

The Only LGBTQuestions That Matter

A Study Guide for loving our LGBTQ neighbors well

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"We must learn to measure the sociological performance of our theological convictions."

-Dr. Christena Cleveland

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Introduction: For Your Consideration

If you are like me, you care deeply about our LGBTQ+ neighbors, as some are family members, friends, or our literal *next door neighbors*. You pass them in the hallways at school, marvel as they belt out tunes on Broadway, or sit next to them in church. Even those we may not know personally, like recording artists or actors, have endeared themselves to us as we sing along to their #1 hits or binge our favorite episodes of their shows on Netflix.¹ However, on social media, in harrowing documentaries, or on the evening news we have read or witnessed the experience of our LGBTQ+ neighbors who have endured family rejection, bullying at school, or have internalized the hatred of others and sent suicide attempts skyrocketing as they can no longer cope with the pain of being unloved (Suicide is the third leading cause of death among fifteen to twenty-four-year-olds, and for every kid who takes his or her own life, there are twenty more who try. Gay teens are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers).² Additionally, “gay teens in highly rejecting families are eight times more likely to attempt suicide,” making those of us who care so deeply about our neighbors wonder what we can do to prevent further harm.³

At the same time, many of us grew up in homes and went to churches where parents, pastors, and the culture at-large told us that being gay is an abomination unto the Lord and worthy of death by stoning, at least according to some.⁴ Perhaps we learned through Focus on the Family, an evangelical nonprofit seeking to “defend and protect God’s marriage design”

¹ Elton John, Freddie Mercury, Brandi Carlile, Miley Cyrus, Frank Ocean, Tessa Thompson, Elliot Page, and Valerie Cox, Kate McKinnon, Raven-Symoné, Billy Porter and Jim Parsons are a few of my favorites.

² Mitchell Gold, “Stats I Wish I Didn’t Have to Share,” in *Crisis*, ed. Mitchell Gold (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), xx.

³ Laurie Krieg, “10 Things I Wish Every Christian Leader Knew About Gay Teens in their Church,” 8.” <https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources>

⁴ Garcia, Sandra E. “Tennessee Pastor Who Is Also a Detective Calls for L.G.B.T. People to Be Executed,” June 15, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/15/us/knoxville-pastor-grayson-fritts.html>

between a man and a woman that the institution of marriage is being attacked by the gay community and is filling our world with “disease, violence, and a predatory sexuality.”^{5 6} Therefore, as our LGBTQ+ neighbors continue to press for rights in the workplace, at school, in our nation’s military, and throughout churches all across America, it has left many of us fearful of what’s to come, while others have started to celebrate what they once condemned. As we see even a small glimpse of the damage done by refusing to fully embrace our LGBTQ+ neighbors, we find it hard to imagine that our future world could be any more troubling than it already is, with Christian parents leading the way in the abandonment of gay children to dangerous streets in our country, all in God’s name.⁷ As we wrestle with these realities, we are left to confront the voices from our upbringing, trusted wisdom of our elders, and what we have been taught is God’s infallible truth. Like you, I have asked hundreds of questions about how my faith intersects with my understanding of how we are to love our neighbors well. In particular, our LGBTQ+ neighbors who often face ridicule, loss of employment and, far too frequently, loss of life due to a misunderstanding of what truly matters in this world. Let me explain.

I am a straight, white, cisgender Christian man. I have been married to the same woman for twenty-five years (and counting!), and we have four children. I was born and bred in the buckle of the Bible belt, with a father, Grandfather, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings and in-laws all working in full-time ministry in the evangelical world. If I were to add up all of the years our family has spent in ministry, it would reach well over eight hundred years. I am thankful to have

⁵ Mihee Kim-Kort, *Outside the Lines*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 113

⁶ Viefhues-Bailey, Ludger. “Homosexuality and Dr. Dobson: What’s at Stake in American Christianity?” Spring Issue, 2006, <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/sex-and-church/homosexuality-and-dr-dobson-what-s-stake-american-christianity>

⁷ David P. Gushee, *Changing our Mind* (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2015) 139.

been raised in a loving home and am regularly inspired by my family's commitment to God. Additionally, the evangelical world to which I refer is a network of thousands of churches in the U.S. and around the world, all adhering to the same beliefs, stating there is "no creed but Christ," and proclaiming, "Though we are not the only Christians, we are Christians only."⁸ I was an active participant in this community for more than thirty-five years, serving at or starting multiple churches within this tightly woven network. Like any denomination or vocational field one works in for an extensive period of time, it can be a true blessing that carries with it many benefits, but it can also undo one's career or severely limit one's future development within the network if and when one begins to challenge the system of long held beliefs, no matter how crucial or trivial. As I came to learn, "no creed but Christ" had an invisible asterisk attached to it, weeding out those who wouldn't abide by its unspoken list of doctrinal positions.

I share this biographical information because I want you to understand I do not approach the questions about how we can love our LGBTQ+ neighbors lightly. I have experienced great loss, at a tremendous financial and relational cost, due to how I have chosen to love my LGBTQ+ neighbors. I understand you may be weighing the implications of a decision, as well. However, any of the pain I have experienced over the past decade pales in comparison to the torment endured by my Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning friends. Since starting a new church in New York City fifteen years ago, I have listened to hundreds of stories of rejection, loss, bullying, and gay conversion therapy gone wrong. I have prayed with LGBTQ+ youth whose families have abandoned them to the streets of our city and

⁸ <https://www.therestorationmovement.com/>

held in my arms grown adults whose parents refuse to pick up the phone when they call. I have read dozens of books that detail tragic stories of our LGBTQ+ neighbors, researched the scriptures time and again, and interviewed anyone who will answer my call on the subject of same gender relationships in an effort to do two things: First, after hearing so many horror stories of what happens to our LGBTQ+ neighbors when they try to live freely ‘as they are’, I wanted to know why Christians have historically concluded that same gender relationships are wrong. Second, after my long pursuit of understanding the *why* behind the conclusion left me bewildered, I began a new journey, which we will unpack in the pages that follow. This journey was filled with dozens of questions, which I am passing along to you, and which I am hoping will help us learn to love our LGBTQ+ neighbors in the same way we want to be loved, and the same way Christ loves us. That being said, I want to end this introduction with two questions.

First, *are you open to the idea of being wrong?* Sitting with my classmates in graduate school at Fresno Pacific University a few years ago, our professor made a comment related to the different ways people interpret and apply scripture, saying, “It is impossible to have a conversation with someone who isn’t at least open to the idea of being wrong.” (Ironically, months later this same professor would be fired due to a disagreement with the University on his interpretation of scripture, causing the school to lose funding from its far-right wing support base⁹). Have you found that to be true, that it’s impossible to have a conversation with

⁹ Smith, Samuel. “Mennonite Seminary Demotes President, Ousts 3 Megachurch Pastors Serving as Lecturers,” September 7, 2018. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/mennonite-seminary-demotes-president-ousts-3-megachurch-pastors-serving-as-lecturers.html>

someone not even open to the idea of being wrong? Perhaps you have found yourself in the middle of a meaningless argument, not due to the subject matter, but because the person with whom you were having an argument was so locked into their position the entire conversation was a moot point?

I was having one of these “meaningless” arguments a few years ago with my older sister when, out of nowhere, she blurted out, “Brian, you’re being a real asshole right now. All you want me to do is see things the way you see them, and you’re spending all of your energy trying to convince me you’re right. Just stop.”

I quickly replied, “Well, isn’t that what we’re both trying to do [convince each other to see things through a different lens]? Maybe I do it more passionately than you, but we’re both aiming for the same goal. We want to be right.” Of course, as I lobbed another ‘truth bomb’ a few hundred miles in her direction via my cellular device, I was simultaneously failing to acknowledge the heart of the matter, that my tone and my posture had turned my sister off in such a way that being right was irrelevant. What she said when she called me an asshole is that she was no longer listening to me. Therefore, it didn’t matter if I won the argument because I had just lost the respect of someone I held in high regard.

Brené Brown, New York Times Bestselling author and research professor at University of Houston, writes that we ought to “acknowledge and reward great questions and instances of ‘I don’t know, but I’d like to find out’ as daring leadership behaviors,” with our posture shifting from “wanting to ‘be right’ to wanting to ‘get it right.’”¹⁰ As we begin this journey together, can we make a commitment that we are here not to ‘be right’ but to ‘get it right.’? Can we be open

¹⁰ Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead*. (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2018), 92

to the idea of being wrong? I know that those of us with a long history in the church will find it difficult to unlearn things we have always believed to be true, and a few of us may never get to the final page of this study guide, but for those who will take the time to read each chapter and seriously ponder the questions, I am confident we will see a way forward that both honors the humanity of every person and also honors our creator God.

The second question before we dive in is this: *What are the outcomes of our beliefs?* While some pastors and politicians are promising that our LGBTQ+ neighbors are marching us down the wide road that leads to destruction, others are begging us to pay attention to crucial data points that expose both the death-dealing results of toxic theology, as well as the data uncovering the not-so-terrible reality of same gender relationships. As Dr. Christena Cleveland writes, “We must learn to measure the sociological performance of our theological convictions.”¹¹ We will be doing ourselves and others a great disservice if we fail to acknowledge that, quite often throughout history, our understanding of God has changed not due primarily to a reinterpretation of scripture, but rather, due to assessing the fallout of theological premises that leave our neighbors beaten and bloodied on the road, left for dead as we pass by.¹²

¹¹ Cleveland, Christena. “Voice of the Day,” *Sojourners*. Accessed November 28, 2019 <https://sojo.net/daily-wisdom/verse-and-voice-04-02-2019>

¹² Luke 10:25-37

A Note on Terminology and Format

TERMINOLOGY

Throughout the study guide you will often notice the acronym LGBTQ+ is used. “LGBTQ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning. These terms are used to describe a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity,”¹³ with the often added plus sign “meant to cover anyone else who’s not included.”¹⁴ Other sources use variations of this acronym, along with “LGBT,” “gay community,” “same gender loving,” “same-sex attraction,” “queer” or “homosexual” to define a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Due to the ever-expanding language that strives for the inclusion of all people, any time a source is not being quoted directly, this guide will refer to the acronym LGBTQ+.

Also, while small portions of the research include religions outside of Christianity, the Christian religion will be the primary focus. This is due, in part, to my own background as a Christian, as well as the religion of Christianity being a primary focus of the research regarding the history of religion and the LGBTQ+ community within the United States. Additionally, the term “Christian” is affiliated with a host of beliefs, practices, and layers of meaning. The use of this term in this guide “broadly refers to those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, or who otherwise self-identify as Christian or report affiliation with a Christian church or tradition.”¹⁵

¹³ “What is LGBTQ?”, Gay Center, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://gaycenter.org/about/lgbtq/>

¹⁴ Michael Gold, “The ABC’s of L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+,” accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/style/lgbtq-gender-language.html>

¹⁵ Babuccar J. Sowe, Alan J. Taylor, and Jack Brown, “Religious anti-gay prejudice as a predictor of mental health, abuse, and substance use.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 87(6), (2017): 691. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000297>

FORMAT

This study guide is laid out in seven chapters with seven “interludes” meant to slow us down, hit the pause button, and ponder together a few questions before marching on to the following chapter. The interludes have valuable information as well, so please do not skip over the reading and jump straight to the questions as it will prevent us from doing the necessary work around this important matter.

Also, I really would like this to be a conversation, even though I’m not currently in the room with you. I have attempted to write the guide in a way that invites discussion. Of course, there may be a few times where it feels like I am coming on strong and being the same “asshole” my sister barked at in the introduction. That is not my intent, and I hope any defense mechanisms that arise in you will be met with a genuine curiosity to see where this conversation is going without jumping to conclusions. I believe there are a few options for making this happen: First, invite a few others to read the book with you. Meet weekly and discuss what you’re learning. Come with questions to the questions. Come with an open mind, willing to learn. Come with a heart bent toward loving others in the same way we want to be loved. Second, submit any thoughts or questions you have to brian@lgbtquestion.org. I will respond directly to you, but also (anonymously) post the question and response on our website: lgbtquestion.org so others with similar questions can be a part of the conversation. Third, if you need to talk just call me: 212.804.8524. Fourth, there are a bevy of resources at the end of this study guide and online at lgbtquestions.org. This may be the first book you’ve read about our LGBTQ neighbors, or it might be one of many. I am but one of many voices striving to help paint a better picture of God than most of us have in our head. The resources listed in the

back are from excellent sources so please take advantage of them. Finally, as we process the LGBTQ questions together let's remember the stakes are sky high. We can't afford to get this wrong, right?

Chapter 1 | The Gay Agenda

On December 4th, 2014, I read a harrowing suicide story about a twelve-year-old boy in Folsom, California, that triggered a shockwave of emotions through my body so fierce my wobbling knees finally buckled, and I dropped to the kitchen floor in our home and wept uncontrollably. Ronin Shimizu, who had been bullied since the first grade with labels such as "gay," "girly" and "fag," and endured a litany of stress-inducing episodes during each year of elementary school, was "placed under the care of a psychiatrist and diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder, ADHD, anxiety and depression," according to his family's attorney.¹⁶ His dream of being a cheerleader for the Vista Jr. Eagles were crushed by daily taunts from his classmates, including being pushed out of the boy's bathroom and told to use the girl's bathroom because he likes "girl stuff."¹⁷ Under the direction of his pediatrician, Ronin's family decided to homeschool him thereafter, as forcing him to attend public school "was like sending him before a firing squad."¹⁸ The obituary reads that he took his own life on December 3rd, 2014, but the disastrous reality is that his sweet, innocent life had been taken from him long before that fateful day.¹⁹

¹⁶ Loretta Kalb. "Family of Ronin Shimizu, who committed suicide, settles with school district for \$1M" Sacramento Bee, September 3, 2015, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/education/article33811815.html>

¹⁷ Kalb, "Family of Ronin Shimizu."

¹⁸ Kalb, "Family of Ronin Shimizu."

¹⁹ Kalb, "Family of Ronin Shimizu."

Twenty-six years prior to Ronin's death I was a scrawny, thirteen- year- old boy doing my best to fit in with my classmates in a small Oklahoma town where the only thing that seemed to matter was whether or not one could handle himself on the football field. As an eighty-seven- pound weakling who couldn't bench press the naked forty-five-pound bar sitting atop the rack, I had no business being in the locker room on opening day of practice in the fall of 1988, but in an effort to prove my manhood I removed my school clothes and slipped on my first jockstrap in preparation for a future hall of fame career. Little did I know the outside linebacker (and school bully to runts like me), Greg Montgomery, was standing in my shadow. With a haunting laugh bellowing from deep within his staggering frame, he flipped my fragile body over his shoulder, sweeping past the other footballers who wondered where this mischievous monster was heading. Suddenly, a door opened to the outside world. The sidewalk of our school property was littered with hundreds of junior high students, either waiting for their parents to pick them up or for the yellow school busses to arrive. While I was wearing nothing but my newly unpackaged jockstrap, which exposed my full backside to every pre- and post- pubescent teenager who walked by, Greg dropped me to the ground and locked the door, with his bellicose laughter screaming into the locker room as I stood alone, trembling with fear. A chorus of giggles began to emerge from classmates who would never see me the same way again. That wasn't the first or last time an event like this happened to me in junior high; as my childhood friends hit puberty and grew in stature, it seemed that everyone from students and teachers at school, to youth group leaders from my church could find a reason to point out the significant contrast between the boy I was and the man I was supposed to be. So that cold December morning of 2014 when my knees buckled under the news of Ronin's tragic suicide,

my heart was swept back to a moment in time that I, too, wasn't sure I had the strength to make it in our cruel world one more day.

We all have a longing to belong, don't we? Whether it be junior high school, the college years, or even as a so-called grown adult, each of us live daily with an innate desire to be loved and accepted for who we are. Some of us feel we must prove ourselves to others, while bullies and big shots demand we justify our worthiness to them. We live in a culture which reinforces the message that in order for us to be worthy we must look a certain way, earn a certain amount of money, attain a certain level of education, or be able to valiantly defend ourselves against anyone who dehumanizes our existence. As Brené Brown notes, "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick."²⁰

Psychologist Alan Downs, Ph.D., is the author of the bestselling book [The Velvet Rage: Overcoming The Pain Of Growing Up Gay In A Straight Man's World](#), and gives poignant insight about how he and other gay children and youth "were taught by the experience of shame during those tender and formative years of adolescence that there was something about us that was flawed, in essence unlovable,"²¹ and that making themselves lovable was a matter of survival. "The lesson of that early, crippling shame was imprinted on our lives. If you are to be loved, you must hide the truth about yourself and work at being lovable."²² Downs continues,

²⁰ Carless, Monika. "The Power of Vulnerability: Brene Brown's Ted Talk May be the Breakthrough You've Been Looking For," February 27, 2017 <https://www.elephantjournal.com/2017/02/power-vulnerability-brene-browns-ted-talk-may-be-the-breakthrough-youve-been-looking-for/>

²¹ Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), xi.

²² Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), xi.

helping us understand why depression, anxiety, and suicidality skyrockets among gay youth. “As young boys, we too readily internalized those strong feelings of shame into a core belief: I am unacceptably flawed. It crippled our sense of self and prevented us from following the normal, healthy stages of adolescent development. We were consumed with the task of hiding the fundamental truth of ourselves from the world around us and pretending to be something we weren’t. Beneath our complex layers lies a deeper secret that covertly corrodes our lives. The seeds of this secret were not planted by us, but by a world that didn’t understand us, wanted to change us, and at times, was fiercely hostile to us.”²³ Writing that being validated for who we are, not what we do, is “one of the essential psychological needs of every person,”²⁴ Downs helps us to see more clearly why gay youth internalize such hatred toward themselves, as well as why gay men “create a false sense of self in order to get by”²⁵ that only leads to more shame because whatever it is people love about you isn’t really you, but only a facade to cover up the shame.

I lament that I must share the stark health disparities between heterosexuals and individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, but the egregious contrast sets up a few questions to the bewildering preachments of pastors doubling down on their theology as our LGBTQ+ neighbors suffer the consequences.

1.6% of the total U.S. population have attempted suicide²⁶
14% of LGBTQ+ individuals have attempted suicide²⁷
41% of transgender adults have attempted suicide²⁸

²³ Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), 21.

²⁴ Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), 25.

²⁵ Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), 27.

²⁶ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix

²⁷ Karl Kralovec, Clemens Fartacek, Reinhold Fartacek and Martin Plöderl, “Religion and Suicide Risk” *J Relig Health* 53 (2014): 416, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9645-2>

²⁸ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix

62% of homeless LGBTQ+ youth have attempted suicide²⁹

Of transgender people:

90% have experienced harassment or discrimination at work³⁰

57% have experienced significant family rejection³¹

26% have been fired because of their gender identity³²

19% have experienced homelessness because of their gender identity³³

As we turn our focus to LGBTQ+ youth we discover:

Gay teens are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.³⁴

Gay teens in highly rejecting families are eight times more likely to attempt suicide.³⁵

Gay youth in grades seven to twelve are twice as likely to make plans to commit suicide and four times more likely to make a suicide attempt that requires medical attention.³⁶

The American Academy of Pediatrics reports:

45% of gay men and 20% of lesbians surveyed had been victims of verbal and physical assaults in secondary school specifically because of their sexual orientation.³⁷

Gay youth are at higher risk of dropping out of school, being kicked out of their homes, and turning to life on the streets for survival.³⁸

LGBTQ+ youth make up 5% of the total population of youth but make up to 45% of the youth homeless population.³⁹

We learn through the Center for American Progress:

LGBTQ+ homeless youth are much more likely to end up in child welfare or institutional care systems after being removed from home due to conflict over LGBTQ+-related issues.

²⁹ Brad Harper, "A Christian Perspective on Parenting a Gay Child," <http://centerforfaith.com> (accessed January 30, 2020), 4.

³⁰ Austin Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

³¹ Austin Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

³² Austin Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

³³ Austin Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

³⁴ Mitchell Gold, "Stats I Wish I Didn't Have to Share," xx.

³⁵ Laurie Krieg, "10 Things I Wish Every Christian Leader Knew About Gay Teens in their Church," 8." <https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources>

³⁶ Mitchell Gold, "Stats I Wish I Didn't Have to Share," (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), xx.

³⁷ Mitchell Gold, "Stats I Wish I Didn't Have to Share," (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), xx.

³⁸ Mitchell Gold, "Stats I Wish I Didn't Have to Share," (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), xx.

³⁹ Andrew Cray, Katie Miller, and Laura E. Durso, "Seeking Shelter: The Experiences and Unmet Needs of LGBT Homeless Youth," Center For American Progress, (September 2013): 4

<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/LGBTHomelessYouth.pdf>

Family rejection is the greatest predictor of ending up in the juvenile justice system for LGBTQ+ youth. Placements in foster care or other housing all too often end in further homelessness because of bias against LGBTQs or abuse and mistreatment. Once in the justice system, LGBTQ+ youth and young adults are at increased risk of being labeled sex offenders even when not convicted of sex-related crimes; are disproportionately likely to engage in ‘survival sex’ to meet expenses, increasing vulnerability to rape, disease, and violence; experience disproportionately high rates of victimization by robbery, assault, rape, and hate crimes while on streets; experience disproportionately bad health outcomes including drug and alcohol abuse; and have disproportionate suicidal ideation and attempts.⁴⁰

“For LGBT kids who remain homeless, the stakes are clearly life and death. They are seven times more likely than their straight counterparts to be the victims of a crime, often a violent one. Studies have shown they are more than three times more likely to engage in survival sex – for which shelter is the payment more often than cash. They are more likely to lack access to medical care, more likely to attempt suicide, more likely to use hard drugs and more likely to be arrested for survival crimes.”⁴¹

Life and Death

Nathanael Frank, Director of the *What We Know Project*, and Kellan Baker, a Senior Fellow with the LGBT Research and Communications Project at the Center for American Progress, recently released an exhaustive report of more than 300 studies revealing the link

⁴⁰ David P. Gushee, *Changing our Mind* (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2015), 139.

