knew these folk came from an evangelical background, and my shields went up. Would these people accept me? Did I have to go into the closet here?

After a while, the woman who was leading the group noticed my hesitancy. “Dennis, are you gay?” she asked. She didn’t ask the question in a mean or menacing way, but more to get at what was making me so shy.

Having grown up in an evangelical culture where being gay wasn’t good, the old tapes were playing in my head. But this woman never turned me away after I told her. She and her husband welcomed me.

I learned a important lesson that day. I learned that not every evangelical is out to get gays. I learned that things had changed in the nearly 20 years since I left evangelicalism. I learned that there is far more nuance among evangelicals than most progressive Christians are willing to admit.

Recently, evangelical author Skye Jethani wrote [a blog post about the reaction of evangelicals after the two Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage](#). Jethani was fascinated by the media coverage because it didn’t match what he was experiencing:

One would assume from media reporting that evangelicals are obsessed with two things: politics and homosexuality. In my 30 years of involvement with evangelical churches, parachurch ministries, and mission organizations, I cannot recall hearing a single sermon about homosexuality. In addition, my role with Christianity Today connects me with evangelical congregation all over the country. Politics and gay marriage may arise in my private conversations with pastors, but I’ve never heard them engaged in a worship service. That does not mean these

topics are never broached in a church setting, but they reside very, very far from the spotlight. And what about this past Sunday after the “culture shaking” ruling by the Supreme Court? Nothing. I did not hear a sermon, a comment, a prayer, or even a conversation in the church foyer about it. And this silence isn’t limited to LGBTQ issues. In three decades I’ve not heard what I would classify as a political or partisan sermon. Given the lack of politics in my evangelical church experience, why do 75% of young non-Christians say evangelicals are “too political”? How do we explain this gap between what actually happens in evangelical communities and the media’s portrayal of evangelicals? There are two possible explanations. Either my church engagement is wildly outside the norm, or perhaps evangelicals aren’t as devoted to political social engineering as the outside culture seems to believe we are.

So why is there a disconnect between what he has seen and what culture perceives? Jethani thinks part of the problem is media perception:

...the presence of socially conservative, politically rabid evangelicals fits the narrative advanced by the news and entertainment media. With 24 hours of airtime to fill each day, finding more extreme voices, to say more outrageous things, and incite more conflicts has become the mission of the news media. That’s why last Sunday’s “Meet the Press” pitted MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow against the founder of the Christian Coalition, Ralph Reed. Are these the two people you want on your news program for an intelligent, respectful conversation about gay marriage? Not likely. These are the people you want at the table when making the news is more valued than reporting it.

I think Jethani is onto something here. For mainline Protestants, most of our perception of evangelicals tends to be from what we see from the media. We don’t really have much interest in getting to know evangelicals, with the exception of those that tend to be more progressive.

Last spring, writer Brandon Ambrosino wrote [a touching essay](#) on his coming out experience, which happened to take place at Liberty University—the institution founded by Religious Right superstar Jerry Falwell. If you are expecting a horror story of how Brandon was mistreated by fundamentalists, you will be surprised.

Many of the adults he encountered were incredibly loving towards him. They might have disagreed with the whole gay thing, but they loved the flesh and blood being standing in front of them.

Last fall, I wrote about [how my opinion of social conservatives has changed](#). I still disagree with them, but I stopped looking at them as abstractions and more like real people—people you might think are wrong, but people you will still welcome at your table.

I wonder at times if the church needs to be a place where we are able to reach out and befriend each other. I know it's hard for lesbian and gay folks who were traumatized by the church to turn around and be forgiving, but I wonder if part of our healing and assurance that God loves us includes reaching out to those that might disagree—not with the intent to change their mind, but to just be present with them. What if we could spend some time listening to them and vice versa? Minds might never be changed, but hearts just might be.

I wonder what might happen if we let go of the need to be right and instead try to be more loving of those with whom we disagree. I'm not saying we abandon our work for justice, but what if we were able to chat with someone who doesn't see things like we do and yet remain friends? What would that say to the world?

*Originally posted at [The Clockwork Pastor](#)*