⁴¹ Alex Morris, “The Forsaken: A Rising Number of Homeless Gay Teens Are Being Cast Out by Religious Families.” *Rolling Stone* (New York), September 3, 2014.
<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-forsaken-a-rising-number-of-homeless-gay-teens-are-being-cast-out-by-religious-families-46746/>

between anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination and the health disparities seen in this population (compared to heterosexuals, as stated above).⁴² Of the 300 studies, 95 percent of them show a connection between discrimination and health harms for LGBTQ+ people, which led the scientists to conclude that this extensive research “puts to rest the old notion that there is something inherently destabilizing about being LGBT, such as the idea that these identities themselves are mental illnesses. Instead, stigma and prejudice – negative social messages, discriminatory policies and exclusionary institutional practices – are responsible for the disproportionate health harms LGBTQ+ experience.”⁴³ Frank writes, “The stakes of these findings are high: If the presence of stigma, prejudice and discrimination harms LGBT people — and the research shows that it does — learning how to reduce those harms may be a matter of life and death.”⁴⁴

There is a Ronin Shimizu buried deep within each of us, a young child longing to be loved for who we are, without judgment or condemnation, allowed to live freely, fully, and filled with joy. The gay agenda, it seems, is “to love, to be loved, and to belong,”⁴⁵ just like everyone else, even the Greg Montgomery’s of this world.⁴⁶ My friend Aubree, a married gay woman and mother of two foster children, summarizes, “At least in my experience, gay people just want to exist and be able to live and be happy, not take anything away from anyone else or destroy people’s lives or what brings them meaning and comfort.”⁴⁷

⁴² Frank, Nathaniel and Kellan Baker. “Anti-LGBT discrimination has a huge human toll. Research proves it.” *Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), December 19, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/19/anti-lgbt-discrimination-has-huge-human-toll-research-proves-it/>

⁴³ Frank, “Anti-LGBT discrimination.”

⁴⁴ Frank, “Anti-LGBT discrimination.”

⁴⁵ Carles, Monika. “The Power of Vulnerability.”

⁴⁶ Moravec, Eva Ruth. “Arrest and ID Made in 2002 Cold Cases,” *My San Antonio*, August 12, 2010,

<https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/Arrest-and-ID-made-in-2002-cold-cases-785858.php>

⁴⁷ Brian Moll, “Are You Open to Option G?” April 1, 2019, video, 21:19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6DCce0Sud8>

For this reason, I have been both fascinated and beleaguered by many in the Christian community who, after assessing both the sacred text we share and the tragic outcomes of those they believe our text condemns, have found themselves unwilling to grant the same need of belonging and validation to our LGBTQ+ neighbors that we find Jesus extending to every person he met, particularly those cast out by religious leaders. Rather than assessing the interpretation of a text through the framework of its lived reality, they instead harken back to an oppressive assertion that violates the human dignity of the very people Christ came to set free (Of course, Christ came to set both the oppressed and their oppressors free. Amen?) As we have already learned, and will discover more throughout this study guide, the consequences of this theological viewpoint have been staggering, leaving our LGBTQ+ neighbors to fend for themselves amongst a people who have been disciplined (i.e., trained) to disavow their identity and, in doing so, have cut off the left hand of Christ's body, believing it impairs the church from building God's beloved community.

A Secretive Meeting

In the spring of 2013 I attended a small conference on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It was led by Jon Tyson, Lead Pastor of Trinity Grace Church (now Church of the City⁴⁸), and his new nonprofit: Center for City Renewal.⁴⁹ Jon is a dynamic leader, prolific author, and phenomenal speaker whose penchant for intrigue always causes his listeners to lean in.⁵⁰ This conference would be no different.

⁴⁸ <http://www.trinitygracechurch.com/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/Speaker/999490>

⁵⁰ <https://www.tbn.org/people/ion-tyson>

At the end of the first day, we were all asked to turn off our cell phones, put down our notepads, and vow to not speak publicly about the contents of his forthcoming talk on human sexuality. In the evangelical world we shared at the time, a single tweet or quote not found in its proper context could cause unnecessary damage to the church, we were told. Each of us obliged, and he began.

“Have you read the book After The Ball?” he asked to the fifty or so leaders that remained in the room as he started sharing the author’s three-prong strategy for changing America’s understanding of gay relationships.⁵¹ According to Tyson, neuropsychologist Marshall Kirk and Hunter Masden, a social marketing and advertising executive, wrote the book after spending several days with more than one hundred seventy-five gay activists in Warrington, Virginia. Tyson said it was in the wake of the deadly AIDS epidemic of the early 1980s that these men found an “opportunity for revolution”⁵² through social movements in America, but what the authors see as a playbook for “how America will conquer its fear and hatred of gays in the 90s”⁵³ through a “massive media campaign designed to correct stereotypes and neutralize anti-gay prejudice.”⁵⁴

What Tyson named a “carefully manufactured campaign of propaganda,”⁵⁵ the authors were hoping it would be a “victory over bigotry.”⁵⁶ (*Note: Due to the strict guidelines of our*

⁵¹Kirk, Marshall and Masden, Hunter. *After the Ball*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1989)

⁵² Tyson, Jon. “God and Sexuality: Jesus & The Gay Community.” Sermon, Bridgetown Church, Portland, OR, March 17, 2019 <https://bridgetown.church/teaching/god-sexuality/jesus-the-gay-community/>

⁵³ Kirk, Marshall and Masden, Hunter. *After the Ball*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1989)

⁵⁴ <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780385239066>

⁵⁵ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁵⁶ Kirk, Marshall and Masden, Hunter. *After the Ball*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1989)

conference leader, no one took notes during his talk. However, in the coming years Tyson went public with his messaging.⁵⁷⁾

For the next thirty minutes or so, Tyson revealed his understanding of the three-prong strategy of the book:

- First, “desensitize the American people through a flood of gay advertising.”⁵⁸
- Second, “jam any dissent to anyone who opposes gay relationships.”⁵⁹
- Third, “convert American opinion around gay relationships toward normalcy.”⁶⁰

As I listened, I was mesmerized by what I heard. Each present-day example, celebrity or cultural reference provided to us seemed to perfectly line up with the so-called gay agenda, or what some had started to whisper themselves: propaganda. While Tyson’s rhetoric felt less burdensome than some of his predecessors, who once laid blame on the LGBTQ+ community for the terrorist attacks on 09/11,⁶¹ I couldn’t help but wonder if this more subtle, pseudo-scientific sermon delivered by a dynamic leader just hitting the prime of his pastoral years would cause even more damage to our LGBTQ+ neighbors. This wasn’t James Dobson or Jerry Falwell, members of the Moral Majority,⁶² who regularly spouted venomous attacks against anything that conflicted with their so-called biblical worldview (and were soon retracted, at least in part, by their public relations department⁶³); this was a young, hip, cigar smoking, motorcycle riding, faith-drenched emerging leader with a massive following among the

⁵⁷ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁵⁸ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁵⁹ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁶⁰ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁶¹ Marc Ambinder, “Falwell Suggests Gays to Blame For Attacks,” ABC News, January 6, 2006, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=121322&page=1>

⁶² Golden, Carl Jr. “A Look at the Moral Majority.” January 24, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/24/nyregion/a-look-at-the-moral-majority.html>

⁶³ Ambinder, “Falwell Suggests Gays to Blame For Attacks”

Generation X and Y crowd, including me. While I had never read that Tyson blamed the 09/11 attacks on our gay neighbors or heard a single utterance of hateful rhetoric from him, our church was filling up with our LGBTQ+ neighbors who could no longer sit in the pews across town under the leadership of someone only willing to allow partial inclusion into their community. As my mind started drifting toward stories of the humiliating rejection some of the parishioners in the congregation I served at the time had endured, Tyson drew me back in with a startling revelation: While standing outside the Stonewall Inn during the early 2000s he had serendipitously met one of the “eye witness leading experts” of the gay rights movement to “convert American opinion regarding same-sex relationships” who subsequently invited him and his friends upstairs to his apartment in the early 2000s.⁶⁴

While sitting inside this gentleman’s West Village home, Tyson says he received an update on the three-prong strategy he had referenced in the book, just a decade or so after the game plan was implemented. First, gay rights activists would protest the American Psychological Association (APA), the largest scientific and professional organization of psychologists in the United States, until they remove “homosexuality as a mental disorder”⁶⁵ (which actually happened in the winter of 1973⁶⁶). Second, they would work to “remove all sodomy laws,” which was “well under way” by the 2000s.⁶⁷ Third, they would persist until they had “homosexuality removed from the list of sins in church.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁶⁵ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁶⁶ Spitzer, Robert L. “The A.P.A. Ruling on Homosexuality,” December 23, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/23/archives/the-issue-is-subtle-the-debate-still-on-the-apa-ruling-on.html>

⁶⁷ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁶⁸ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

From the perspective of a pastor who grew up in a conservative home and was the son and grandson of evangelical pastors who loved God and were themselves students of scripture, Tyson's slow burning introduction fascinated me. It had all the elements of a perfectly framed message. The tension in the room was palpable. A cultural war had been brewing in our country for decades, and we were members of the new regime tasked with anchoring our churches in God's truth in order to quell the fervor of gay activists seeking to, well, invade the United States with "disease, violence, and a predatory sexuality."⁶⁹ Below are the elements of his talk that neatly addressed the matter at hand:⁷⁰

- 1 - We are at a crossroads in our culture
- 2 - The gay agenda is clear: normalize gayness in every form
- 3 - The stakes have never been higher
- 4 - Here is what God says
- 5 - How we can lovingly respond to this cultural moment

Tyson was about to turn to scripture, where he would dissect what have come to be known as the "six clobber passages" in the Bible, which have been debated in hundreds of books and sermons over the past several decades. According to Tyson, these passages reveal God's disdain with LGBTQ+ "behavior" while pointing to God's original design for human sexuality. He assured us he would speak on them in a way that was respectful of disagreeing parties, and that he would offer a pastoral response to close. The room fell silent for more than an hour as we listened to one of the most educated, well spoken, rising leaders of

⁶⁹ Kim-Kort Mihee, *Outside the Lines*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 113.

⁷⁰ Tyson, "God and Sexuality."

evangelicalism pick apart his understanding of the gay agenda, review ancient texts in their original language, and repeat to us something he had recited to dozens of our LGBTQ+ neighbors he said were simply “burning through bodies” in a feeble attempt to fill their God-shaped hole: “We have to learn in our modern society to love people we disagree with.”⁷¹ This pastoral directive near the end of his talk was meant to squash the passionate, battle-ready warriors on both sides of the debate, instead calling us to peaceful discussions as we put our cultural framework under the lordship of Jesus. However, years later I am reminded of the words of Robert Jones, Jr., often attributed to author James Baldwin, who writes:

*“We can disagree
and still love each other,
unless your disagreement is
rooted in my oppression
and denial of my humanity
and right to exist.”⁷²*

As I think about young Ronin Shimizu, whose life was ended by homophobic bigotry well before it ever began, the 62% of homeless LGBTQ+ youth who will attempt suicide this year, or the exhaustive research showing that “religious involvement increased the risk of suicide by as much as 52% for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals but decreased the risk of suicide for straight people,”⁷³ I am left wrestling with a question by LGBTQ+ activist Bridget Eileen: “How is it that going to church would keep straight people alive but push gay people to death?”⁷⁴ While the

⁷¹ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

⁷² Powell, John A. “Resistance and the Rebirth of Inclusion,” Berkeley Blog, November 28, 2016, <https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2016/11/28/resistance-and-the-rebirth-of-inclusion/>

⁷³ Anne Harding. “Religious Faith Linked to Suicidal Behavior in LGBTQ Adults,” *Reuters*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-lgbq-religion-suicide/religious-faith-linked-to-suicidal-behavior-in-lgbq-adults-idUSKBN1HK2MA>

⁷⁴ Bridget Eileen Rivera. “Heavy Burdens,” *Meditations of a Traveling Nun* (New York), February 27, 2020 <https://www.meditationsofatravelingnun.com/>

so-called gay agenda is often posited by critics as a mass takeover of sex-crazed people in a nation built on godly principles, the abandoned gay children of parents unwilling to embrace a wider understanding of God's love make it crystal clear: it is to win "victory over bigotry" and "to love, to be loved, and to belong."⁷⁵⁷⁶

As I reflect on the 'secret meeting' of 2013, which isn't so secret now that Tyson's message has been repeated, by both he and others with the same theological viewpoint, in churches across the country and downloaded millions of times on computers, I can't shake another question that seems so rudimentary in terms of natural law and logic that it regularly brings me to tears how some of America's brightest pastors miss it on their journey to honor God with their positions of authority. This question is what we will start to unpack in the upcoming interlude and beyond.

Interlude: *Can Hollywood Save Us?*

A Publisher's Weekly review of *After the Ball* notes the authors' intent included outlining "a code of gay ethics calling for mature love relationships and greater moderation in sex,"⁷⁷ which seems to be less about a hostile takeover of America's godly principles and more about helping the general public overcome its fears of gay people, which, strangely enough, Hollywood itself had helped perpetuate.

Laverne Cox is an Emmy-nominated actress and "the first trans woman of color to have a leading role on a mainstream scripted television show."⁷⁸ She is also the producer of

⁷⁵ Kirk, Marshall and Masden, Hunter. *After the Ball*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1989)k

⁷⁶ Carless, Monika. "The Power of Vulnerability"

⁷⁷ "After the Ball," Publishers Weekly, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780385239066>

⁷⁸ <https://lavernecox.com/about/>

“Disclosure,” an award-winning documentary which takes “an unprecedented, eye-opening look at transgender depictions in film and television, revealing how Hollywood simultaneously reflects and manufactures our deepest anxieties about gender.”⁷⁹

Approximately fifteen minutes into the film we hear from Nick Adams, the GLAAD Director of Transgender Representation,⁸⁰ who says that “For decades Hollywood has taught audiences how to react to trans people. Sometimes they’re being taught that the way to react to us is fear, that we’re dangerous, that we’re psychopaths, that we’re deviants and perverts.” He says that GLAAD, a nonprofit established in 1985 to fight bigotry and accelerate acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community,⁸¹ conducted research on one hundred and thirty-four television shows where a transgender person appears as a guest. One finding from the research was that, “the most common profession shown was that of a sex worker,” reinforcing stereotypes and further dehumanizing a people group the culture at-large would often push to the brink of suicide.⁸²

Jen Richards, a transgender actress and writer, shares a story of working “up the courage to tell one of my colleagues” about her transition, to which the colleague said, “like Buffalo Bill,” referring to a character in the Academy Award Winning film *Silence of the Lambs*.⁸³ “Her only point of reference was this disgusting, psychotic serial killer who hunts women in order to kill them, and skin them in order to wear their bodies.”⁸⁴

⁷⁹ *Disclosure*. Directed by Sam Feder and Amy Scholder (Bow and Arrow Entertainment, 2020), Netflix.

⁸⁰ <https://www.glaad.org/about/staff>

⁸¹ <https://www.glaad.org/about>

⁸² *Disclosure*. Directed by Sam Feder and Amy Scholder (Bow and Arrow Entertainment, 2020), Netflix.

⁸³ *Disclosure*. Directed by Sam Feder and Amy Scholder (Bow and Arrow Entertainment, 2020), Netflix.

⁸⁴ *Disclosure*. Directed by Sam Feder and Amy Scholder (Bow and Arrow Entertainment, 2020), Netflix.

After a montage of clips from blockbuster movies that have grossed millions of dollars while purporting negative stereotypes of transgender people, films like *The Crying Game*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Naked Gun 33 1/3*, *Hangover II*, and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, Nick Adams concludes that “Hollywood is teaching people that the way you react to seeing a transgender person’s body is to vomit.”⁸⁵

One of the three questions Tyson asks his audience to consider as he dives into a message on God and Sexuality is about where we get our definitions of sexuality, and what has informed our way of thinking. If we were to only listen to conservative pastors and politicians, we might be led to believe that liberals in Hollywood have perpetuated an “anything goes” mentality that is warping the minds of our young children and leading us to the edge of the moral abyss. However, what Cox’s documentary articulates with almost perfect precision is that Hollywood has, in fact, perpetuated “our deepest anxieties on gender.”⁸⁶ A conservative pastor’s message that being gay is an alternative lifestyle to avoid, or a more doom and gloom vision of what allowing transgender women to use a public women’s restroom will do to our children’s future, is actually undergirded by the same Hollywood writers often accused of driving our culture away from God’s design for human sexuality.

Today, through film and television shows, some writers are working hard to offer a more humane portrayal of our LGBTQ+ neighbors, which will undoubtedly aid the transformation of our culture from negative, overplayed and harmful stereotypes toward a more realistic, authentic understanding. Additionally, as we will unpack later in this study guide,

⁸⁵ *Disclosure*. Directed by Sam Feder and Amy Scholder (Bow and Arrow Entertainment, 2020), Netflix.

⁸⁶ *Disclosure*. Directed by Sam Feder and Amy Scholder (Bow and Arrow Entertainment, 2020), Netflix.

a growing number of churches are seeking to reverse decades of death-dealing, toxic theology that has led to extraordinarily high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality among our LGBTQ+ neighbors.⁸⁷ As Christians from Generation X, Y and Z hold a Bible in one hand and binge-worthy Netflix shows on their phone in the other, I want us to explore a few questions that I can't escape as I think about honoring God and honoring God's beloved children.

First, we need to ask "Why?" Why is being gay (or acting on one's gayness) wrong in the eyes of God? Rather than pointing to the six clobber passages alone, think about the *why* behind the *what*. Please take out a notepad and write down all the reasons why you believe God rejects what some call LGBTQ+ "behavior," or all of the reasons you have been given.

Second, how did you arrive at this belief? Where did you learn this theology? Was it from your pastor, your professor, your parents, or from culture at-large? Were you also influenced by Hollywood? From where did you hear that being gay is a sin? Take a moment and write down any and all people and places from where this message came.

Third, how do you normally assess whether an action, identity, speech or behavior, is wrong? Consider your everyday life (i.e., work, relationships, finances, your future, etc.) and write down how you determine whether something is right or wrong to say or do, or to hold someone else accountable for saying or doing.

Finally, have you ever changed your mind on something you previously thought to be true (or false)? It can range from geography to our nation's history to the actual words of your

⁸⁷ Babuccar J. Sowe, Jac Brown, and Alan Taylor, "Sex and the Sinner," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 84, no. 5 (2014): 531, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000021>

favorite song you have been singing incorrectly for years. Write that down, along with what helped change your mind.

We are going to explore all of these questions and more in the following pages. For now, please take a moment to review your responses before moving on to chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Standing on Your Head

“If God told me to stand on my head, I would do it. I wouldn’t even question it,” Francis Chan dogmatically announced to the crowd at William Jessup University in Rocklin, California.⁸⁸ Francis is one of the most trusted, well-known evangelical leaders in our world today. After starting a church out of his southern California home in 1994 it grew to more than 6,000 regular attendees, launching Francis into church stardom with international speaking gigs and book deals, with his first, Crazy Love, topping the New York Times Bestseller list.⁸⁹ The passion and charisma Francis has is indefatigable, and his commitment to God’s word is commendable, but on the subject of why he believes anything outside of heterosexual sex is wrong, or why he would stand on his head if God mandated it, Chan establishes a theological framing with which no one can seemingly argue: *Because God said so*.

“I wouldn’t even question it,” Francis belts to the packed crowd of college students of his decision to stand on his head, should God ever demand it, “because He’s God, the Creator of the Universe! He says it plainly, ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways

⁸⁸ Cool Frood, “Francis Chan on Homosexuality,” February 11, 2018, video, 1:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krEep7LSY_I&t=11s

⁸⁹ Chan, Francis. “New York Times Bestseller List,” April 3, 2011
<https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2011/04/03/paperback-advice/>

my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”⁹⁰ Just about anyone growing up in an evangelical home or church has heard this framing before: *We trust God, without question, even if we don’t understand and especially if we disagree.* If we disagree it is simply a sign of our unwillingness to obey rather than it being an opportunity to dig deeper in order to understand the *why* behind God’s *what*. In a video introduction to his book Erasing Hell, Chan asks:

So when we begin an argument with, “Well, I wouldn’t believe in a God who would...who would what? Do something you wouldn’t do? Or think in a way that’s different from the way that you think? Do you ever consider the possibility that maybe the Creator’s sense of justice is actually more developed than yours? And that maybe his love and his mercy are perfect – and that you could be the one that is flawed? See, when we make statements like, “Well, God wouldn’t do this, would he?” Do you understand, in that moment you’re actually putting God’s actions in submission to your reasoning? You’re in essence saying, “Well, God wouldn’t think that way or act that way because I wouldn’t act that way or think that way.” And yet if – when I read the scriptures, man all through this book, I’m like, “God – there are things you say that I wouldn’t think to say. There are things you do that I wouldn’t think to do.”⁹²

Of course, Chan is on to something. God understands the realities of this world in a way we often can’t. As the apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am

⁹⁰ Cool Frood. “Francis Chan on Homosexuality”

⁹¹ Isaiah 55:8

⁹² David C. Cook Publishing, “Erasing Hell,” May 19, 2011, video, 9:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnrJVTSYLr8>

known.”⁹³ It is true that God’s ways are higher than our ways, but does that mean we are not allowed to ask God a few follow up questions when we read something in scripture we disagree with or don’t understand? If God wants me to stand on my head, am I not allowed to ask why?

Near the end of his time at William Jessup Francis is asked a follow up question about same gender relationships, to which he replies, “So before we get to what this book actually says, I have to say, ‘Would you surrender?’ I mean, if you disagree with God on an issue – would you submit to him? I really believe that’s the core issue here. I really think we jump to [the discussion of sexuality] too quickly, rather than saying – at the core of your being, do you believe in a Creator? And if He is your Creator, would you surrender to whatever He would ask you to do?”⁹⁴

Unsurprisingly, Francis proceeds to state he believes same gender relationships are outside of God’s will for humanity and infers that anyone who disagrees has simply refused to trust in the Lord, whose ways and thoughts are higher than ours. But as we reflect on the deep psychological trauma our LGBTQ+ neighbors endure each day of their existence, shouldn’t we pause and ask a few follow up questions to Francis, or to God, about why the so-called ‘thoughts and ways’ of our Creator pertaining to same gender relationships are leading to extraordinarily high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide (not to mention the bullying and beating to death of gay men like Ronin Shimizu, Matthew Shephard and others⁹⁵)?⁹⁶

⁹³ I Corinthians 13:12

⁹⁴ Hess, Jacob. “If You Disagreed With God...What Would You Do?”, *Mindfully Mormon*, September 11, 2016, <https://mindfullymormon.org/2016/09/11/if-you-disagreed-with-god-what-would-you-do/>

⁹⁵ <https://www.matthewshepard.org/>

⁹⁶ Frank, Nathaniel and Kellan Baker. “Anti-LGBT discrimination has a huge human toll. Research proves it.” *Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), December 19, 2019.

For instance, how might Francis Chan, Jon Tyson, or other pastors and theologians who speak to God’s condemnation of same gender relationships respond to a recent study conducted by Nathanael Frank, Director of the What We Know Project, and Kellan Baker, a Senior Fellow with the LGBT Research and Communications Project at the Center for American Progress, who released an exhaustive report of more than 300 studies revealing the link between anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination and the health disparities seen in this population?⁹⁷ Of the 300 studies, 95 percent of them show a connection between discrimination and health harms for LGBTQ+ people, which led the scientists to conclude that this extensive research “puts to rest the old notion that there is something inherently destabilizing about being LGBTQ+, such as the idea that these identities themselves are mental illnesses. Instead, stigma and prejudice – negative social messages, discriminatory policies and exclusionary institutional practices – are responsible for the disproportionate health harms LGBTQ+ experience.”⁹⁸ Frank writes, “The stakes of these findings are high: If the presence of stigma, prejudice and discrimination harms LGBT people — and the research shows that it does — learning how to reduce those harms may be a matter of life and death.”⁹⁹

It is true that for a majority of people “religiousness has been, with relative consistency, associated with better mental health,” and “greater religiousness predicts less substance use, antisocial behavior, depression, and suicidality and greater reported well-being.”¹⁰⁰ However, it is now widely recognized that, for those in the LGBTQ+ community, there is a direct link

⁹⁷ Frank, Nathaniel and Kellan Baker. “Anti-LGBT discrimination has a huge human toll. Research proves it.” *Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), December 19, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/19/anti-lgbt-discrimination-has-huge-human-toll-research-proves-it/>

⁹⁸ Frank, “Anti-LGBT discrimination.”

⁹⁹ Frank, “Anti-LGBT discrimination.”

¹⁰⁰ Anthony N. Fabricatore, Paul J. Handal, Doris M. Rubio, and Frank H. Gilner, “Stress, religion, and mental health: Religious coping in mediating and moderating roles.” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 14, (2004): 93. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr1402_2

between anti-gay religiosity and depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidality.¹⁰¹

Additionally, according to multiple surveys among university students, we learn that individuals who report higher levels of religiosity, stronger religious adherence, more frequent religious participation, greater religious commitment, or stronger integration into a religious institution, on average, “harbor higher levels of anti-gay prejudice.”¹⁰² To put it plainly, messages like the ones referred to by Francis Chan or Jon Tyson are directly linked to higher levels of anti-gay prejudice in their listeners, and to a significant increase in depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicidality among our LGBTQ+ neighbors. Shouldn’t this be reason enough to pause and ask a few follow up questions about why same gender relationships are supposedly wrong in the eyes of the Lord?

“Because it breaks the heart of God,” declares Matt Chandler, Lead Pastor of The Village Church, a 14,000-member megachurch in Texas and coauthor of The Mingling of Souls: God's Design for Love, Marriage, Sex, and Redemption, “and that’s all that should matter to us.” In a message delivered to his church on June 26th, 2015, Chandler is direct with his conviction that same gender relationships not only violate the will of God, but that to associate with someone claiming to be a ‘gay Christian’ is not allowed.¹⁰³

During a Question and Answer session after his sermon on “Homosexuality and Culture,” Chandler responds to a text message from the audience asking if Christians should continue to be in relationship with professing Christians who are living an “actively homosexual lifestyle.” Without stuttering, Chandler instructs his church members to treat those who “don’t

¹⁰¹ Fabricatore, “Stress, religion, and mental health”

¹⁰² Sowe, Taylor, and Brown, “Religious anti-gay prejudice,” 690.

¹⁰³ To Live is Christ, “Homosexuality and Culture, Part 1,” June 26, 2015, video, 49:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQdsOciSF24>

care about the Bible” like they are an unbeliever, hoping that by excluding our LGBTQ+ neighbors from community they will be reminded of God’s love.¹⁰⁴ Ironically, Chandler later says that his go to phrase when sharing the Good News of Jesus with others is simply, “God is after your joy, not your begrudging submission.”¹⁰⁵

After listening to a decade’s worth of messages on same gender relationships from prominent evangelical leaders like Chandler, Chan and Tyson, or reading books by the conservative theologians from where they draw their material, I am not at all surprised to hear (again and again) that God is against same gender relationships, at least from their perspective. What surprises me is that some of the best and brightest that evangelicalism has to offer fails to offer a substantive reason *why*. Tyson and Chandler work their way through the six clobber passages previously mentioned, exegeting scripture and giving us their original terms in Hebrew and Greek, but never once address *why* they believe God refuses to celebrate same gender relationships today, save “breaking the heart of God,” as Chandler exclaims. Francis Chan leverages the use of Isaiah 55:9, which reads “‘My ways are higher than your ways’, says the Lord,” to defend his position, claiming that God knows best even if we don’t understand. However, this passage is plucked from its original context, which the prophet Isaiah used to communicate God’s abundant love and grace to Israel, making no mention of same gender relationships.¹⁰⁶ Author and theologian Mark Achtemeier writes, “Any adequate interpretation of the Bible’s moral teaching will include not just rules or principles for guided behavior, but an

¹⁰⁴ All Things Theological, “Homosexuality – Q&A – Culture and Theology – Matt Chandler,” June 26, 2015, video, 37:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f26pbVhvA9w>

¹⁰⁵ All Things Theological, “Homosexuality – Q&A – Culture and Theology – Matt Chandler,”

¹⁰⁶ Isaiah 55:1-13

understanding of the reasons why such principles make sense.”¹⁰⁷ During the interlude we will explore Achtemeier’s five guidelines for interpreting the Bible with integrity, but before we do that I need to share a short story with you.

Just Give Me a Reason

Two years ago, I was in Toronto, Canada, attending a week-long class for my graduate degree program. Sitting inside one of many small conference rooms at the megachurch hosting our class cohort, I listened to the adjunct professor (and Senior Pastor of the megachurch hosting us) talk about what he calls a “third way” of responding to the hot-button issue of sexuality.¹⁰⁸ From his understanding, a “third way” to approach what he called “this issue” is to lovingly embrace our LGBTQ+ friends, welcome them inside our faith communities, and refuse to break fellowship with them, even as we disagree on their “actions.” This was certainly a less caustic way of addressing the “issue” than Matt Chandler directed to his parishioners, but as I wrestled internally with his church’s position I couldn’t help but wonder if what he calls “third way” thinking is simply a repackaging of the old “love the sinner, hate the sin” cliché known to drive out our LGBTQ+ friends from the church in high frequency.

Just to the left of this well-known pastor was Wendy VanderWal-Gritter, the Executive Director of *Generous Space*, a nonprofit organization that seeks to “dismantle religious-based harm” and celebrate the lives of our LGBTQ neighbors, both in the church and the world.¹⁰⁹ After the pastor finished telling us about his “third way” approach, which seeks to welcome gay people into the church pews without affirming their identity or orientation, Wendy, who holds

¹⁰⁷ Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 31

¹⁰⁸ Cavey, Bruxy. “Same-Sex Marriage: A ‘Third Way’ Approach,” Accessed January 21, 2021, <https://psalt.info/media/cavey-third-way.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.generousspace.ca/>

both a Master of Divinity and a Doctorate of Ministry degree from seminary, stood to speak about why the organization she leads transitioned from offering faith-based ex-gay therapy to advocating on behalf of our LGBTQ+ neighbors and how her “own theology shifted from a particular view of orthodoxy towards a justice lens that saw anything but full affirmation as injustice for LGBTQ+ people.”¹¹⁰ *Generous Space* was originally founded as an ex-gay therapy organization named New Beginnings and “employed therapists who practiced conversion therapy” for nineteen years (1985-2004), as “hundreds of sexual and gender minority individuals attempted to change their innate sexual orientation or address their gender dysphoria through spiritual and therapeutic means.”¹¹¹ During her lecture, Ms. VanderWal-Gritter referred to a position paper she wrote and addressed to the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, pushing for a full ban on gay conversion therapy, or what some refer to as SOGICE (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts), which outlined, “numerous psychological and spiritual harms, including shame, poor self-esteem, self-hatred, depression, anxiety, problematic substance use, and suicide ideation, attempts, and death by suicide” as a result of the practice, with a particular emphasis on the harm done in Christian settings.¹¹² Pointing to research based on SOGICE conducted in the United States, 50 percent of all efforts are done in religious settings by religious leaders or pastoral counselors without “any professional affiliation,” and resulted in the following tragic health consequences:

- Suicide ideation, attempts, and death by suicide
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Poor self-esteem; self-hatred

¹¹⁰ Sharp, Brianna. “I Once Led a Conversion Therapy Organization,” Broadview, June 20, 2019

<https://broadview.org/generous-space-wendy-vanderwal-gritter/>

¹¹¹ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HESA/Brief/BR10439056/br-external/GenerousSpaceMinistries-e.pdf>

¹¹² <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HESA/Brief/BR10439056/br-external/GenerousSpaceMinistries-e.pdf>

- Problematic substance use
- Loneliness

In addition, survivors experience profound disruption in:

- Family relationships
- Faith commitments
- Connection to community

VanderWal-Gritter concluded, “These multi-faceted health consequences may be experienced for many years beyond exposure to SOGICE and survivors may be unable to seek support due to ongoing religious expectations and the internalized shame and self-loathing.”¹¹³ Before returning to VanderWal-Gritter’s discussion with our class cohort, let’s take a quick look at a few of the ex-gay conversion therapy organizations inside the United States to which VanderWal-Gritter referred.

In Boy Erased, author Garrard Conley recounts his time at *Love in Action*, an ex-gay therapy center in Tennessee that sought to heal people of their same-sex attraction. The instructor, John Smid, told Conley, “If you walk out you won’t ever be cured;”¹¹⁴ only days after Conley’s own father, a soon-to-be-ordained pastor, threatened to kick him out of the house and forego paying his son’s college tuition if he ever acted on his feelings.¹¹⁵ In a bit of twisted irony, Conley reflects on how his religious upbringing intersected with his sexuality, writing, “It was our fear of shame, followed by our fear of Hell, that truly prevented us from committing suicide,” before continuing, “What happened to me has made it impossible to speak with God, to believe in a version of Him that isn’t charged with self-loathing. My ex-gay therapists took

¹¹³ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HESA/Brief/BR10439056/br-external/GenerousSpaceMinistries-e.pdf>

¹¹⁴ Garrard Conley. *Boy Erased*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 324.

¹¹⁵ Garrard Conley. *Boy Erased*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 135.

Him away from me, and no matter how many different churches I attend, I will feel the same dead weight in my chest. I will feel the pang of a deep love now absent from my life. And even if I no longer believe in Hell, I will continue to struggle with the fear of it.”¹¹⁶ As it turns out, John Smid resigned from *Love in Action* after coming out as a gay man himself,¹¹⁷ and his book Ex’d Out details the damage done in God’s name for decades.¹¹⁸ Going Gay by Tim Rymel¹¹⁹ and My Exodus by Alan Chambers¹²⁰ tell of similar accounts: closeted gay men with internalized homophobia who started “ministries” meant to cure others eventually come out of the closet, shut down their practice, and admit that ‘99.9%’ of the people they attempted to help saw no change in their sexual orientation.¹²¹ In a Washington Post article, author and journalist Jonathan Merritt writes about fallout of the ex-gay movement. “Michael Bussee, an early ex-gay pioneer, left the movement in 1979 and entered a relationship with another ex-gay leader, Gary Cooper. On his way out, Bussee confessed he never witnessed an LGBTQ+ person become heterosexual. Ex-gay icon John Paulk was ousted as chairman of *Exodus International*, the world’s most prominent ex-gay ministry, after being photographed at a gay bar in 2000. He later declared that instead of helping anyone, the movement had done “great harm to many people.”¹²²

As VanderWal-Gritter concluded her remarks and opened the floor for some Questions and Answers, my hand was the first one raised. “Hi, my name is Brian. I am so glad you are here

¹¹⁶ Garrard Conley. *Boy Erased*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 337.

¹¹⁷ Garrard Conley. *Boy Erased*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 332.

¹¹⁸ John J. Smid. *Ex’d Out*, (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012)

¹¹⁹ Tim Rymel. *Going Gay*, (New Glarus, WI: CK Publishing, 2014)

¹²⁰ Alan Chambers. *My Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2015)

¹²¹ David P. Gushee. *Changing Our Mind*, (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books), 26.

¹²² Jonathan Merritt, “The ex-gay Christianity movement is making a quiet comeback. The effects on LGBTQ youth could be devastating,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/09/06/ex-gay-christianity-movement-is-making-quiet-comeback-effects-lgbtq-youth-could-be-devastating/>

because I am hoping you can answer a question I have found puzzling for several years. It is actually a question for both you and Bruxy,” Bruxy being the name of the pastor who spoke ahead of Wendy.

“Go for it. I’m all ears, Brian,” Wendy kindly shot back.

“Your website says you have been working at Generous Space since 2002. You work with the LGBTQ+ community, with pastors, with parents, and all sorts of people who either have questions about their identity, orientation, or whether they can or should approve of what some call the ‘behavior’ of our LGBTQ friends.” I was working my way to the point.

“Is there a question in there, Brian?” she asked, as my classmates and professor wondered the same. The truth is, I was just working the crowd a bit, winding up my question to her so it would, perhaps, cajole a response worthy of the money we were all paying to receive our degrees.

I continued. “Okay, so in your seventeen years of working with Generous Space, has anyone -- a parent, a pastor, a theologian, or perhaps a professor at seminary -- has anyone given you a sufficient response as to why same gender relationships are wrong? In your hundreds of discussions on the matter, have you ever received something beyond, lifting my fingers for air quotes, ‘The Bible says it’s wrong’?”

Wendy offered a smile to me, and then to the room. She briefly glanced at her notes, which obviously didn’t have her response to my question written upon them but were surely filled with more stories of the harm done in God’s name against God’s beloved children. She turned to Bruxy, a gentle, loving leader with whom she has had many discussions, before turning to provide us with a pithy reply.

“Never.”

Interlude: *Are You Sure You’re Right?*

As we pause to reflect on how pastors have condemned same gender relationships by pointing to the Bible and declaring something like, “God says it’s wrong,” or that it “breaks the heart of God,” at least one question we will explore during the interlude is simply this:

Are you sure?

Mark Achtemeier is a public theologian whose aim is to help everyday people like you and me better understand how to unpack what we often find confusing in the scriptures. We are all well aware of the atrocities of genocide and slavery, along with the pastors and politicians who used what Achtemeier calls the “fragment method” of interpreting scripture, which happens when someone strips a passage of its original intent and applies it wholly for their own purposes.¹²³ In the 21st Century we look back in horror at how the founders of our nation, including politicians and pastors alike, justified the killing of indigenous people through the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny, and the enslavement of Africans stolen from their homeland, by turning to what you and I often call God’s Word.¹²⁴ But before we start to argue that it was also Christians who helped free the slaves, let me drive home a bitter pill we often find too hard to swallow. Today in the 21st Century, it is still quite possible to read the Bible and justify slavery, genocide, and a whole host of actions currently deemed not only illegal but inhumane. Sadly, even some of the pastors I’ve already mentioned, who condemn

¹²³ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 18

¹²⁴ Charles, Mark. “The Doctrine of Discovery,” May 27, 2018, video, 1:39:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRRDuinkgrI>

the enslavement of Africans in America during the 17th and 18th Century, condone the slavery we read about in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, as well as what we read in a litany of New Testament books.¹²⁵ A primary reason given is that the slavery we read of in scripture was nothing like the enslavement of Africans in America,¹²⁶ though the book of Exodus clearly outlines that beating a slave brings no consequences to the abuser, so long as the slave can continue to work.¹²⁷ Why am I writing about slavery in a study guide that is supposed to be focused on our LGBTQ+ neighbors? Is it because I think the issues are similar? No, I do not seek to compare the gravity and egregiousness of slavery to the harm done to our LGBTQ+ neighbors, for they are both awful enough to stand on their own. Here is the reason we are discussing the endorsement, and eventual abolition, of slavery.

If the most trusted scholar or theologian of our day, or an entire team of trusted theologians, were to release a book in the year 2021 that condones slavery – yesterday’s slavery, today’s slavery, or slavery of a future world – they would be hard pressed to find a single sane person on planet earth who would give their argument a nickel’s worth of time. Their books would be burned, their degrees from elite universities rescinded, and they would be shunned and shamed for the remainder of their lives. Even if they could position the words of Jesus in the Holy Book to somehow provide enough nuance to their argument in hopes that readers would make it past the first chapter, it would be wholly and completely condemned. *Why?* Because we know slavery is wrong.

¹²⁵ Exodus 21:20-21, Leviticus 22:44-46, Deuteronomy 28:68, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22, Philemon

¹²⁶ Tyson, Jon. “God and Sexuality”

¹²⁷ Exodus 21:20-21

How do we know slavery is wrong? Is it because the Bible says it's wrong? (It doesn't) Is it because God says it's wrong? (Nope) Is it because Jesus spoke directly about the matter? (He didn't) If the Bible, God, and Jesus himself never openly condemn slavery, how do we know that stealing humans, enslaving them to build our wealth, and beating or discarding them when we are finished, is wrong? I can't believe we even need to discuss this, do you? We all know the answer, for it has been placed within us by our Creator regardless of what we might be able to justify with scripture: We are to love others in the same way we want to be loved. It's really that simple.

Five Principles

Writing about how the fragment method has been used to endorse the practice of slavery we now fully condemn and deeply regret, Achtemeier wonders aloud if we are headed in the same direction as it relates to same-sex sex, writing, "Would faithful Christians one day look back at the traditional condemnations of homosexuality and similarly shake their heads at us? I wondered. Witnessing the devastating fruits of that traditional teaching as it worked itself out in the lives of real human beings had given me some very strong reasons for believing it did *not* reflect the will of God. Could this be another case of the fragment method yielding false results?"¹²⁸ Achtemeier then writes five guidelines for interpreting scripture. Let's take a look at the principles he offers and ask a few questions along the way.

Principle One

Contrary to the fragment method or the arbitrary "stand on your head" rule mentioned earlier, Achtemeier writes of the first principle "that faithful interpretations of the Bible should

¹²⁸ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 19

make coherent, good sense.”¹²⁹ Nowhere in the entirety of scripture do we see God making demands of people simply to discern their allegiance; rather, even the few commands that didn’t seem as reasonable in the moment they were given (i.e., Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 or Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence in Matthew 5) bear out in a way that helps reinforce the good sense principle. However, high quality pastors and theologians that we have addressed so far in this study guide are convinced that same gender relationships, which are both legal and celebrated by many in our country (and world) today, are not only sinful, but that monogamous same gender relationships were well-known in antiquity, as well, which means that the scriptures people rely on to condemn same-sex sex are just as valid today as they were thousands of years prior to the 21st century.¹³⁰

The question we must ask ourselves again, however, is “Why?” Why do same gender relationships make one unholy, detached from God, and incapable of human flourishing? What is it about a monogamous relationship between two women that leads to the degradation of society? We will address these questions directly in our next chapter. For now, let’s move on to Achtemeier’s next principle for interpreting scripture.

Principle Two

“One of the most significant [guidelines for interpreting scripture that has stood the test of time] is that any correct understanding of the Bible’s teaching should be grounded and centered in Christ.”¹³¹ It is hard to imagine any integrous pastor disagreeing with Achtemeier, at least in principle, but how does this work its way out in practical matters? How do we know if

¹²⁹ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 29

¹³⁰ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

¹³¹ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 37

we are interpreting scripture through the lens of Jesus, or if we have put filters on the lens, which keeps us from seeing people the same way he does? Let me offer a few examples:

In Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount he seems to alter, adjust, or upgrade a few Old Testament laws through his memorable "You have heard it said, but I say..." rhetoric, raising the bar on Levitical laws dealing with our anger, how we treat our enemies, and what to do with lust.¹³² (Matthew 5) Of course, Jesus also shared a few other words that intersect and help us understand his teaching:

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'
This is the greatest and first commandment.*

And a second is like it:

*'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'
On these two commandments
hang all the law and the prophets."*

Matthew 22:37-40

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.
I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.
John 10:10*

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Luke 4:18-19

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another."*

John 13:34-35

¹³² Matthew 5:21-48

As we consider how we are to love our LGBTQ+ neighbors well, it would be good to ask if our policies and practices are helping to set them free and bring them life, or if they are oppressively tightening the shackles around their wrists. Strangely enough, far too many of us claiming to follow the radical Jesus we have come to call Lord and Savior focus more on the rules and doctrine created by theologians than we do on the actual life of Jesus and how he strived to set free all those who had been cast out and marginalized by their peers and those in power. We will explore this more in the following chapters, but as we strive to center and ground our understanding of scripture based on the life, character and teachings of Jesus, we must remain faithful to his life, words and work, and ask, “Is my interpretation of scripture as life-giving as Jesus intended, or is it death-giving in that it runs contrary to his message of hanging it under the ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ banner?”

Let me ask bluntly: Does condemning 5% of the world’s population who make up the LGBTQ+ community (approximately 350,000,000 people) because they love differently than the other 95% of our world align well with the way you see Jesus treating minority populations throughout his life?¹³³ As Franciscan Richard Rohr reflects, “How cleverly our moral pretenses free us from struggling with what is right in front of us. How ingeniously our ego protects itself from compassion and understanding. And how convenient that the [majority] of the population that is heterosexual decides that homosexuality happens to be where evil resides.”¹³⁴

¹³³ Poitras, Colin. “The ‘Global Closet’ is Huge,” Yale School of Medicine, June 13, 2019, <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/20510/>

¹³⁴ Walter Wink, ed. *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 88.

Principle 3

A classic principle of interpreting the Bible says we should “interpret Scripture by Scripture.”¹³⁵ According to Achtemeier, doing this “helps keep our understanding in tune with the big picture of the Bible’s witness by interpreting individual passages with reference to the rest of scripture. It also says that if a particular passage is giving us trouble, we should seek help with it from other, clearer parts of the biblical text.”¹³⁶

We will draw out the ‘big picture’ of the Bible in the following chapters, but as we consider interpreting Scripture by Scripture let’s come back to the Levitical law Jesus tells us we should hang all other commands on (Leviticus 19:18) as well as his new command of self-sacrificial love we find in John 13:34-35. As we consider the meaning of marriage, whether it is between a man and a woman, between two women, or consider the meaning of familial or friend relationships, how do we strive to love one another in a Christlike manner? Is it possible for two women to love one another in a way that honors the Levitical law of loving others in the same way we want to be loved, as Jesus commands? If not, why not?

Principle 4

Seeking to understand “particular passages in both their biblical and historical contexts” is our fourth principal, which is another straightforward, important guideline.¹³⁷ Coming to understand the world in which many of the biblical authors lived can help us ferret out the meaning behind confusing passages, particularly ones related to slavery, the role of women in the church, and God’s design for human relationships. As theologians and pastors wrestle with

¹³⁵ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 38.

¹³⁶ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 38.

¹³⁷ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 39.

present day realities, it can be a mistake to simply lift a passage out of its historical context in order to apply it to our current circumstances. In doing so, scholars strive to help us discern the difference between what they call God's ceremonial will, God's civil will, and God's moral will. Others may categorize parts of scripture as God's limited will versus God's universal will. Anything that falls under the category of a ceremonial, civil, or limited will is understood to be for a certain group at a certain time for specific purposes that may or may no longer be relevant. However, God's moral or universal will has been declared by many to not only be relevant in our world today, but wholly endorsed and enforced by the Church. An example of God's ceremonial will might address what one can eat or wear or how one ought to wash themselves before dinner. We see some examples of this in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, with some of the rules and customs practiced by the Israelites meant to help them maintain a unique identity in a pluralistic society, and others done to protect the community from diseases or unwanted sickness. Thanks to modern medicine, and a better understanding of the human body, many of the ceremonial rules and rituals are no longer necessary to keep a person or a community in good health, though some ceremonial laws are still practiced as a matter of custom and identity. If in today's church a pastor sought to endorse or enforce many of the ceremonial laws we find in these books, they would have great difficulty in finding a following.

However, when we arrive at matters pertaining to slavery, the role of women in both society and the local church, or human sexuality, well-meaning, seminary educated, pastors and theologians cannot get on the same page regarding the scriptures' interpretation, even when considering the historical context.

For example, as we learn more about how Greco-Roman society was wholly built on the economy of slavery, or that slavery under Levitical law wasn't the same as chattel slavery during the 17th and 18th century, we can easily understand why beating a slave to within an inch of his or her life wouldn't be outright condemned by God¹³⁸, and we can also better understand why our Lord and Savior Jesus never once addressed the inhumanity of slavery in the Roman world -- all thanks to a fresh understanding of the biblical writer's historical context.

Wait. Please read the above paragraph again. Does it actually read the way I wrote it? The sad answer is yes, it does. Even as we consider the historical context of the passages we are attempting to unpack and discern, we cannot use this principle as the primary way to understand the big picture of God's will for our lives. It is simply one principle among many, and anything we read in scripture that runs contrary to the life, teachings and character of Jesus -- who told us he not only came to give us life abundantly but that we are commanded to love others in the same way he loves us -- must be put in its proper place. That being said, let's explore a few questions.

First, do the words from Exodus about beating a slave to within an inch of his or her life sound like the words of a loving God? How do we reconcile this passage with the life, teachings, and character of Jesus?

Second, as we are now seeing a small window into the suffering our LGBTQ+ neighbors endure as a result of a theology that condemns their identity and expels them from the body of Christ unless they change or abstain from their personhood, can we reconcile this teaching with the command of Jesus to love our neighbors in the same way we have experienced Christ loving

¹³⁸ Exodus 21:20-21

us? If we immediately return to our preconceived notions that same-sex sex is wrong, please first return to where we ask the question again and again: “Why?”

Third, as we think critically about the four principles above that help us better understand the scriptures we have, what questions emerge for you? What is your push back to where we’re heading, so far? How are you feeling in this moment? Please take a few minutes to process what you are reading. Write down questions. Email me. Talk to your small group. Call your pastor. Let’s continue to wrestle together so we may learn to lovingly embrace our 350,000,000 LGBTQ+ neighbors who are longing to belong in our world.

Principle 5

The fifth principle ties together with our first, weaving the whole of them together so we may work toward a proper understanding of scripture in order to carry out God’s purposes for our lives. Leaning on John Calvin, a leader from the 16th Century Protestant Reformation, in order to drive this principle home, Achtemeier writes that “in order to rightly understand and interpret biblical law...we must understand the purpose of God that stands behind the commandment.”¹³⁹

When my eight-year-old boy balks at his bedtime, I not only strive to help him understand that getting a full night’s sleep makes good sense for his “batteries” to work the following day, I also occasionally fill him with far more information than he’s ready to hear. I talk about his health, how the neurons in his brain will fire quicker at school the next day, and that going to bed on time makes life better for everyone else in the home, as well. I explain how life’s long, arduous journey is made lighter by adhering to the rhythms of nature, to our body,

¹³⁹ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 40.

and to the world. I wax poetic about the sun and the moon, the beauty of the stars that only emerge in the darkness, and how he, too, can shine brighter once the lights go out.

When legislation is brought to the floor of Congress, politicians aim to tell us why the law is necessary in the first place, the intention and importance of the law, what has been negatively impacting our community without this law in place, and how this law seeks to address and remedy the issue. Stop signs, red lights, parking meters, and white lines on the road before us are all there for a reason. Achtemeier explains, “When judges in our court system seek to interpret the meaning and proper application of a particular law, they will sometimes refer to the *legislative intent* that stands behind it: What was the underlying purpose of the law in the minds of the legislators who voted it into existence? What was the legislative body that adopted the law trying to accomplish? Making sure we grasp the purpose or intention that stands behind a particular statement or regulation is simply a commonsense means of ensuring that we have understood it properly.”¹⁴⁰ Thus far, regarding same gender relationships, we have only heard “the Bible says it’s wrong” as a defense against widening the circle of belonging to our LGBTQ+ neighbors, but in the following chapter we will explore the only other reason I’ve heard or read in my more than fifteen years of study. It is one we have hinted at a time or two in this chapter, and one we will fully explore in the next. Let’s turn there now.

¹⁴⁰ Mark Achtemeier. *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*, (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 41.

Chapter 3: Principle 6

I need to warn you ahead of time that the language used in the coming pages may trigger past traumatic experiences for our LGBTQ+ neighbors. While I am merely quoting others throughout this chapter, I realize it may feel as if I am attempting to shock people with the vulgarity on display in the following paragraphs. I assure you that is not my intent. My ultimate goal is to unpack Principle 6 which, to me, is the most important principle to apply as we think through how we can best love our LGBTQ+ neighbors.

Principle 6 cannot be found in Mark Achtemeier's book, but a careful reading of his five principles for reading and understanding scripture naturally leads one to understand the following principle that helps us discern the text we are reading:

The best way to discern whether you have properly interpreted a passage of scripture is to put it into practice.

Stuart Murray is an author, church planter, and has a PhD in hermeneutics (hermeneutics is the process of discerning the meaning of the text, bridging the gap between the reader and the author's original intent).¹⁴¹ Writing of theologians from his Christian heritage (Anabaptism) Murray declares they, "were convinced that interpreters would not make progress in understanding the Bible unless they were already practicing what they did understand. And as they attempted to put into practice what they believed Scripture taught, the consequences would help them discern whether they had understood the text well."¹⁴² Let me repeat what I have written above as it will help us keep it in mind as we move into a few stories. Putting our

¹⁴¹ Stuart Murray. *The Naked Anabaptist*. (Harrisonburg, VA. Herald Press, 2015)

¹⁴² Stuart Murray. *The Naked Anabaptist*. (Harrisonburg, VA. Herald Press, 2015), 75.

interpretation of scripture into practice is the only way to discern whether or not we properly understand the text.

Aside from “the Bible says it’s wrong,” the other argument for the prohibition of same gender relationships I have heard from pastors, parents and preachers is something like, “What will condoning same-sex sex lead to?” The question is more a statement than an offer to respond, and the slippery slope argument of “affirming our LGBTQ+ neighbors will lead to the degradation of society” ensues. Let me share an example.

Max Lucado has sold more than 120 million books that have been translated into 54 languages, with many hitting the New York Times bestseller list.¹⁴³ Up until 2004, I had read every single book he had written. Lucado, pastor of a 5,000-member mega church in San Antonio, Texas, is a staple in the evangelical world, offering compelling words about God’s grace to everyone -- that is, everyone but our LGBTQ+ friends. At the GC2 (Great Commandment/Commission) Summit at Wheaton College (Wheaton, IL) in 2004 Lucado asked the audience, “How will homosexuality impact our culture? What about the spread of disease? If the gay lifestyle and gay marriage is endorsed – what follows? Legalized incest? If we can’t draw a line, will lines will be drawn at all?”¹⁴⁴ The slippery slope argument isn’t reserved for anti-gay rhetoric alone, but it is a scare tactic leveraged by those afraid of what may happen if we endorse something they believe the Bible doesn’t. As a Christian, it’s embarrassing to type the words you are about to read from one of the most famous Christian authors of all time, a sincere individual who has helped countless people access God’s love, but who has also done

¹⁴³ <https://maxlucado.com/about-max/>

¹⁴⁴ Joy, Emily. Twitter Post. December 13, 2018, 5:56pm.

<https://twitter.com/emilyjoypoetry/status/1073350865501741058>

unspeakable damage to God’s beloved children. At the same GC2 Summit he leaned into the slippery slope argument, asking, “If they recognize gay marriage, what will keep them from the next step? Who’s to say that one man can’t marry five women? Or two men and two women? How about a commune marriage? Or a marriage between a daddy and a daughter or a woman and a giraffe?”¹⁴⁵ These are not silly side comments or locker room talk from a conservative politician seeking to garner votes for his political aspirations, but a wildly influential leader in the Christian evangelical world who has been called “America’s Pastor” by Christianity Today, and once labeled “The Best Preacher in America” by Reader’s Digest.¹⁴⁶ When Max Lucado speaks, or writes, people listen. What Lucado and others are doing with their rhetoric is painting as ugly a picture as possible of what is to come if same gender relationships are endorsed (a woman having sex with a giraffe, for example), and if their understanding of what they believe to be a ‘biblical marriage’ is violated. In a nutshell, what they are talking about are outcomes or, as Stuart Murray writes, “the consequences” of violating their interpretation of the text. Perhaps the slippery slope argument is one you’ve weighed, as well, as you think about whether to celebrate our LGBTQ+ friends or if, instead, you need to pull out the red-light warning sign. Nearly twelve years ago, this was my challenge. I was leading a church in New York City that was quietly moving from a non-affirming to a fully affirming position regarding our LGBTQ+ neighbors, but as I faced the slippery slope argument from our leadership team, our original funders, and the church planting organization that hired me to start the church in the heart of Manhattan, I had some homework to do. *Where was all of this leading? Would I*

¹⁴⁵ Joy, Emily. Twitter Post. December 13, 2018, 5:56pm.

<https://twitter.com/emilyjoypoetry/status/1073350865501741058>

¹⁴⁶ <https://maxlucado.com/about-max/>

one day be performing a ceremony between a beauty and a beast? Will gay relationships lead our country into the abyss? After more than a year's worth of reading, research, and dozens of interviews with our LGBTQ+ neighbors, I wrote a 40-page paper for our leadership team outlining the outcome of same gender relationships, thus far, in our world. What I and our team discovered was truly remarkable.

What we learned then has been confirmed over the past decade, with newer research supporting our original findings. For instance, in 2020 a study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* by authors Michael A. Garcia and Debra Umberson shows “that men in a same-sex marriage have less psychological distress than their straight peers,” and that “women in different-sex marriages reported the highest levels of stress.”¹⁴⁷ Additionally, the week before the Supreme Court took up the issue of same-sex marriage in 2013, a report about children raised by gay parents in the American Academy of Pediatrics argued that “three decades of research concur that kids of gay parents are doing just fine.” In fact, co-authors Ellen Perrin and Benjamin Siegel write, “Many studies have demonstrated that children’s well-being is affected much more by their relationships with their parents, their parents’ sense of competence and security, and the presence of social and economic support for the family than by the gender or the sexual orientation of their parents.”¹⁴⁸

Of course, neither of the above reports mean one ought to blindly support same gender relationships, nor does the reality that women in different-sex marriages experiencing

¹⁴⁷ Reynolds, Daniel. “Study: Gay People Have Happier Marriages Than Straight People.” *The Advocate*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.advocate.com/people/2020/2/13/study-gay-people-have-happier-marriages-straight-people>

¹⁴⁸ Reynolds, Daniel. “Study: Gay People Have Happier Marriages Than Straight People.”

extraordinarily high levels of stress mean they ought to either get a divorce or seek out same gender relationships. The goal of my research was, and is, to point to outcomes. What happens when same gender relationships are affirmed? Most evangelical leaders would have us believe that society itself will implode as we disobey the God of heteronormativity. However, that is not what the research reveals. Let's explore a few more studies.

On November 20, 2018, an article titled "Welcoming All Families: Discrimination Against LGBTQ Foster and Adoptive Parents Hurts Children"¹⁴⁹ revealed a plethora of research, including:

- Same-sex couples raising children are seven times more likely to be raising a foster child and seven times more likely to be raising an adopted child than their different-sex counterparts.
- Same-sex couples are more likely to adopt older children and children with special needs, who are statistically less likely to be adopted.
- Children of gay or lesbian parents fare as well as children of different-sex parents; they are also just as healthy, both emotionally and physically.

Each year, 20,000 children age out of the U.S. child welfare system without finding a permanent family.¹⁵⁰ Sadly, if you ever study the connection between foster care, homelessness, and mass incarceration, you will find them inextricably linked.¹⁵¹ What the above research points to is that our LGBTQ+ neighbors who choose to adopt or become a foster parent are not only saving children from homelessness and/or a life behind bars, but also providing them with a stable home that leads to a similar upbringing of those raised by different-sex parents. While some evangelical leaders and conservative politicians lead us to believe same gender relationships

¹⁴⁹ Frank J. Bewkes, Shabab Ahmed Mirza, Caitlin Rooney, Laura E. Durso, Joe Kroll, and Elly Wong, "Welcoming All Families," American Progress, November 20, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/reports/2018/11/20/461199/welcoming-all-families/>

¹⁵⁰ Bewkes, Frank J., "Welcoming All Families."

¹⁵¹ Shalita O'Neale, "Foster Care and Homelessness," Foster Focus Magazine, Accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.fosterfocusmag.com/articles/foster-care-and-homelessness#:~:text=Approximately%20400%2C000%20youth%20are%20currently,of%20foster%20youth%20become%20homeless.>

will lead to incest, bestiality, and a slew of disastrous outcomes, the actual results are not only to be tolerated or accepted, but to be celebrated. The above research does not reveal that same gender relationships are better, or preferred, to different-gender relationships. Additionally, the research does not point to some of the unique struggles same gender relationships face, which we will explore in chapter five, but what it does reveal is that same gender relationships, on the whole, fare just as well (or just as poorly) as different-gender relationships. It also reveals that same gender couples are more likely to adopt or provide foster care for at-risk children, which is not only noble, but deeply needed in our world today. Of course, this may be due, in part, to biological limitations for some couples, but when decades of research bear strikingly similar results for children of same gender couples as children of different-gender couples, the charge from evangelical leaders that our LGBTQ+ friends are leading us to the moral abyss doesn't seem to carry as much weight as it once did.

What we have learned in this chapter, thus far, is that despite Lucado's declaration that same gender relationships may lead to bestiality and daddies marrying their daughters, years of studies show that not to be true. In fact, we are learning that same gender relationships can flourish in a similar way to different gender relationships. With this in mind, I want to draw our attention back to Principle 6, which reads:

The best way to discern whether you have properly interpreted a passage of scripture is to put it into practice.

For the next few paragraphs we are going to explore this principle, but almost through reverse engineering. If the above research reveals that same gender relationships are not, in fact, tearing at the moral fabric of our society, then it is past time to start asking questions about the outcomes of a theology that refuses to welcome and celebrate God's beloved children. What

impact does the condemnation of same gender relationships from Lucado, Tyson, Chandler and Francis Chan have on our world today? If a pastor or theologian concludes that the Bible condemns same gender relationships, then they write or speak or hold to those beliefs, what are the outcomes? Although we have already put on display a few heartbreaking outcomes, I invite you to take a deep breath and keep reading.

Do not pray for me

In 2016 I came face to face with the grimmest of realities as Christian evangelicalism collided with the work I was doing to address homelessness in New York City, where more than 60,000 people sleep in temporary shelters and 4,000 sleep on sidewalks, in subway cars, or on church steps.¹⁵² Our family had just returned from a short stint in San Francisco, and I had taken a job as the chief collaborator for a coalition of Christian nonprofits who wanted to work together to serve our homeless neighbors. Upon accepting the role, I was clueless about how the anti-gay theology of pastors like Lucado had been so deeply embedded within these organizations. However, I quickly discovered the consequences of such a theology when, like the innkeeper said to Joseph and Mary before the birth of Jesus, there would be no room for our LGBTQ+ neighbors inside the doors of our organizations, even if that means they die on the street.

On the second day of my new role I met up with the Vice President of Outreach at one of the organizations with which I was working. Their mission focused exclusively on being the medium between folks living on the street and the resources they desperately need, which

¹⁵² "Basic Facts About Homelessness," Coalition for the Homeless, Accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/>

could be anything from a new I.D. to a detox referral to temporary or permanent housing. After our brief introduction while standing on line for coffee, I thought to myself, “Of course this guy is the V.P. of Outreach.” Born on a different continent, he speaks multiple languages, tucks his Samson-like hair beneath a winter cap, waxes eloquent on a bevy of subjects, and bears a name that only the most devoutly Christian parents would give their child (see 2 Kings 22:1-2). It was at this first meeting with the International Man of Mystery that my eyes would be awakened to the brutal reality of homelessness, my heart would be crushed by the evangelical response to it, and how I learned what would eventually cause me to lose my job (more on this in chapter seven).

As I met with the V.P. and learned of his history, the path that led him to working with our homeless neighbors, and how I might be able to help their organization solve some of the big (and small) problems it was regularly facing, my new friend sitting across the table from me lacked the focus I believed he needed so we could make real progress on the problem at hand. Or so I thought.

“Excuse me for just a moment,” he said, his eyes looking over my shoulder once again. In the first twenty minutes of our meeting, he hadn’t touched his coffee. He had barely paid attention to any of the questions I was asking him, and I was starting to get worried about our working relationship. But everything changed in a single moment. His eyes followed a woman to the trash can, then back to her seat, then again back to the trash can. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a young, distraught woman, with a few black duffle bags at her feet.

“Ma’am,” my friend gestured to the woman behind me. “Do you mind if I ask: Are you okay? Is everything okay?” I later learned that the V.P. of Outreach had earned his title by

keenly discerning when someone was in a high stress situation. Rather than looking away, he was acting like a firefighter approaching the flames inside a building or a secret service agent that chases down a speeding bullet, and he took a step toward the discomfort.

This young woman, we'll call her Jordyn, looked down again at her bags, which we would soon discover held everything she owned. Underneath the brim of her hat we could hear her whisper, "I'm in trouble." My feet slowly pressed against the floor, gently sliding my chair backwards to allow a better line of sight for someone I would later call friend and co-laborer on a wide range of initiatives to help reduce homelessness in New York City.

"I spent last night at a shelter, but I was terrified. People were screaming all through the night. There were bugs crawling on my blanket. I couldn't sleep. I can't go back." She continued to describe her dangerous situation in the shelter, articulating the fear she has as a transgender woman in a building where all respect for human life seems to be stripped at the front door.

I turned to the V.P. of Outreach, wondering what he would say next. I saw him feverishly scrolling his phone. "How can I help?" I asked, lobbing a question into the air for either of them to answer. I then whispered to my friend, "Can we take her to the mission? She'll be safe there, right?" I was referring to a large Christian homeless shelter, one that boasts of Christ's love for all people since its inception more than 140 years ago. He shot a glance in my direction, rolled his eyes, and went back to his phone. It was as if I had asked him if the sun created darkness or if a newborn baby could swim across the Hudson River, questions so ridiculous in nature they don't even beg a response. I could feel him questioning my role with the coalition. *Wait, does this guy not understand how homelessness intersects with the evangelical world?* I would soon find out.

Let me make this abundantly clear: A young woman who feared for her life would be denied entry at all of the historic Christian evangelical organizations for which I served, leaving her alone on our city's streets because the leadership believed it would be 'unsafe for everyone' if they were to provide shelter to someone they believed had violated God's original design for their lives. Before we move on allow me to remind you:

1.6% of the total U.S. population have attempted suicide¹⁵³

14% of LGBTQ+ individuals have attempted suicide¹⁵⁴

41% of transgender adults have attempted suicide¹⁵⁵

62% of homeless LGBTQ+ youth have attempted suicide¹⁵⁶

Of transgender people:

90% have experienced harassment or discrimination at work¹⁵⁷

57% have experienced significant family rejection¹⁵⁸

26% have been fired because of their gender identity¹⁵⁹

19% have experienced homelessness because of their gender identity¹⁶⁰

LGBTQ+ youth make up 5% of the total population of youth but make up to 45% of the youth homeless population.¹⁶¹

While I stewed about how the Christian organizations with which I had chosen to work would respond to Jordyn, my new friend (and soon to be 'hero for life') landed on a place that would provide Jordyn safe shelter for the night, and longer, if she chose to go. You could see the relief come across her face as she learned about Covenant House, a nonprofit organization that has served more than 1,000,000 homeless youth since its inception in 1972. Now an

¹⁵³ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

¹⁵⁴ Karl Kralovec, Clemens Fartacek, Reinhold Fartacek and Martin Plöderl, "Religion and Suicide Risk" *J Relig Health* 53 (2014): 416, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9645-2>

¹⁵⁵ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

¹⁵⁶ Brad Harper, "A Christian Perspective on Parenting a Gay Child," <http://centerforfaith.com> (accessed January 30, 2020), 4.

¹⁵⁷ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

¹⁵⁸ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

¹⁵⁹ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

¹⁶⁰ Austin Hartke, *Transforming* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), ix.

¹⁶¹ Andrew Cray, "Seeking Shelter: The Experiences and Unmet Needs of LGBT Homeless Youth,"

international organization, Covenant House is located in thirty-one cities throughout six countries.¹⁶² Jordyn started to collect her duffle bags as I stood to hail a cab for her transport across town. However, we were both interrupted by my friend, who said he had one more question for Jordyn before she departed.

“Can I pray for you?” This gritty, unshaven, long-haired V.P. of Outreach whose lone office was inside a moving bus and whose industrial ear-piercing made him look like a roadie for the hot 90s band Matchbox 20, was also a pastor (the kind that no longer attends church which, as I have come to find out, is fairly common). The final move toward this fearful woman made me verklempt, taken back by the softness of my friend’s heart which (stereotypically) stood in contrast to his tough outer shell. I bowed my head, my heart filled with gladness as my second day on the job was becoming such a rich, meaningful experience. Of course, I had no idea it was about to grow a lot richer.

“No. No. Uh...no!” the woman quietly yelled back across the table. “No, don’t you do that. Don’t you dare pray for me.” She trembled again, picking at the straps on her bags like some of us chew on our nails when we’re anxious. Although I would soon come to learn why so many of our homeless friends are exhausted with prayer, this young woman’s visceral response left us both bewildered. That is, until she told us more of her story.

Jordyn unzipped one of her bags, drawing out a wrinkled envelope and unfolding the letter inside. Briefly revealing the scribbled note to us, she described that her ‘Christian’ parents had left it on the doorstep of their home in Atlanta, GA, along with the duffle bags, once they

¹⁶² <https://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-charity>

learned of Jordyn’s gender identity. The locks had been changed, and the note said she would only be welcome inside once she denounced the evils of her behavior. “God made man and woman,” the note said, “and when you reclaim your manhood we will reclaim you as our child. Until then, we release you to Satan so that you might be repulsed by your own wickedness and fall back into the loving arms of God.” Jordyn had been on the run ever since, and she came to New York as a last-ditch effort to find safety in the home of her cousin, who also rejected her.

Tragically, Jordyn’s story is not unique. After being abandoned in a trash can in Brooklyn, New York, Irene Monroe grew up in the foster care system. As she discovered her own sexual orientation during her childhood and teenage years, she was regularly kicked out of foster homes “for fear that my homosexuality would lead me to prey on their other female foster kids or cause them to ‘catch it’ from me.”¹⁶³ In a fit of malevolence, one foster parent hurled at her, “I ain’t raising no goddamn bulldagger up in my house. Before I do that I’ll send your ass right back to that damn agency where I got you” (*bulldagger* is a colloquialism once commonly used in the African-American community to denote a masculine lesbian).¹⁶⁴ Reflecting on her time in this foster home, Ms. Monroe writes, “This pejorative term had both tremendous sting and stigma, and my foster mother used it not only to spew her venom about my behavior but also to evoke fear in the hopes that it would straighten me out...She yelled at me for my twisted thoughts, warning me that I would be homeless if I didn’t take her demands seriously.”¹⁶⁵ It is worth noting that attempted suicide rates “among LGBTQ+ young people whose parents tried to change their sexual orientation were more than double (48%) the rate

¹⁶³ Irene Monroe, “Religious Discrimination,” in *Crisis*, ed. Michelle Gold (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), 8

¹⁶⁴ Irene Monroe, “Religious Discrimination,” in *Crisis*, ed. Michelle Gold (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), 7-8.

¹⁶⁵ Irene Monroe, “Religious Discrimination,” in *Crisis*, ed. Michelle Gold (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), 9.

of LGBTQ+ young adults who reported no conversion experiences (22%), and suicide attempts nearly tripled for LGBTQ+ young people who reported both home-based efforts to change their sexual orientation by parents and intervention efforts by therapists and religious leaders” (63%).¹⁶⁶

Grace Alive Fellowship Church meets in the middle of Manhattan’s Chinatown neighborhood.¹⁶⁷ Its progressive, LGBTQ+ affirming posture stands out among the dozens of conservative churches surrounding it, including the one it rents space from for Sunday services. Peter (not his real name), a gay man who grew up attending one of the many local conservative Chinese churches, once took severe steps to commit suicide. After being banned for “struggling with being gay,”¹⁶⁸ he was told the pastor’s wife led the youth group to pray for him because he had “invited the devil into his heart.”¹⁶⁹ Upon hearing this, Peter locked himself in his bedroom and doused his body with lighter fluid. He was in the 7th grade. Believing his parents, who were still members of the church from which he had been banned, would be better off without him, he struck a match. However, the matches never sparked a flame, leaving Peter confounded.

Interlude: *What is Good Theology?*

“The best theology would need no advocates; it would prove itself.”¹⁷⁰

Karl Barth

¹⁶⁶ Cathy Renna, “First Study Shows Pivotal Role of Parents in Conversion Efforts to Change LGBT Adolescents’ Sexual Orientation,” *Family Acceptance Project*, November 8, 2018,

<https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/conversion-therapy-begins-at-home>

¹⁶⁷ Sarah Ngu, “Inside the New LGBTQ-affirming church in New York’s Chinatown,” *NBC News*, May 7, 2020,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/inside-new-lgbtq-affirming-church-new-york-s-chinatown-n1201361>

¹⁶⁸ Ngu, “Inside the New LGBTQ-affirming church.”

¹⁶⁹ Ngu, “Inside the New LGBTQ-affirming church.”

¹⁷⁰ Wong, Brenda, ed. *Quotations From the Wayside*, (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1999), 78

If Jordyn were your child, would you have locked her out of your home? If you were Irene's foster parent, what language would you use to describe her sexuality? If you were Peter's mother, how would you address your theological conclusions in light of your son attempting to set himself on fire? Can we see a direct link from the theological preachments of pastors like Lucado and the psychological toll taken on our LGBTQ+ neighbors? If not, what do you attribute the pain and suffering to instead?

Of the way his theological ancestors assessed their interpretation and implementation of scripture, Murray wrote "the consequences would help them discern whether they had understood the text well."¹⁷¹ In light of the outcomes assessed in this chapter, do you believe it's possible that same gender relationships can be just as healthy (or unhealthy) as different gender relationships? Do you believe that gay couples choosing to adopt or provide foster care to at-risk children is God-honoring? If not, why not? What other solutions exist? Rather than believing our LGBTQ+ neighbors need to change in order to align with our current understanding of scripture, is it possible for us to dig deeper and ask, "What might need to change in me?"

Chapter 4: This is Your Brain

In 1987 an advertisement was created by Partnership for a Drug-free America to address the harm caused by hard drugs like cocaine.¹⁷² In the ad a middle-aged man in an empty apartment stood over the stove with an egg he was preparing to crack on the edge of a

¹⁷¹ Stuart Murray. *The Naked Anabaptist*. (Harrisonburg, VA. Herald Press, 2015), 75.

¹⁷² "The Partnership's 'Fried Egg' Message, Partnership For a Drug Free America, Accessed January 17, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20060926000816/http://www.drugfree.org/Portal/About/NewsReleases/Fried_Egg_Message

skillet. Before doing so, however, he looks at the camera and tells us the egg “is your brain” and the hot skillet is “drugs.” As the outer shell is cracked and its contents start to sizzle on the stovetop, we hear him declare, “This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?” The “Fried Egg” commercial was an instant hit, even if it didn’t lead to a precipitous drop in drug use. Over the past several decades it has been nominated for the coveted Madison Avenue Walk of Fame awards, parodied by Saturday Night Live, recreated multiple times in subsequent anti-drug messages, and used in television shows like *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Roseanne* to warn its characters of the obvious message: Doing drugs will fry your brain.

Although this is not a study guide on drug use, it is, at least in part, an exploration on the effects of our theology. As Dr. Christena Cleveland writes, “We must learn to measure the sociological performance of our theological convictions.”¹⁷³ That being said, if we were to recreate the commercial for our subject matter at hand, can you discern what the egg and the skillet would represent?

As we consider the implications of this public service advertisement as it relates to our LGBTQ+ neighbors, I want to highlight work of an esteemed Christian psychiatrist, Dr. Timothy Jennings, M.D., who is a board-certified Christian psychiatrist, master psycho-pharmacologist, lecturer, speaker and author. He was named a distinguished fellow of the APA and was voted one of America’s Top Psychiatrists by the Consumers’ Research Council of America.¹⁷⁴ In his book [The God-Shaped Brain](#) he asks, “Isn’t something wrong if in talking about God we frighten the children? Do we help or hurt, heal or injure, when we present a God that incites fear? Does

¹⁷³ Cleveland, Christena. “Voice of the Day,” *Sojourners*. Accessed November 28, 2019

¹⁷⁴ Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017)

it even matter whether our view of God is good, bad or ugly? It *does* matter, more than we ever realized – to the point of changing our brain structure! Although we have power over what we believe, what we believe holds real power over us – power to heal and power to destroy.”¹⁷⁵

We will return to more from Dr. Jennings at the end of this chapter, but let’s take a moment to listen to those impacted by the inculturation of a theology that condemns our LGBTQ+ neighbors. Below are the words of a few bold survivors who are now choosing to speak out, write, and tell how their church’s preachments shaped their brain structure.

“All I had heard about homosexuality in school was that it was a sin punishable by death, and all I heard at home was my brothers calling gay men ‘fudge-packers’ and my parents talking about gay people like they were lonely lepers.”¹⁷⁶

“My mother said I was crazy and sick and told me I was going to hell.”¹⁷⁷

“...My father’s screams of ‘faggot’ only intensified as that night went on. Those screams are what I’ll never forget. That slur is what will always hit me in the pit of my stomach.”¹⁷⁸

“You’ll never step foot in this house again if you act on your feelings. You’ll never finish your education.”¹⁷⁹

“Sometimes I just want to die when I think about how difficult it is just to get through a day, trying to act normal.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁵ Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 9.

¹⁷⁶ Ari Gold, “Religious Discrimination,” in *Crisis*, ed. Michelle Gold (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), 48

¹⁷⁷ Matt Comer, “Religious Discrimination,” in *Crisis*, ed. Michelle Gold (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2008), 72

¹⁷⁸ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 17.

¹⁷⁹ Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 135.

¹⁸⁰ Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 335.

“Multiple suicide attempts, two psychiatric hospitalizations. Diagnoses severe type-2 bipolar disorder and moderate PTSD by multiple doctors in two different states. Ex-gay therapist told me the symptoms from these illnesses were caused by my ‘sexual confusion.’”¹⁸¹

“Travis had a broken arm and numerous bruises from the last beating his father had given him. But these were only the visible wounds; his father had also called him a ‘God damn faggot,’ ‘cock sucker,’ and ‘fairy,’ standard insults that he flung at Travis when he became angry,” Dr. Alan Downs wrote as he recounted a tragic therapy session with a former client.¹⁸²

One survivor writes that the Executive Director of a large ex-gay organization once told a client it would be better to “to kill himself than to live as a homosexual,”¹⁸³ and in a memoir about his transition to a man another survivor feared “I would lose my family.”¹⁸⁴

One reason we see sky high suicide rates among our LGBTQ+ neighbors is due to internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia is what happens when a gay person experiences so much shame from others they turn on themselves, believing the lies told to them and about them by their parents, peers, pastors, and public-school teachers. Hundreds of studies show that internalized homophobia leads to significantly high levels of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and suicide completions among the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁸⁵ Through decades of his own research, combined with hundreds of therapy sessions with gay men, Dr. Alan Downs assesses, “The wound is the trauma caused by exposure to overwhelming shame at an age when you weren’t equipped to cope with it. An emotional

¹⁸¹ Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 336.

¹⁸² Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), 49.

¹⁸³ Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016), 24.

¹⁸⁴ Daniel Mallory Ortberg, *Something That May Shock and Discredit You* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2020), 11

¹⁸⁵ Frank, “Anti-LGBT Discrimination.”

wound caused by toxic shame is a very serious and persistent disability that has the potential to literally destroy your life. It is much more than just a poor self-image. It is the internalized and deeply held belief that you are somehow unacceptable, unlovable, shameful, and in short, flawed. To experience such shame, particularly during our childhood and adolescent years, prevents us from developing a strong sense of self.”¹⁸⁶

Let me try to make this as clear as possible, just in case we aren’t able to make the connection. When a young child hears from his peers that he is a “fag,” from her mother that she is a “bulldagger going to hell,” or from his father that he is a “Goddamn cocksucker,” and this child also grows up in a church that affirms and informs his parent’s beliefs, it matters not how sweet or compassionate the voices from the pulpit may be, toxic theology produces bad fruit. In fact, if you remember we have already learned that “children raised by religious parents appear to develop greater prejudice toward homosexuals than those raised in nonreligious home environments.”¹⁸⁷ Additionally, the American Journal of Preventive Medicine conducted a survey of over 21,000 U.S. college students and discovered that “greater religious feeling and engagement was tied to increased risk of suicidal thoughts and actions for participants who identified as LGBTQ+”¹⁸⁸ While you may not yet be convinced there is a direct link between the words of Max Lucado, Jon Tyson, or Francis Chan and the high suicide rates of our LGBTQ+ neighbors, or the bullying they receive that puts them over the edge, hundreds of studies among thousands of our LGBTQ+ neighbors reveal it is true.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), 24.

¹⁸⁷ Sowe, Taylor, and Brown, “Sex and the Sinner,” 532.

¹⁸⁸ Anne Harding. “Religious Faith Linked to Suicidal Behavior in LGBTQ Adults,” *Reuters*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-lgbq-religion-suicide/religious-faith-linked-to-suicidal-behavior-in-lgbq-adults-idUSKBN1HK2MA>

¹⁸⁹ Frank, “Anti-LGBT Discrimination.”

Another reason suicide rates among our LGBTQ+ neighbors are four times higher than their heterosexual peers, and eight times higher in highly rejecting families, is because internalized homophobia is exacerbated by what Caitlyn Ryan, Director of the Family Acceptance Project, calls *Minority Stress* -- events or conditions that minority populations experience that exceed the average person's ability to endure, and that can then cause mental or physical illness.¹⁹⁰ As indicated above, LGBTQ+ youth only make up about 5% of the total youth population in the U.S. but account for up to 45% of homeless youth in America, which is often caused by family rejection.¹⁹¹ In a study of more than 1600 individuals, doctoral research scientist Dr. Babucarr J. Sowe and his team discovered that "for LGBTQ+ persons, harm may be enacted through minority stress processes involving actual *events* of anti-gay discrimination and victimization; ongoing *expectations* of rejection that induce anxiety and hypervigilance; and *the internalization* of negative societal attitudes regarding homosexuality. The disproportionately high rates of mental and physical adversity observed among LGBTQ+ populations mirror the disproportionately prejudicial social conditions they experience."¹⁹²

Minority Stress is exacerbated for LGBTQ+ youth of color, who reported even greater "increases in social anxiety" and "decreases in their social support systems" than white LGBTQ+ youth.¹⁹³ Eric Thomas and Michael Arceneaux are two men who have written about their experiences growing up with an enormous amount of stress and shame, attributed to being both black and gay. Drawing upon experiences of getting his hair cut in a barbershop,

¹⁹⁰ Caitlin Ryan, David Huebner, Rafael M. Diaz., and Jorge Sanchez, "Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults" *Pediatrics* Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics 123, no. 1 (January 2009), 346 <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-3524>

¹⁹¹ Morris, "The Forsaken."

¹⁹² Sowe, Taylor, and Brown, "Religious anti-gay prejudice," 691.

¹⁹³ Ja'nina J. Walker, Buffie Longmire-Avital, "The Impact of Religious Faith and Internalized Homonegativity on Resiliency for Black Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Emerging Adults." *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 9, (2013): 1723–1731 <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031059>

Arceneaux writes, “There are plenty of straight Black men who have said to me that the barbershop is partially where they learned how to be a Black man in the world. I understand that, but as a Black man in this world who happens to be gay, my past experiences will never allow me to share their sentiments...I’ve never found those spaces to be welcoming to the sort of man that I am.”¹⁹⁴ He recounts the multiple conversations inside barbershops growing up, ones that focused on sex, masculinity, and the crude details of being with a woman. The conversation turned derogatory and dangerous as his own barber picked up on a derisive exchange about same-sex relationships. Arceneaux writes, “That barber wouldn’t stop his diatribe, going on to add that gay men needed to be rounded up and sent to a women’s prison to be raped.”¹⁹⁵

Thomas, a senior staff writer at *Elle* online, who is now married to the Reverend David Norse, reflects on his childhood in [Here For It](#), which entailed regularly being called “faggot” and being hit by a brick thrown at him by a neighborhood peer who repeatedly used the same refrain writes, “When the fact of your being is used as a weapon against you, the process of relearning who you are and what your value is, is a long one. I don’t know that I’ll ever be finished. I don’t know that I’ll ever fully be there.”¹⁹⁶

This is Your Brain on Toxic Theology

Thabiti Anyabwile is the Senior Pastor of Anacostia River Church in Washington, DC, and Council Member of The Gospel Coalition (TGC), which says it “exists to equip the next

¹⁹⁴ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus*, (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 127.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus*, (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 119.

¹⁹⁶ Eric Thomas, *Here For It* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2020), 132

generation of believers, pastors, and church leaders to shape life and ministry around the gospel,”¹⁹⁷ and is comprised of New York Times bestselling authors like Dr. Tim Keller, John Piper, and Mark Driscoll. Pastors, religious leaders and authors contribute weekly to its website through blogs, articles, book reviews and podcasts which generate an estimated 65 million annual page views.¹⁹⁸ In 2013 TGC published an article on their website by Anyabwile calling for Christians to re-engage their “gag reflex” and realize the “yuck factor” in same-sex sex. Pastor Anyabwile asked, “Do you mean to say we should all accept as normal and good one man inserting the part of his body intended to create life into the part of another man’s body meant to excrete waste?”¹⁹⁹ Anyabwile continues by invoking I Corinthians 13, a popular Christian passage which charges the reader to do no harm. He writes, “Love does no harm, and homosexuality clearly harms everyone involved...Deep down we all—Christian and non-Christian, heterosexual and homosexual—know it’s wrong. The knowledge of that moral wrong repulses us because we’re moral beings, made that way by our Creator.”²⁰⁰

Dr. Jennings makes it clear the impact our beliefs have on our brains, writing, “Brain research has demonstrated that the kind of God you worship changes your brain...When we believe lies about God those false beliefs actually damage us, change our neural circuits, and warp our minds and characters.”²⁰¹ Personalizing his findings, he asserts, “I understood that worshipping an authoritarian, punishing god inflames the fear center (amygdala), damages the

¹⁹⁷ “The Gospel Coalition,” accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>

¹⁹⁸ Jonathan Merritt, “The Gospel Coalition and how (not) to engage culture,” *Religion News*, June 6, 2016, <https://religionnews.com/2016/06/06/the-gospel-coalition-and-how-not-to-engage-culture/>

¹⁹⁹ Thabiti Anyabwile, “The Importance of Your Gag Reflex When Discussing Homosexuality and ‘Gay Marriage,’” *The Gospel Coalition*, August 19, 2013 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/the-importance-of-your-gag-reflex-when-discussing-homosexuality-and-gay-marriage/>

²⁰⁰ Anyabwile, “The Importance of Your Gag Reflex.”

²⁰¹ Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 63-66.

prefrontal cortex, and impairs healing and growth. My young patients could never experience wellness as long as lies about God were retained. Only the worship of the God of love brings healing. Holding to lies obstructs the healing process.”²⁰² Later in his book he alludes to the same 1 Corinthians passage that Anyabwile used to deride homosexual behavior, but Jennings offers a different perspective, writing, “God’s very nature is other-centered love,”²⁰³ and that “God’s law of love is the outward flow of his personhood in the constant dispersion of himself to create, uphold and sustain the universe. This giving, outward-moving, other-centered love is the design on which all creation was constructed to operate. God has written his law of love – his circle of beneficence – in all of nature because it is the design schematic for life’s basic operation. In every living system, if it is to be healthy, the circle must not be broken. Whenever the circle of giving – the circle of love – is broken, pain, suffering and death inevitably follow. And it is only the love flowing from God that restores life, health and happiness.”²⁰⁴ He then points to a national survey conducted in 2006 by Baylor University which evaluated how people perceive God. In the study we learn that a paltry 23 percent of people view God as “benevolent or loving,” while 32 percent see God as “authoritarian,” 16 percent as “critical” and 24 percent as “distant.” (Five percent claimed to be atheist).²⁰⁵ Although the Christian scriptures proclaim that “God is love,”²⁰⁶ it appears as if most people actually experience God as indifferent and domineering. High anxiety and depression, both negative mental health indicators that are significantly increased in the LGBTQ+ community due to homonegativity, internalized

²⁰² Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 127.

²⁰³ Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 23.

²⁰⁴ Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 24.

²⁰⁵ Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 27.

²⁰⁶ | John 4:8

homophobia, and minority stress, leads to “intense feelings of inadequacy, guilt and a sense that everything they are doing is wrong,” according to Jennings.²⁰⁷

Before we get to a few questions during the interlude, I want to reference Tyson’s sermon from chapter 1 once more. Near the beginning of his talk he alluded to a survey found in the book unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why it Matters, written by the President of Barna Research Group, David Kinnaman.²⁰⁸ Released in 2007, this book was widely recognized in the evangelical world as a wake-up call to the church as it revealed in stunning fashion that, at least among 16-29 year old non-Christians, the church is judgmental, hypocritical, and out of touch.²⁰⁹ The piece Tyson referred to is below:

The most common perception is that present-day Christianity is “anti-homosexual.” Overall, 91% of young non-Christians and 80% of young churchgoers say this phrase describes Christianity. As the research probed this perception, non-Christians and Christians explained that beyond their recognition that Christians oppose homosexuality, they believe that Christians show excessive contempt and unloving attitudes towards gays and lesbians.²¹⁰

Tyson then recalled a gay parishioner who walked out of his church after sharing he was “exhausted with Greek and Hebrew translations” of the so-called six clobber passages and just wanted a place to call home.²¹¹ But after a few cursory words about the pain our LGBTQ+

²⁰⁷ Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 233.

²⁰⁸ “A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity,” barna.com, Accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity/>

²⁰⁹ “A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity,” barna.com

²¹⁰ “A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity,” barna.com

²¹¹ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

neighbors endure by the theology that condemns them, he proceeded to spend two full nights (compassionately) condemning them.²¹²

Interlude: What Do You Think About When You Think About God?

“Most of us doubt – deep down – that God loves us.”²¹³

Jan Johnson

Author and Pastor A.W. Tozer writes, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”²¹⁴ As we have learned in this chapter there is a great divide between how heterosexual Christians see God and how not only our LGBTQ+ neighbors but also how our non-Christian neighbors are taught to see God by those in the church. To recall a question that activist and author Bridget Eileen asks, “How is it that going to church would keep straight people alive but push gay people to death?”²¹⁵ Can we sit with that question for a moment during this interlude? Can we process how our LGBTQ+ neighbors have been taught to see God, and can we understand why every health indicator is higher for those that have never been to church than for those who have been raised in it?²¹⁶ Tozer not only states that “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,” but continues by implicating the church in her witness to the world about the nature of God, as well, writing, “This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of

²¹² Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

²¹³ Jan Johnson. *The Invitation to the Jesus Life*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008), 38

²¹⁴ Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*. (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2018)

²¹⁵ Bridget Eileen Rivera. “Heavy Burdens,” *Meditations of a Traveling Nun* (New York), February 27, 2020 <https://www.meditationsofatravelingnun.com/>

²¹⁶ Sowe, “Sex and the Sinner.”

Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him.”²¹⁷ Based on this, let’s reflect on a few questions below.

1. As we wade through the chorus of evangelical pastors who understand the harm done to our LGBTQ+ neighbors, with some of that harm ending in death or long-term psychological or physical trauma, and yet continue to preach against affirming a minority population, can we continue to allow this to happen? How does this correlate with the words of Jesus, who declares, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,”²¹⁸ and who said we are to “Love one another in the same way I have loved you.”²¹⁹
2. Is Jan Johnson right when she says, “Most of us doubt – deep down – that God loves us.”²²⁰ Do you find yourself wondering whether or not you measure up to God? Are you constantly analyzing your behavior, or the behavior of others, to discern God’s love for individuals? Do you think the good news of Jesus is better than this?
3. Brené Brown along with Dr. Alan Downs agree that “We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong,” and that “when those needs are not met, we don’t function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.”²²¹ Have you discovered that to

²¹⁷ A.W. Tozer. *The Knowledge of the Holy*. (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2018), 15.

²¹⁸ John 10:10

²¹⁹ John 13:34

²²⁰ Jan Johnson. *The Invitation to the Jesus Life*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008), 38.

²²¹ Carless, Monika. “The Power of Vulnerability: Brené Brown’s Ted Talk May be the Breakthrough You’ve Been Looking For.”

be true in your own life? If so, can you begin to imagine how our LGBTQ+ neighbors process a theological framework that denies their humanity, that leads parents to abandon their children, and well-known authors to compare same gender relationships with bestiality? How do we move forward with the knowledge that messages condemning same gender relationships leads to death?

4. Is there a better way to love our LGBTQ+ neighbors than to condemn them? What happens if, instead, we celebrate them?

In the following chapters we will take a look at what happens to our LGBTQ+ neighbors when their humanity is affirmed and celebrated, but before we get there, we have one more “reason” why some evangelical pastors cannot yet discard their toxic framework. It is to that reason we now turn.

Chapter 5: The Truth about Truth

In Chapter 1 I wrote about a secret meeting held at a conference on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in 2013, along with what the speaker, Jon Tyson, believed to be the gay agenda. Near the end of his talk he offered a few pastoral thoughts, hoping to close his ninety-minute talk with a reminder of the weight of “this cultural moment.”²²²

“First,” he said, “If you want to follow Jesus in this world you must walk a fine line of compassion. Also, we must learn to love people we disagree with.”²²³

As I put pen to paper for this study guide, however, I am reminded of the words from Robert Jones, Jr., whose words I quoted above, but bear repeating here:

²²² Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

²²³ Tyson, “God and Sexuality.”

“We can disagree and still love each other,
unless your disagreement is rooted
in my oppression and denial
of my humanity and right to exist.”²²⁴

Agreeing to disagree is fine for favorite sports teams or food dishes, but let us consider the reality of the world in which we live, where a President has been impeached for inciting a riot on the nation’s Capitol, where our Black siblings are called racial slurs before being shot in the back, and where our LGBTQ siblings are told by Christian leaders that the essence of who they are is not only sinful but worthy of eternity in hell. I have come to learn that many pastors (myself included) struggle to understand that when exegeting an ancient text, regardless how well and thorough it is done, leads to denying someone’s humanity or innate identity, any utterance of love or compassion that follows drops to the ground and is swept away by the inescapable reality that the person standing in front of us is not welcome to participate in the abundant life we claim to be offering. I think of Jesus’ words to a few religious leaders in John 5, “You search the Scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life,” along with the profound pronouncement from esteemed theologian Dr. Miguel De La Torre, who writes, “If your biblical interpretation prevents life from being lived abundantly by a segment of the population or, worse, brings death, it is anti-gospel.”²²⁵ People in desperate need of validation and belonging don’t need to know how you’re most educated guess of a Hebrew or Greek word from two thousand years ago supposedly gave the apostle Paul the authority to forever outlaw

²²⁴ Powell, John A. “Resistance and the Rebirth of Inclusion.”

²²⁵ Dr. Miguel De La Torre. *Reading the Bible From the Margins*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 52.

something that is inherent in their lives; what they need is someone brave enough to see the bigger picture of God's love, someone willing to dismantle the human-made barriers for entry into God's beloved community so all may join in the renewal of our world.²²⁶

At the conclusion of his talk in 2013 a few leaders stuck around to chat before heading home. Just before I hit the elevator button to start my journey downtown, Jon approached me and asked, "So, what did you think? How did that go for you, mate?" By this point in my multi-year trek of unpacking the clobber passages, hearing heartbreaking stories about gay conversion therapy gone bad, and seeing a wholly different set of outcomes for our LGBTQ neighbors than had just been described in his talk, I replied, "Jon, you're a fascinating speaker. That talk had me on the edge of my seat, but now I need to go back and think about how your words make sense to the people in my church whose lives have been destroyed by hearing that their lives aren't honoring God simply because they are gay."

He leaned in, seeking to help me discern how to best broach the subject with my congregation and uttered three words that, to this day, I still can't properly understand why such an incredible leader like him would say: "We preach ideals, Brian. We preach ideals." I understood his intentions, for I had peppered myself with that same message over the past several years, but I found this posture to be a "swing and a miss" as I thought deeply about the real lives of people in our community suffering at the hands of pastors only capable of preaching what they believed to be God's idea of a perfect world. The thinking goes: *If Jesus came to give us life abundantly, and if we would follow God's original design for our lives --*

²²⁶ Giles, Keith. "Will Homosexuals Inherit the Kingdom of God?," Patheos, August 23, 2018, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/keithgiles/2018/08/will-homosexuals-inherit-the-kingdom/>

whether that be in the areas of finance, vocation, generosity and grace or human sexuality -- only then would we truly experience the life Jesus came to give us. As it specifically relates to human sexuality, *we preach the “ideal” God intended: one man, one woman, for life.* Eight years have passed, and his words still ring through my head every time I look at how different our world is compared to what some pastors point to as the “ideal” one God intended from the beginning. But then I snap out of it and say to myself the same words I spoke to him before the elevator pulled me to the ground.

“You may preach ideals, Jon, but we serve the God of reality.”

The God of Reality

Something I have a difficult time understanding as I read through the scriptures is how we so often miss the reality of God inviting all of the people we might ignore or refuse to acknowledge into participation in building the beloved community. Yes, I am thinking about the sinful acts of people like King David, Abraham, the apostle Paul, the sinful woman in Luke 7, the woman caught in adultery in John 8, and a whole host of others. Speaking of the genealogy of Jesus, author Linn Marie Tonstad writes, “Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus includes Tamar, who dressed up like a sex worker in order to get pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah; Rahab, a Canaanite sex worker; Ruth, a Moabite woman (so, in biblical logic, descended from the sexual intercourse or rape of a drunken and insensible Lot by his older daughter); and the unnamed Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife stolen by King David after he spied on (stalked?) her bathing. To intensify the surprise of this genealogy, it is in fact a genealogy of Joseph, who is not (according to Matthew) the father of Jesus, but the husband of Jesus’ mother. Thus, sex work, rape, incest,

murder (which is what David did to Uriah, in practice), and adoption are all part of the lineage through which God brings Godself into the world in a new way in Jesus.”²²⁷

At first glance, the above genealogy may be a poor way to construct an argument to affirm same gender relationships, but the primary aim in recording it in this guide is to point to the “many ways of being human and sexual in the world that God incorporates into God’s salvific actions.”²²⁸ Additionally, the above examples are often leveraged to help us understand that we need not be perfect in order to be used by God, or that God can even forgive the most egregious of sins if we confess, repent, and seek to honor God. As a person with many flaws on my record, I am thankful for God’s grace and repeated invitation to bring good into the world by loving others well. However, I am also thinking about those considered sinful due to their condition, such as the man born blind in John 9, but whom God or Jesus healed in order to both point to a future Kingdom where there will be no more pain, but also to return this segregated person to their community, where they had been abolished out of fear of transmitting a disease or that God had punished them for their unrighteous behavior. Each time I open my Bible and read stories from Genesis to Revelation I am reminded of our God, who understands the reality of the world we live in and is willing to work with us and through us, even when we are unfaithful and especially after others deem us to be unworthy.

But perhaps more important than these examples are the stories we find in scripture of God either inviting someone from a minority position to be a part of bringing renewal to the world, or God honoring a person from a minority position after they have acted or spoken in a

²²⁷ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 40.

²²⁸ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 40.

way that brings honor to God and renewal to our world. I want to share a brief story from the Old Testament that brings this reality to light.

Jeremiah 38

Jeremiah was a prophet whose name means “God will exalt,” but he was also known as “The Weeping Prophet” due to his unpopularity for regularly bringing bad news to the leaders of Israel.

In Chapter 38 of Jeremiah we read that everything Jeremiah had been telling the prophets would happen to them if they kept dishonoring God’s people was about to go down. Of course, people in power don’t appreciate being told their actions are going to bring about their destruction, so several high-ranking officials convince the king to kill Jeremiah.

So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.
Jeremiah 38:6

The prophet Jeremiah has been left to die because he spoke truth to power, which happens to a fair number of prophets in case you’re considering a career move. Now, entering stage left is a person named Ebed-Melech, whose name means “servant of the king,” but it’s not as rosy a description as one might think. You see, Ebed-Melech is a eunuch, which, if you know of Lord Varys from Game of Thrones²²⁹ you may already have some images in your head of what that means, but for everyone else let’s turn to the words of Jesus in Matthew.

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs.
Matthew 19:12

²²⁹ Blumsom, Amy. “The eunuchs who inspired Lord Varys and Grey Worm in Game of Thrones,” The Telegraph, May 19, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/0/grey-worm-lord-varys-what-eunuchs-who-inspired-game-thrones-characters/>

Ebed-Melech was a “servant of the king,” which means he was castrated (i.e., *made a eunuch by others*) so as not to be tempted while serving in the king’s court. So “Ebed-Melech” isn’t his real name; it’s just his function. The scriptures don’t give us his name from birth. Are you following? The prophet Jeremiah is starving to death in a cistern because of the impending news he brought to the king. Ebed-Melech (not his real name), is convinced that Jeremiah’s prophecy to the king is correct, and he conjures a plan to save Jeremiah’s life. With the help of a few other “servants of the king,” Ebed-Melech lifts Jeremiah from the cistern, keeping him safe from the powers that be.²³⁰ This particular part of the story is in the thirty-eighth chapter of Jeremiah, but if you keep reading you’ll soon discover that the army coming in to overthrow the king and his people wind up sparing Jeremiah’s life. Something else you’ll see in the following chapter is God’s word to the prophet:

*“Go and say to Ebed-melech, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts...I will save you, and you shall not be handed over to those whom you dread; but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have trusted in me, says the Lord.’
Jeremiah 39:17-18*

Tonstad writes that Ebed-Melech, whose real name we’ll never know, “is given a personal promise by God that he will survive the destruction of Jerusalem and is presented both as an instrument throughout which God’s will is fulfilled, and as someone for whom God has such care that he, quite unusually, is given his own word of prophecy and protection.”²³¹

²³⁰ Jeremiah 38:11-13

²³¹ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 25.

If Ebed-Melech were alive today he would fit neatly into the LGBTQ community, but awkwardly inside most religious institutions (if he chose to attend). I imagine church leaders not knowing how to categorize such a person, or how to ask the appropriate questions regarding their living situation, sexual history, or commitment to celibacy, fidelity in marriage, or a whole host of questions most straight people rarely, if ever, encounter inside the church walls.

In the modern world our church leaders tend to operate more like the king's officials than they do the "*made to be eunuch*" Ebed-Melech, who was heralded by God and whose life was saved due to his holy pursuits. We put fence posts around who's really welcome, who's allowed to lead in our churches, and who gets to be a voice box for God in our culture. These fence posts are not based on character, gifts, or God's calling upon one's life; they aren't based on one's commitment to the poor, a person's pursuit of justice, or even one's ethical practices but, rather, they are based upon someone's gender identity or sexual orientation or both, which are not under the control of our LGBTQ neighbors, just like they are not under the control of those promoting heteronormativity, either. In Tonstad's book Queer Theology she tells the story of Ebed-Melech from Jeremiah 38, recalls the words of Jesus about eunuchs in Matthew 19, and adds the conversion story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 before writing that, based on these stories, "It is absurd to have debates about whether trans* and gender-nonconforming people can be included in the church. They've been in the church all along! God made that happen."²³² Perhaps this is the "ideal" we ought to be preaching.

²³² Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 26.

Please allow me to drive the point home. What we learn through the prophets, the “made to be eunuchs,” and Jesus Christ coming as God in person, is that any time we ‘fence the table’ in a way that runs contrary to the love of God for all humanity, we find our Creator on the outside of that fence, standing in solidarity with those that have been rejected, working to tear down the walls that divide us so we may all share in God’s bounty.

“We preach ideals,” some say, but as we learn to fully embrace just how complex our world is, we must come to also embrace reality, and learn together that “the truth is both more nuanced and more marvelous” than we can imagine.²³³ There are millions of God’s beloved children, filled with talents and gifts and passions, who have been refused a place to call home because they don’t fit the “ideal.” This is a wholly unnecessary consequence of toxic theology, and while it is far more painful for our LGBTQ+ neighbors to experience the shame of rejection, I fully believe it is those who believe God’s eyes cannot look upon their unholiness who are missing out on the beauty God is bringing into our world through their resilience, determination, and uncompromised lives.

While some pastors point to the ideal world found in the poetry of the Garden of Eden, we serve a God who journeys with us through the triumphant and tragic realities of life, refusing to exclude anyone from participating, and often surprising us by selecting for seats of honor those we wouldn’t even allow a seat at the table.

Celebrating Plan B

²³³ Jan Johnson, *Invitation to the Jesus Life*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008), 95.

In Chapter 2 I wrote about the response Wendy, the Executive Director of Generous Space, gave to our seminary cohort when I asked if she had ever heard a sound reason for denying LGBTQ individuals into full participation of the church. Do you remember her answer?

“Never,” she replied. As the clock struck 12:00pm, our professor led us out of the conference room and to the bountiful buffet of soggy sandwiches and bagged chips that had surely been sitting on a table in the lobby for a few hours. We offered a prayer of thanksgiving, shuffled to a different set of chairs to sit upon, and began unpacking what we had just heard. Lucky for our table, the professor who invited both the mega pastor and the Executive Director to speak to our cohort decided to eat his chips with us. His first words were directed at me.

“You know, Brian, I hear that a lot,” he said in between crunches. “I think if you pay attention to what some of the more respected theologians -- people like Robert Gagnon, for instance -- say on the matter is that same gender relationships, while sometimes found to be good and attractive to many, just simply isn’t God’s best for our world.” Before responding with a question to my professor, I first let him know I was well aware of Dr. Gagnon and his views on same gender relationships. Years prior, when the church I started in New York was on the cusp of transitioning from a non-affirming to affirming position regarding our LGBTQ neighbors, our entire leadership team read his books on the subject, along with books from other theologians and pastors. Dr. Gagnon, a former professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, is an outspoken anti-gay theologian, whose views were once described by a former student as “not merely anti-affirming, they’re vehemently, almost rabidly, anti-gay.”²³⁴ Like some of the pastors

²³⁴ Smith, Peter. “Outspoken Critic of Same-Sex Practices Leaves Pittsburgh Theological Seminary,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 24, 2017, <https://www.post-gazette.com/local/region/2017/08/24/pittsburgh-theological-seminary-robert-gagnon-same-sex-marriage-protestant-presbyterian-church-usa/stories/201708240187>

I've occasionally mentioned thus far, Dr. Gagnon is exclusively dedicated to interpreting the texts from their point of origin, which he believes conclude that "there is clear, strong and credible evidence that the Bible unequivocally defines same-sex intercourse as sin."²³⁵

"Dr. B," I shot back to our beloved professor, calling him by the endearing title he had come to embrace with our cohort, "Tell me, how do you define 'God's best'? What does that mean to you? And if 'God's best' is the only thing we can celebrate or preach about, what does that do to the, oh, 7,000,000,000 of us who can't possibly be living 'God's best' in our own lives each day?" While he chewed on the cost-effective sandwiches our tuition had provided for the day, I asked if I might indulge the table with an illustration. After rolling his eyes in acknowledgement that his Gagnon reference was what the young folks call 'weak sauce,' he nodded with approval.

"Okay, let me ask you a quick question or two. My best friends are parents to two foster children who come from different homes in New York City, and if I told you even a tenth of their story you'd weep at its brutality. One child was beaten so badly by his former foster parent that he's 90% blind; the other child isn't even aware she has a father somewhere in the world. Neither one of them is living their best life, as you might imagine, through no fault of their own, as you likely agree." Everyone at the table was tracking with me, including the professor. I continued. "In fact, the little girl's mom isn't even sure who the father is, so it is easy to believe she will never meet him. And the boy? His parents are not only incapable of loving their son, they don't want him. They simply discarded him at a young age for reasons too

²³⁵ Smith, Peter. "Outspoken Critic of Same-Sex Practices Leaves Pittsburgh Theological Seminary," Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 24, 2017, <https://www.post-gazette.com/local/region/2017/08/24/pittsburgh-theological-seminary-robert-gagnon-same-sex-marriage-protestant-presbyterian-church-usa/stories/201708240187>

complex to explain right now. So one of my questions for you is, 'What is God's best for their life, particularly since the toothpaste is out of the tube and cannot be put back in?' They have no biological parents to call their own; they have been seized by the State and would live as orphans if no action were taken to remedy the situation. So how do we define God's best for them?" Everyone remained silent, knowing I had a bit more information to put on the table. "And if we cannot get back to God's best for them, is it possible to celebrate anything else? Or do we believe that God is reserving celebrations solely for the 'ideal family'?" I asked, using my fingers for quote marks.

"Brian, I get your point," Dr. B exclaimed. "Of course we should celebrate any time something that has been broken is being repaired, and in the case of these two children you mention, I think it's wonderful that your friends have chosen to take them into their home. I'm sure it is a relief to both children, but particularly the little girl, who otherwise wouldn't have the example of a godly man in the home during her childhood."

"I agree, Dr. B., and I'm sure everyone at the table agrees with you. But let me add another layer to the already complex question about 'God's best,'" once again using finger quotes to highlight my lack of enthusiasm about the phrase. "My best friends who are parents to these adorable foster children are two gay women who have been married for a little over a year. One of them was a rising star in the evangelical world, attending a prestigious Christian university, graduating with a noteworthy degree from a coveted institution, and was well on her way to an eye-popping career that would help build God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That is, until she came out as gay. Appalled by her 'choice,' my friend's parents refused to attend her wedding, and she has been collectively shunned by former classmates,

professors, and future employers who once believed she might one day walk the halls of Congress as a representative for the religious right. Would the two children under their care be better off living in a group home, or with their former child-beating foster parents, or driven out to the middle of nowhere and left for dead?" I took a breath. A few classmates put down their sandwiches (probably because they tasted terrible, but still). "So tell me, Dr. B., what does God's best even mean, and are any of us living it? I think we're all on Plan B or C or the letter Q. Isn't life already hard enough? Why must we insist that gay people live up to what some believe scripture outlines as 'God's best' for their lives, while we pay little attention to the truth that the world we live in is complex, and beautiful, and tragic, and amazing all at the same time. People are exhausted, trying to live up to a holiness code attributed to God by religious leaders often out of touch with the very world in which they live. The message of scripture, at least in part, is that through all of our trials and triumphs, God is with us. The message is not that God's best is the unreachable bar of holiness and anything less than that deserves his wrath. How do you explain that to these children or to my friend whose own mother refuses to answer the phone when she calls? How do you explain it to the homeless youth who have been abandoned by their Christian parents and are learning the only way to survive on the street is through selling their bodies for some space on a warm couch? 'God's best' is not a doctrinal stance we must agree to or a set of rules we must ardently follow (or else). God's best is Jesus, a person, a flesh and blood human being who is also the Divine Creator, who came to walk with us, sit with us, and stand with us in the middle of our shit." I apologized for the curse word but doubled down on the question.

Interlude: *What is 'God's Best'?*

“What if theology were about reality?” asks Tonstad, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School, as she leads us to a better understanding of how theologians might work if they actually told the truth.²³⁶

For instance, Karl Barth is a world class theologian and prolific author, writing dozens of books throughout the course of his life, including the 9 million worded Church Dogmatics and The Epistle to the Romans, which shot him to international recognition in the early 1900's. His writing was deeply influential to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, Jürgen Moltmann, and more.²³⁷ Today, you would have a difficult time finding a single pastor in our world who doesn't count Barth's writings as having at least some measure of influence on their understanding of God, with many noting Barth as the “father of neo-orthodoxy,” as he added extraordinary insight to John Calvin's Doctrine of Election and sought to recover the Doctrine of the Trinity.²³⁸

But Tonstad wonders if Barth was really telling the truth. “What would have happened if the great 20th century theologian Karl Barth had told the truth about how boring and unsatisfying he found marriage,” she asks, “as he sat in his office or vacationed with Charlotte Von Kirschbaum (not his wife) while writing his 14-volume *Church Dogmatics*,” in which he wrote of woman's subordination to man as a theological construct for understanding God.²³⁹ What if we understood the patriarchal structure of theology, and how its talk of a God the father and his son have led to sex and gender discrimination for centuries, even if theologians can't muster the courage to say it out loud?

²³⁶ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 76.

²³⁷ <https://quotes.thefamouspeople.com/karl-barth-2043.php>

²³⁸ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/top-5-christian-theologians-karl-barth/>

²³⁹ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 77.

Tonstad continues, “Heterosexuality as a system doesn’t deal with truth. Theological heterosexuality deals with fictions, ideas of what human beings ought to be like that are divorced and distanced from the reality of human, bodied, sexual life. Yet those fictions get used against people. Poor women are called indecent or undeserving if their lives don’t confirm to heterosexual, middle class ideologies of sexual behavior. They are often called undeserving by politicians whose own lives bear no trace of the decency they seek to impose on others.”²⁴⁰

Let’s review a few questions for us to ponder before marching forward to Chapter 6:

1 - Has your understanding of God ever changed, not necessarily based on what you read in the scriptures, but based upon how you experienced the lived reality of that understanding?

Thinking back to chapter 3 and our brief discussion on slavery, consider the following:

“Generally, people don’t need to give all kinds of reasons why slavery is wrong, nor do they spend any time wrestling with the biblical passages that endorse slavery. Similarly, once one recognizes that there are no good reasons to believe that it’s wrong to be gay, trans*, intersex, queer, or nonbinary, one doesn’t need to keep coming up with arguments dealing with the biblical passages that some interpret differently. Instead, one can get on with other issues.”²⁴¹

Take a moment to reflect on this.

2 - Is there such a thing as ‘God’s best’ for our lives? Think critically about this, particularly in light of everything we have discussed thus far. What would ‘God’s best’ be for my best friend’s mother, who refuses to pick up her daughter’s phone call? What would ‘God’s best’ be for the

²⁴⁰ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 76.

²⁴¹ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 23.

two children living in foster care? How do we see God celebrating the lives of those not living up to what others say are 'God's best' ideals in scripture? Is there room for more celebration in the modern world?

3 - Can God do what God wants? As we reflect on stories like that of Ebed-Melech and pull them forward into our current reality, how might we celebrate what God is seeking to do in and through the lives of our LGBTQ neighbors, rather than try to stop it? Can you write down the names of anyone from the LGBTQ community, either that you know personally or are perhaps more well-known, who have been used by God to bring beauty, truth, and goodness into the world? Take a moment to write down as many names as you can.

Chapter 6 | The Only Thing That Matters

In Chapter 2 we read Mark Achtemeier's five principles for interpreting scripture, and in the following chapter we added a sixth principle, one that this entire study guide is built around, which is to measure the sociological performance of our theological convictions (i.e., what happens when we put these convictions into practice?). We have measured some of the deadly ramifications of what many of our LGBTQ neighbors understand as toxic theology, but my guess is that a few of us may have a few questions about the questions we have been posing during each interlude, with one in particular looming large over all of the others.

If the foundation of your life of faith is called into question, it can lead to a series of other serious, meaningful questions such as: *Will my faith system stay intact? What does this mean about my understanding of God? Have I been wrong all along? Does this mean my*

parents and pastors and former professors have all led me astray, or am I being led astray by our present culture's radical acceptance of an "anything goes" philosophy?

With the subject of same gender relationships in the background, let's turn our attention to the big picture of the Bible and what it is trying to communicate about human flourishing, God-honoring relationships, and even the meaning of marriage. Achtemeier, a former theology and ethics professor at Dubuque Theological Seminary, asks the following questions: "Looking at the grand sweep of the Bible's witness, what are the highest purposes that emerge for love, sex, and marriage? Why did God invent these gifts and make them a part of human life? What was God trying to accomplish in creating human beings with the capability of entering into these experiences? What purposes did God have in mind for our use and enjoyment of these gifts?"²⁴²

After taking readers on a journey through the epistles attributed to Paul, the words of Jesus in the Gospels, and even a long trek back to the story about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Achtemeier presents his assessment, writing, "My study of the Bible's teaching on love, marriage, and sexuality revealed that God's highest purpose in providing these gifts is to help people grow in their ability to give themselves completely to another person, following the pattern of Christ's self-giving love."²⁴³ It is hard to argue with his understanding of God's purpose, at least for heterosexual relationships, but what about same gender relationships? Achtemeier presents a series of new questions, including: "Would same-gender relationships turn out to be fully compatible with the divine purposes for love, marriage, and sexuality I had

²⁴² Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 44.

²⁴³ Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 58.

uncovered? Does scripture point to any specific features of such relationships that undermine their compatibility with God's purposes? And do same-gender relationships have the capacity to deepen our experience of God's blessings by nurturing us in the self-giving love of Christ?"²⁴⁴
His conclusion?

"It struck me as I considered this that there seemed to be nothing about this purpose that required an opposite-gender relationship. A same-gender marriage appeared to afford the same or very similar opportunities for growth in love and grace and mutuality and for learning to give the whole of oneself to another person. And if God's purpose for marriage could be fulfilled in a gay marriage as well as a straight one, it made absolutely no sense to tell gay people that God's will for them could be fulfilled only in a heterosexual context or in celibacy."²⁴⁵

Some of the significant pushbacks offered to Achtemeier's understanding of God's bigger picture for marriage, and for life in general, include questions about procreation, adoption, and human anatomy. One might be tempted to lean into the laws of nature and decay, "Just look at the particulars of male and female anatomy. It is perfectly obvious from the way human bodies are constructed that men and women are meant for one another. Any attempt to deny this or live as if it were not true makes a mockery of God's work of creation."²⁴⁶ More than any other argument, the argument about human anatomy is put on the table as a trump card, harkening back to Genesis 1:26-27, which reads:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁴⁴ Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 56.

²⁴⁵ Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 58.

²⁴⁶ Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. (Minneapolis, MN. John Knox Press, 2014), 61.

Male and female. It seems pretty black and white, right? Each person is clearly born one or the other. Similarly, the same passage in Genesis refers to night and day and land and water. There is nothing in between. *It is either sunny outside or pitch black, and you can't convince me otherwise* (insert your own sarcastic eye roll here). Author Austen Hartke writes that, "This verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk," but instead "invite us into thinking about everything between and beyond."²⁴⁷ Imagine how dull the world would be if night and day were like light switches we turn on and off. Instead, God created a built-in dimmer switch that allows us to see a more beautiful picture of creation as the several hundred shades between night and day glisten and glimmer before our eyes. Could the same be true of gender?

Hartke continues, "The reality is that, for as long as there have been humans, there have been people who fall outside of the male/female binary."²⁴⁸ He then provides references from 1600 BCE which reveals, "humans who are created with sex organs that are not immediately identifiable as 'male' or 'female,'" and to the Mishnah and the Talmud (Jewish compilations of oral law put together between 200 CE and 500 CE) where we "see several examples of individuals who don't fit male or female categories within Jewish culture, including those whose sex is indeterminable, those who have characteristics of more than one sex, and those whose characteristics change over time."²⁴⁹

Living in the Tension

²⁴⁷ Austin Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 51.

²⁴⁸ Austin Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 51.

²⁴⁹ Austin Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 52.

A few years ago, I took a quick trip to Chicago, IL, with my daughter Brooklyn. I wanted to explore what author Andrew Marin called a “Living in the Tension” gathering in his book *Love is an Orientation*, written in 2010 and subsequently went on to win numerous awards for what he called “Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community.”²⁵⁰ The book itself was a gem at the time, at least for an evangelical leader like me who had more questions than answers. His book helped me understand that folks in the LGBTQ+ community took theology just as seriously as everyone else, and yet many were coming to far different conclusions about what God’s message was to those in the minority population. My goal at the time was to attend one of his gatherings, then bring those same conversations back to our church in the city. I invited Brooklyn along so we could celebrate her fifteenth birthday by eating some delicious cake at Sears Tower and walking the Michigan Mile, but it turns out having her attend a “Living in the Tension” gathering with me was the best gift of all as it opened both of us to a reality we didn’t know existed.

We sat in a room with a few dozen others and watched a film on asexuality, learning that more than 3,000,000 people in the United States do not “experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way.”²⁵¹ This was an orientation I had never learned of, and the conversation in the room that evening was fascinating, though it left me with a number of questions about how many of us understand human sexuality, create rules within the church for how people ought

²⁵⁰ Andrew Marin, *Love is an Orientation*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009)

²⁵¹ The Asexual Visibility and Education Network, Accessed January 4, 2021, <https://asexuality.org/?q=overview.html>

to live, with whom they are allowed to live, and the kinds of relationships that are sanctioned (or not) as godly.

That evening I learned more about the term Intersex, which describes bodies that fall outside the strict male/female binary.²⁵² There are a variety of ways one can be intersex. “Some intersex people have genitals or internal sex organs that fall outside the male/female categories — such as a person with both ovarian and testicular tissues. Other intersex people have combinations of chromosomes that are different than XY (usually associated with male) and XX (usually associated with female), like XXY. And some people are born with external genitals that fall into the typical male/female categories, but their internal organs or hormones don’t.”²⁵³

According to medical experts, approximately 60,000 people in the U.S. are born intersex each year, and conversations about people born intersex have created great controversy through the years.²⁵⁴ Some doctors and parents choose a gender for their infant, then have surgery performed and, later, hormones given to the child so they can grow into puberty inside their assigned male/female categories. However, as doctors and psychologists learn more about human development, many are beginning to allow children to grow up and make their own decisions about their bodies.

What our brief trip to Chicago gave me was a new understanding of asexuality and a better understanding of the term intersex, and it confirmed that God’s creation of “male and female” as we read in Genesis is not as binary and confining as one might imagine. Just like all of the radiant colors we see between the rising and setting of the sun, the fingerprints of God

²⁵² “What’s Intersex?” Planned Parenthood, Accessed January 23, 2021, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/whats-intersex>

²⁵³ “What’s Intersex?” Planned Parenthood.

²⁵⁴ “What’s Intersex?” Planned Parenthood

on humanity confirm that the “truth is more nuanced and more marvelous” than we can imagine.²⁵⁵

Anything Goes?

In the apostle Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia we find two passages of scripture tucked inside a letter meant to help people see beyond their binary understanding of how God was working in the world (and continues to work today). *Should Gentiles be circumcised? Does everyone who follows Christ need to also adhere to Mosaic Law? What are the new rules for what would later become a new religion?* On one hand, Paul addresses these questions with pinpoint precision (see Galatians 2:1-10, 5:2-6), but on the other hand Paul attempts to help his audience learn to be led by the Spirit of God that transcends the rule of law. There are two significant places where Paul’s words can help us well.

First, in Galatians 3:28 we read, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Under the reign of Christ, Paul writes, the classifications we once used to categorize and dehumanize others are no longer valid, for everyone is welcome to the table of God. From this point forward, Paul drives home, there is no advantage to being a man and no disadvantage to being a woman, which cut against the grain of Roman patriarchy but aligned perfectly with the life and teachings of Jesus. Stephen Patterson, author of *The Forgotten Creed*, writes that this passage was adapted from the first baptismal creed of the 1st century, which reads:

*For you are all children of God in the Spirit.
There is no Jew or Greek;
There is no slave or free;*

²⁵⁵ Jan Johnson, *The Invitation to the Jesus Life*. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008), 95

*There is no male or female.
For you are all one in the Spirit.*²⁵⁶

Patterson's assertion here is that Paul was desperately hoping the people of Galatia would see beyond the binary labels used to divide us, instead noticing that through God's Spirit we are all considered God's children. As Patterson declares, "We may not all be the same, but we are all one, each one a child of God."²⁵⁷

In the fifth chapter, Paul lifts his audience above the petty ways we tend to argue about trivial rules and reminds us, "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,'" (Galatians 5:14) which follows his earlier decree that "the only thing that counts is faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6) Paul then goes on to help us see that a life firmly planted into the soil of God's loving grace will produce the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," adding, "There is no law against such things." (Galatians 5:23)

Please allow me a moment to weave together the beginning of this chapter with the passages from Galatians we just read. If it's true that same-gender relationships provide the same or similar opportunities to grow in Christlike love toward one another, and if Paul's words to the churches of Galatia two millennia ago can serve to rekindle our understanding of how every single law we have sits underneath the law to love our neighbors in the same way we want to be loved, is there a valid reason to argue against celebrating our LGBTQ neighbors if and when they find themselves in a God-honoring, self-giving, Christlike relationship?

²⁵⁶ Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed*, (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2018), 29.

²⁵⁷ Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed*, (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2018), 29.

If there is no law against such things, one might ask, *is there a law against anything? Are we living in an “Anything Goes!” culture? Have we descended into the slippery slope of moral relativism, so fearful of offending our neighbors with the “truth” that we have instead caused God’s face to turn against us?*

My friend, mentor, and former boss, Paula Williams, is a teaching pastor at a church in Colorado and the author of [As a Woman: What I Learned About Power, Sex and Patriarchy After I Transitioned.](#)²⁵⁸ Several years ago, I was sitting in her car just outside a hotel in Florida, where we were both attending a conference for church planters. Between tears of joy and lament about what she knew was to come of her future in our evangelical world, she told me about her upcoming transition and started answering questions that I had not asked, but one’s she believed would be coming from her good friends, her former colleagues, and from the very organization she had grown from a small mom-n-pop nonprofit to one of the finest church planting organizations in the world.

“Brian,” she whispered across the front seat of her rental car, “God’s law of love never allows for the exploitation of others, never permits abusive power, and will not stand for the dehumanization of God’s beloved children through acts of violence,” which she said includes a “litany of sexual acts such as rape, sexual assault, pedophilia, pederasty, sexual harassment, and any situation where consent has not been given, but you know, the very scriptures I have given my entire life to studying don’t say a single word about being transgender. Not one! Yet I am about to lose everything I built during my forty-year career because the moment people

²⁵⁸ Paula Williams, *As A Woman*. (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2021)

learn about my transition I will be placed in the same category as sexual predators, pedophiles, and what the American Psychological Association (APA) used to define gay people up until 1973: mentally disturbed. I just wish the [evangelical] world we swim in lived by the law of love.”²⁵⁹ (Paula was right. You can read her book or her blog to learn more²⁶⁰)

Paula then gave me a five-minute rundown on the dangers facing transgender people in America today, much of which we have covered in this study guide. Tragically, one of the lessons we have learned is that the violence experienced by our transgender neighbors often comes from the hands of religious parents whose neurological makeup has been wired by pastors who miss out on the bigger picture of God’s law of love, instead choosing to frame their narrow understanding of God without any regard to how scientists and psychologists might help us interpret the meaning of scripture, particularly when one’s theological convictions have disastrous repercussions for others. With this in mind, I want to direct us back to the APA, which is “the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, with more than 121,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students as its members.”²⁶¹ In their 2009 policy manual which detail its findings related to the harm caused by religious based homonegativity and its resolutions and recommendations for religious organizations based on its comprehensive research, we read the following:

WHEREAS psychologists are encouraged to recognize that it is outside the role and expertise of psychologists, as psychologists, to adjudicate religious or spiritual tenets, while also recognizing that psychologists can appropriately speak to the psychological implications of

²⁵⁹ “The APA Ruling on Homosexuality,” New York Times, December 23, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/23/archives/the-issue-is-subtle-the-debate-still-on-the-apa-ruling-on.html>

²⁶⁰ <https://paulastonewilliams.com/>

²⁶¹ “About APA,” American Psychological Association, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/about/>

religious/spiritual beliefs or practices when relevant psychological findings about those implications exist;

and WHEREAS those operating from religious/spiritual traditions are encouraged to recognize that it is outside their role and expertise to adjudicate empirical scientific issues in psychology, while also recognizing they can appropriately speak to theological implications of psychological science;

and WHEREAS the APA encourages collaborative activities in pursuit of shared prosocial goals between psychologists and religious communities when such collaboration can be done in a mutually respectful manner that is consistent with psychologists' professional and scientific roles;

and WHEREAS societal ignorance and prejudice about a same-sex sexual orientation places some sexual minorities at risk for seeking sexual orientation change due to personal, family, or religious conflicts, or lack of information;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA encourages advocacy groups, elected officials, mental health professionals, policymakers, religious professionals and organizations, and other organizations to seek areas of collaboration that may promote the wellbeing of sexual minorities.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA advises parents, guardians, young people, and their families to avoid sexual orientation change efforts that portray homosexuality as a mental illness or developmental disorder and to seek psychotherapy, social support, and educational services that provide accurate information on sexual orientation and sexuality, increase family and school support, and reduce rejection of sexual minority youth.²⁶²

In case you missed it due to some technical language throughout let me make it plain.

The most widely recognized and deeply respected field of psychologists in the entire country want religious leaders to know that, while it is outside the expertise of a trained psychologist to speak directly to or make judgments about church doctrine or theology, it is well within their expertise to speak to the implications of those beliefs. Additionally, this legislative document

²⁶²B.S. Anton. "Proceedings of the American Psychological Association for the legislative year 2009: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives and minutes of the meetings of the Board of Directors." *American Psychologist*, 65, (2010): 385–475.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019553>

makes it clear: it is outside the role and expertise of religious leaders to make a formal judgment about empirical scientific issues in psychology. What this means is that we cannot properly interpret scripture until we first assess the outcomes of what we hear from pulpits across America each week. Do you remember principle six?

The best way to discern whether you have properly interpreted a passage of scripture is to put it into practice.

To repeat the words of Dr. De La Torre, “If your biblical interpretation prevents life from being lived abundantly by a segment of the population or, worse, brings death, it is anti-gospel.”²⁶³ In chapter seven we’ll take a look at the sunnier side of LGBTQ+ inclusion, along with some of the true costs along the way to freedom for everyone, but before we get there I’m guessing we have a few questions about what we just walked through, particularly around gender and our traditional understanding of scripture. I understand you may be weary. This is (potentially) a lot of new information coming your way. Take a breath. And another. We will get through this together.

Interlude: *Did You Hit a Wall?*

Research shows that most runners who take on the gargantuan goal of a 26.2-mile marathon hit a figurative “wall” just before the 20th mile. Their knees are wobbly, their feet tired, and their heart is exhausted from all of the exertion over the past two to three hours of nonstop exercise. While many marathoners break through the wall and complete the final five

²⁶³ Dr. Miguel De La Torre. *Reading the Bible From the Margins*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 52.

to six miles, the vast majority of those who quit a marathon do so at the 20th mile.²⁶⁴ While some have the will and fortitude to finish, others can't see past the wall and can only envision another hour of excruciating work.

As it relates to our spiritual lives, along with all of the questions we have about same gender relationships (or any number of questions about theology), many of us face a similar dilemma. We spent the first twenty or thirty years of our lives learning about God in a certain way, from a particular context, and by well-meaning people we believed to be trustworthy. But then, questions started to emerge that we couldn't shrug off; friends and family began facing insurmountable obstacles without Divine intervention, and we started to doubt that what we were taught about God, the scriptures, and life itself was true. Like a marathon runner in their twentieth mile, we hit a wall. However, unlike a 26.2-mile race that causes your body to ache and tests your mental and physical fortitude to carry on, the unanswered questions about the faith system in which you grew up seems to have spiritual, relational, and for some, financial implications. We begin to face an intimidating wall of questions, such as:

-If I believe the Bible says something different about same gender relationships than what I was taught to believe growing up, how does that impact the rest of the Bible? Can any of it be trusted? Is this all a sham?

-If I simply disagree with the Bible on same gender relationships, believing that today's world is far different than the one we read about in scriptures, how does that impact my relationship with the text, or God, or other social issues of today?

²⁶⁴ Jon Gordon. *The Power of Positive Leadership*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2017), 38

-If I change my mind about same gender relationships, will I lose favor with God?

-If I change my mind about same gender relationships, how will it impact my relationship with my friends and family who disagree? Or my church? Will I be a pariah to those I once counted as dear friends?

For many Christian leaders these questions have financial implications, as well.

-Will the church or nonprofit allow me to stay employed if we have a different understanding of scripture related to same gender relationships?

These valid questions and more can be quite dizzying as we enter a process of our faith journey called “deconstruction,” where what once seemed to be a rock-solid foundation upon which to build our lives has started to reveal a few cracks. Many of us become so frightened by the questions we stop asking them; instead, we retreat back to a place in our past where doubt didn’t exist, hoping that by shutting off the questions we can proceed without more injury to our faith. This decision brings some temporary reprieve (like a runner who stops at mile twenty), but it also prevents us from further growth; like a muscle that is best developed through friction, our faith will be developed through adversity. We need to “keep running,” so to speak, in order to achieve a breakthrough.

For others, however, retreating is not an option. Returning to a faith system that is broken and has left us miserable is not a path we are willing to take. Unfortunately, rather than moving forward or backward, many find themselves stuck in a constant existential crisis. Unable or unwilling to do the grueling work of rebuilding what has crumbled to the floor, we get trapped in a cycle of cynical, jaded thinking that prevents us from breakthrough.

Author Richard Rohr has labeled the developmental stages of our faith “order, disorder and reorder,” claiming that very few people get through to the other side.

“Conservatives normally get trapped in the first stage, progressives are trapped in the second, and only a minority of either group seem to get to the third. The last stage is considered dangerous to people in the first stage, and rather unknown and invisible to people in the second stage. If you are not trained in a trust of both love and mystery, and also some ability to hold anxiety and paradox, *all of which allow the divine entry into the soul*, you will not proceed very far on the spiritual journey. In fact, you will often run back to stage one when the going gets rough in stage two. The great weakness of much Western spirituality is that there is little understanding of the necessity of darkness and “not knowing” (which is the transformative alchemy of faith). This is what keeps so much religion at stage one.”²⁶⁵

Rohr proceeds to tell us that Jesus is the “Resurrected icon of reorder,” who through his life, death, and resurrection reveals a beautiful third space where we no longer fight or flee the darkness that weighs us down. Instead, we embrace it as a key part of our faith journey, believing that breakthrough comes as we face our fears and doubts rather than running away or giving up.

Where do you find yourself? Are you in the first stage? The second? Have you retreated, or do you feel trapped? Have the questions and doubts about your faith caused you to believe you’re losing it? Reflecting on his own spiritual journey, author Nathan Albert once quipped, “I wish more of my spiritual mentors told me that deconstruction was a regular rhythm that led to

²⁶⁵ Rohr, Richard Fr. “Order, Disorder, Reorder,” Center for Action and Contemplation, February 23, 2016 <https://cac.org/order-disorder-reorder-2016-02-23/>

an expansive faith instead of believing it was giving up one's faith. So, to all of you whose faith seems like it's crumbling...it's not. It's being refined."²⁶⁶

What are the looming questions you have about same gender relationships? Are they intersecting with questions about your faith in God, or how it might impact your relationship with friends and family, or with your church? If so, please know that you are not alone. You do not have to walk through the darkness and doubt by yourself, and you don't need to think that you are losing your faith in the process, but that your faith is being refined. You are simply shedding the old and putting on the new. Besides, in nearly every change of life we experience (job, relationships, finances, etc.), we begin by focusing on what we're going to lose in the process; but what might happen to our faith system if we turn our eyes to all of the good we have to gain instead? That's the direction we're heading during our final chapter.

Chapter 7: FOMO (on the Abundant Life)

"Wait! This place exists?!" Alex shouted exuberantly through the phone. "From the first day I walked in until now, I just keep coming back. And to this day I am still floored to find a church where it's not just everything that I love, it's more."

Alex, whose triumphant voice regularly brings down the house at Middle Collegiate Church in New York, NY, spoke to me about his experience as a talented, Black gay man growing

²⁶⁶ Albert, Nathan. Twitter Post. December 3, 2020, 7:56pm
<https://twitter.com/nathanalbert/status/1334662860136468482>

up in the church. “They wanted to use my voice to bring others to the throne of God, but denied me the right to speak up about who I really am. There was even a married pastor (very married and very much had children, he emphasized) who made a pass at me in Louisville, KY, and just a few weeks after I rebuffed his advances I was asked to step down from my role as worship leader. It was all very confusing.” His own mother talked him into two weeks of conversion therapy camp, another place to “pray the gay away, with lots of devotionals, and a lot of praying, but nothing worked,” he reflected.

After years of avoiding God and staying clear of the church, Alex joined a choir that, strangely enough, sang a lot of Gospel songs. “I was in a space with a lot of gay people singing about how much they loved God, and knew God loved them.” Seeing their faith in God caused him to start a new faith journey of his own, but this time through a new lens: acceptance. Not long after Alex joined the choir, they had a gig at Middle Collegiate. It would be his first time dawning the doors of a church in more than a decade. With fear and trepidation, he agreed to join the choir and sing in God’s house once again.

“On my first day hanging out at Middle,” Alex’s voice was moving at such a rapid pace I struggled to pound out notes on my keyboard as quickly as needed, “this delightful white woman hands me her baby to hold. Now, as a Black gay man who has experienced so much shame in the church, for a woman to do this without reservation, I felt free. Free to be who I am wherever I am.”

Middle Collegiate Church

Middle Collegiate is the oldest congregation of the Collegiate Churches of New York. Organized in 1628, the Collegiate Churches of New York is the oldest continuously-active church

and the oldest corporation in the North America, established by royal charter from King William III of England in 1696.²⁶⁷ In other words, it has been around for a while! Today, under the leadership of Senior Minister Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, it is a beacon of hope for tens of thousands of people both in New York City and around the world, with new members committing to the church's vision of revolutionary love from as far away as France, Italy, and Spain. However, Middle wasn't always known as a welcoming place for our LGBTQ+ neighbors. In fact, in the 1980's, the church was so lifeless there were talks of shutting the doors for good. With less than three dozen people showing up on Sundays, perhaps the spirit of God was no longer with this historic congregation, some wondered. Of course, incoming pastor Gordon Dragt had other plans. Though only twenty-seven parishioners were at church his first Sunday in 1985, when he retired twenty years later the congregation boasted more than 500 members and 350 in weekly worship. Of the many reasons for the church's revival was a wide-open welcome to their LGBTQ+ neighbors. In his own words, Gordon attributes this to the power of a simple "Yes."²⁶⁸

I want to share one of Middle's most transformative stories straight from Gordon's book:

Some of Middle's most important programs came into being by simply saying "yes." Jerriese, a gay African-American Middle Church member, elder, and professional performer, asked if he could start a gospel choir. He talked about his vision and...the answer was 'yes' and the East Village Gospel Choir was created. It played a critical role in the early transformation, growth and diversity of the congregation. Middle's commitment was to Jerriese and the choir. When he was ill from complications with HIV/AIDS, he frequently mentioned a fear of not being

²⁶⁷ <https://www.middlechurch.org/our-story>

²⁶⁸ Gordon R. Dragt, *One Foot Planted in the Center, the Other Dangling Off the Edge*. (Middletown, DE: Self-Published, 2015), 38

remembered. I assured him that would never happen on my watch. When he died in 1995, I ended his memorial by renaming the choir the Jerriese Johnson East Village Gospel Choir.²⁶⁹

The name of the choir in which Alex regularly ‘brings down the house’, you might wonder? Yep, the Jerriese Johnson Gospel Choir. Had Gordon not said “yes” to Jerriese, Alex may have never known a more beautiful picture of God actually exists. But there’s one more story from Gordon’s early days at Middle I must share with you.

In 1986, early in the discovery of HIV/AIDS and in a time when there were a lot of myths and fears about the disease and how it spread, Ed walked in to the church house unannounced and asked if he could speak with me. He shared how he wanted to do something important for people with HIV/AIDS in the East Village. He went from church to church seeking a partner but was turned down after every request. Middle, he said, was his last stop. His proposal was to serve a meal...and provide basic services. His vision was to think of the meal as a form of Holy Communion, spiritual as well as physical, based upon the biblical stories of Jesus sharing food, love, and compassion with others. To him, the very act of sharing food with people in need was a holy act. The answer was ‘yes’ and the pioneering Celebrate Life Meal for Persons Living with HIV/AIDS was created.²⁷⁰

Established more than thirty years ago in the middle of the HIV/AIDS crisis, this ministry is still alive and well at Middle Church. Because of Gordon’s courageous “yes” when everyone else was saying “no,” Middle Church has been a life-saving church to thousands of our LGBTQ+ neighbors. If you were to visit Middle on a Sunday morning you would see a reflection of the

²⁶⁹ Gordon R. Dragt, *One Foot Planted in the Center, the Other Dangling Off the Edge*. (Middletown, DE: Self-Published, 2015), 39.

²⁷⁰ Gordon R. Dragt, *One Foot Planted in the Center, the Other Dangling Off the Edge*. (Middletown, DE: Self-Published, 2015), 40.

community in which it resides, with the rows of congregants mirroring what you would find while waiting on a subway platform and the leadership intentionally reflecting the very people it has been serving and standing in solidarity with over the past thirty years, which is why Alex said so proudly to me, “it’s not just everything that I love, it’s more.”

Middle Collegiate was once an anomaly; a refuge for the weary and a guiding light for those so traumatized by their church experience they swore to never darken the doors of a church again, but Middle Church is no longer alone in its welcoming of our LGBTQ+ friends into full participation. Their revolutionary love is spreading across the globe as church leaders are opening their doors to the same folks Jesus welcomed into his life.

City Church in San Francisco, CA, is part of the Reformed Church in America, and was born out of the home of their Senior Pastor, Fred Harrell, in the city’s Richmond District in 1997. The first fifteen years of this church’s life saw exponential growth, with deep roots being planted throughout the city and ever-increasing membership at a faith community that boasted a dozen staff, a Newbigin House of Studies where leaders could be developed through theological education, and the construction of a non-profit, City Hope, that would provide compassionate care to the city’s most vulnerable.²⁷¹ However, as the Senior Pastor and larger church leadership started to evolve in their theology regarding same gender relationships, their future quickly became uncertain. Leaders renounced their membership, staff resigned, and attendance sharply fell.

²⁷¹ <https://citychurchsf.org/>

In the spring of 2015 I had just moved to the Bay Area to launch a new non-profit, which required a heavy dose of fundraising. Due to my background as a pastor, I quickly contacted a few churches in the area. Although my primary interest was in connecting with church leaders to speak about the new work I would be inviting them to join, our family was also looking for a church to call home. Nearly every pastor I met with said the same thing, “Stay away from City Church. They’ve completely abandoned the gospel” (note to self: I think we have found our new church home). Rev. Harrell’s church was quickly becoming a pariah among conservative Christian groups, and the windfall of their decision to welcome our LGBTQ+ neighbors into full participation in the life of their church flooded neighboring evangelical churches with their former members. In the first three months of my time in San Francisco, I heard about City Church’s ‘about face’ of the gospel no less than fifty times. But when I met with their Senior Pastor, along with a chance encounter with one of the church’s elders, I was delighted by their firm commitment to open wide the doors of their church to *all people*, noting not only the tragic damage done in God’s name but, just as important, the abundant, spirit-filled lives people like you and me were missing out on by attempting to deny the gifts our LGBTQ+ friends bring not only to the world, but to the heart of the church. Reflecting on the church’s decision to be fully inclusive, Harrell wrote, “The stories of our LGBTQ congregants break my heart and open it more to God’s expansive love and grace. Non-affirming pastor friends, I love you and you are missing out on the work of the Spirit that could renew you and draw you closer to the God you so desperately want to serve.” Knowing that many pastors are wrestling with this very issue, he added a profound note:

*Your church will lose hundreds. Your church will be larger in more important ways.*²⁷²

While it is true that churches transitioning to the full inclusion of our LGBTQ+ friends run the risk of a dip in both attendance and financial gifts, we would be foolish to not also track the impact this will have on our LGBTQ+ friends. After the completion of an 11-month study in New York City that ensured ethnic, gender, cultural, political, and economic diversity, researchers concluded that, “those who opt for affirming settings or who have no religious affiliation at all have significantly lower levels of internalized homophobia” than those who attend non-affirming settings.²⁷³ This is good news, though I ask you to not miss what the research is saying. LGBTQ+ folks who *never enter church settings* have significantly lower levels of internalized homophobia than those that do attend church (that is, unless the church is affirming). For more than forty years I have heard the church is supposed to be about saving lives, so why is it our LGBTQ+ friends are instead met with a toxic theology that kills them? How is it that not going to church is safer for our LGBTQ+ friends than entering a space where people gather to worship Jesus, who welcomed everyone?

But there is more good news! In a study of more than two thousand students at colleges sprinkled throughout the Midwest, research revealed that when our LGBTQ+ friends joined a church that affirmed their sexuality it not only served as a “protective factor” against discrimination, but as churches also started providing social support and resources that were helpful in “overcoming interpersonal stressors” internalized homophobia and minority stress

²⁷² Fred Harrell, “Your Church Will Lose Hundreds,” November 12, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/fred.harrell>

²⁷³ David M. Barnes and Ilan H. Meyer, “Religious Affiliation, Internalized Homophobia, and Mental Health in Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82, (2012): 512 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2012.01185.x>

decreased while personal confidence began to rise again (or for the first time).²⁷⁴ If we compare this against a University of Texas study from 2010 that indicated 69% of gay male participants surveyed “had turned away from organized religion, choosing instead to accept their sexual identity, we begin to see the stark contrast between the psychological well-being that happens when we affirm and embrace versus the death-dealing stress that ensues when one is condemned for simply being who they really are.²⁷⁵ Michael Arceneaux, author of I Can’t Date Jesus, asks, “How can you be obedient to dogma you’ve found oppressive? How can you cling to tradition and exalt a vision of God that minimizes you and expects you to suppress what is innate to you?”²⁷⁶ Alternatively, think back on the exuberance of Alex’s voice when he discovered a church that didn’t tolerate or accept him – no – they celebrated him! Let’s ponder for a moment how many folks like Alex exist in our world today. How many have been turned away from the church? How many have run away from toxic theology? How many parents and pastors have driven our LGBTQ+ neighbors away from the sanctuary due to a misunderstanding of sexuality and same gender relationships?

In chapter three I told you about Grace Alive Fellowship, an inclusive church in the heart of Manhattan’s Chinatown, along with the story of Peter, a young gay man who felt the pain of rejection from his own family so immensely he attempted to set himself on fire. Thankfully, Peter is still alive today and, due to revolutionary love of Grace Alive Fellowship, he has found a community that accepts and celebrates him just as he is. While Grace Alive may currently be an

²⁷⁴ Maurice N. Gattis, Michael R. Woodford, and Yonnsun Han, “Discrimination and depressive symptoms among sexual minority youth: Is gay-affirming religious affiliation a protective factor?” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 43, (2014): 1590. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0342-y>

²⁷⁵ Alissa Sherry, Andrew Adelman, Margaret R. Wilde, and Daniel Quick. “Competing selves: Negotiating the intersection of spiritual and sexual identities.” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 41, (2010): 115. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017471>

²⁷⁶ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 3

anomaly in the heart of Chinatown, and current members conclude it “was the first spiritual community they found that didn't require choosing between faith and queerness,” there is more good news on the horizon, both for the LGBTQ+ community and for the future of the church.²⁷⁷ Today there are a growing number of formerly conservative churches that have transitioned to being fully affirming,²⁷⁸ new churches are starting that hold an identical position from its inception,²⁷⁹ and both of these are following in the footsteps of more historic churches, like Middle Collegiate, that decided long ago no one should be excluded from full participation in the church based on their sexuality.²⁸⁰ In fact, if you are looking for a church that will not just accept you, but celebrate you, as well, there are several websites that can point you in the right direction. I have listed more in the Resources page at the back of this study guide, but two reliable sources are Church Clarity and gaychurch.org.²⁸¹ According to the extensive data reviewed above, these churches are doing life-saving work based on a theology that teaches we are not only made in God's image, but each of us is fearfully and wonderfully crafted by God in order to do good works that bring about God's reign on earth, as it is in heaven.²⁸²

I want to end this chapter with two stories. First, a story about the author listed above, Michael Arceneaux. Second, I want to share something compelling that Alex (Middle Church) told me near the end of our conversation.

²⁷⁷ Ngu, “Inside the New LGBTQ-affirming church.”

²⁷⁸ John Leland, “Faith and Family, in Transition,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/16/nyregion/forefront-pastors-father-became-a-woman.html>

²⁷⁹ “About,” Launch Pad, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.launchpadpartners.org/about/>

²⁸⁰ Shaila Dewan, “United Church of Christ Backs Same-sex Marriage,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/05/us/united-church-of-christ-backs-samesex-marriage.html>

²⁸¹ <https://www.churchclarity.org>

²⁸² Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:14, Ephesians 2:10, Matthew 6:10

Arceneaux was born in Houston, Texas, educated at Howard University, and now lives in Harlem (New York). He grew up Catholic, with a mother who regularly preached “love the sinner, hate the sin,” and directed her sermons at her own son when he came out as gay.²⁸³ She always spoke of heaven, was frightened that Michael would wind up in hell, and yet couldn’t understand the “hell on earth” her son was experiencing due to being ostracized by his friends, classmates and now, his very own mother.²⁸⁴

He left the church and never looked back except, of course, to write a memoir about leaving the church that includes the subtitle: *Love, Sex, Family, Race and Other Reasons I’ve Put My Faith in Beyoncé*.²⁸⁵ Surprisingly, the introduction to his book actually includes a recent visit to First Corinthian Baptist Church in Harlem, his first experience inside a faith community in “five Beyoncé albums.”²⁸⁶ It was Easter Sunday, and his friend dré had invited him, knowing about his baggage with the church and adding there was no pressure to attend. What Michael saw, experienced, and later learned from Lead Pastor Mike Walrond himself, was a completely different picture of God than the one he was taught about growing up. Just eight pages into the book and I was on the edge of my seat as I read the following:

“...What I saw at First Corinthian in Harlem was the Christianity I wish I had as a child, as a teenager, and as a young man trying to find a place in a world that appeared unwilling to offer one. This was the Jesus I had needed to see back then. These were the Christians I had needed much earlier in my life.”²⁸⁷

²⁸³ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 214

²⁸⁴ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 215

²⁸⁵ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018)

²⁸⁶ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 1

²⁸⁷ Michael Arceneaux, *I Can’t Date Jesus* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018), 8

I would love to leave us right here, dangling on the edge of our seats as we ponder the kind of life Michael could have experienced had he been fully embraced just as he is, and how much better the church would be with Michael and others just like him fully participating in it. But I must tell you about something Alex shared with me before our conversation ended, something about God showing up in the most unlikely of places.

We spoke for nearly two hours, my fingers burning from typing so quickly and my heart on fire with both joy and lament as Alex invited me on his arduous, amazing journey of life. Before hanging up, I asked him for an update on the relationship he has with his mother, who like Michael's mother regularly repeated the "love the sinner, hate the sin" mantra to her own boy. As a teenager, he was also sent away to conversion therapy, which included a lot of "praying the gay away" that God apparently refused to properly address.

"You know, Brian, that's a funny story," he quipped, laughing at the irony he was about to share with me. "My dad is not religious. He never has been. Anyway, years ago I was getting married and sent out invitations to everyone I knew who would truly celebrate the occasion, including my father, but not my own mother. I didn't want her there if she wasn't going to honor who I am." Distraught by the news, Alex's mother questioned his father. "He told her, 'Why would he invite you? You're being a bad mama not loving your boy the way he is. Is this what it means to be a good Christian? Does God approve of your behavior? Is this how you be a good mom to your son?'" Reflecting on the story's irony, Alex said, "That hit her. It took someone who wasn't religious to show her God's love and wake her up."

God moves in mysterious ways, friends. Perhaps God is showing up in surprising ways to you in this study guide. If so, I am overjoyed. If you still have questions and doubts, I simply

invite you to continue the journey. Look for God in the spaces and places you'd least expect, and when God shows up in a way you've never experienced before, don't be afraid. We will all be better at this thing called life when we learn to embrace what we have been taught to be afraid of and when we begin to lean into what we had once run away from. But before we go I want to walk us through three final questions, with the last two being ones I hope you will carry with you long after you put this book down.

Interlude: *What Will Happen to Me?*

In a message delivered more than fifty years ago, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. posed a question to his audience about what we ought to do when we see a neighbor in need. Before doing so he took his listeners down to the dangerous Jericho road we read about in Luke 10, where a group of bandits beat and bloodied a man before stripping him of all his possessions, and to the place in scripture where Jesus responds to a question he received: "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10) The story Jesus tells his listeners, which has come to be known as The Good Samaritan, is a familiar one today -- too familiar, in fact, for many of us to heed its principle of radical hospitality. We have reduced the controversial aspects of this story either because we don't understand its full weight, or because draining Christ's message of its extravagant, outrageous love allows us to defend our inaction toward those he invites us to call 'neighbor.'

This is why I love the question Dr. King asks near the end of his sermon. After walking through all of the potentially justifiable reasons the Priest and the Levite pass by the beleaguered man, Jesus introduces us to a Samaritan, who bandages the wounds of this weary

traveler, takes him to a hotel, and pays for his recovery -- practicing what Dr. King calls “dangerous altruism.”²⁸⁸

But why didn't the Priest or Levite take the same risk, Dr. King wonders. “I can imagine that the first question which the Priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’” Jericho road is a dangerous one, indeed, and the robbers may still be present, hiding as they wait for their next prey. Isn't that the question we all ask when we face danger, when we face the wall of questions, the doubt that lurks in our heart and mind about the future if we affirm our LGBTQ+ neighbors who have also been bullied, beaten and bloodied on life's dangerous streets? I know many pastors who are quietly affirming but afraid for their jobs (and their livelihoods) if they publicly endorse same gender relationships. I have a number of gay friends who tell me their parents have yet to tell any of their own friends, fearing being disavowed and left alone to deal with a reality too few of us are willing to celebrate.

My friend Paula lost her job the very moment she came out as transgender. Hundreds of people left Fred Harrell's church in the weeks and months after their leadership determined they would be an affirming church. In a previous chapter I introduced you to Jordan, a transgender woman who was abandoned from her home, lost on the streets of New York, and desperate for a safe place to sleep. I told you about my friend and V.P. of Outreach who helped her locate Covenant House, and I added that this was a foreshadowing of why I would eventually be fired from the Christian evangelical organization I had started working with just two days earlier.

²⁸⁸ King, Martin Luther, Jr. “Draft of Chapter III ‘On Being a Good Neighbor.’” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Accessed January 30, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-iii-being-good-neighbor>

In March of 2020 our entire world was knocked sideways as COVID-19 made its way around the globe, shuttering businesses, infecting millions of people, and putting to death hundreds of thousands of God's beloved children. Our world will never be the same. In the middle of this, my job was still to help build collaboration among organizations committed to addressing homelessness. Within days of the lockdown in New York City, the sidewalks of our city filled with people waiting online for food, for shelter, and for personal protection equipment (PPE). I worked the phones, the internet, and dug into every contact I had to find masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, temporary housing, and mobile shower units that would help our homeless neighbors during this deadly pandemic. New York City was on edge. Broadway shows were shut down. NBA games would no longer be played. The economy was about to tank. But there was one arena of work where the money was flowing in: the nonprofit world. Specifically, the nonprofit world of addressing homelessness. The CEO of one of the organizations I worked with shared cheerfully, and with great thanksgiving, about the "flood of donations" coming in that would not only help their organization survive, but actually thrive in the middle of the pandemic. This was true across the board. Another partner organization received so much funding they started giving away money to other organizations in need, and we received so much food, PPE, and other resources we were running them to smaller organizations around the city that had yet to build up a network like we had done. That being said, in the middle of some of the best work I (and we) had been doing since the inception of our coalition, I was fired.

Just a few weeks after being told my job was secure, that the funding partners had all renewed their commitment, and we received a "flood" of our own donations, I was fired from

this Christian evangelical nonprofit. Why? Because our board Chair learned I was a part of a church that is gay affirming. He convinced the rest of our board I was a “threat to fundraising dollars,” and I was told over a Zoom call (with my son sitting next to me on the couch in our living room) that “today is your last day.” Under threat of legal action being taken against me, I’m not allowed to name the organization that fired me for simply having a different viewpoint on God’s love for our LGBTQ+ neighbors. What I learned that day was toxic theology had come knocking on my door. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised, particularly with everything I’ve written about in the above chapters, but it is still shocking that an organization committed to serving our homeless friends in the name of Jesus can so deeply anti-gay in its understanding of God that it won’t even allow an employee to hold a different understanding of the kind of people God loves. As my favorite 90s artist reflects, “Isn’t it ironic, don’t ya think?”²⁸⁹

That being said, the Priest and the Levite may have been on to something. “If I stop to help, what will happen to me?” isn’t just a theoretical question posed inside a parable Jesus told a couple thousand years ago; it’s a real and present question each of us ask ourselves each day. It’s the question my board chair asked, and convinced those I had worked with for years in addressing homelessness to ask, as well. Truthfully, this question is at the top of our mind any time we are invited to act courageously.

Of course, Dr. King says, it’s the wrong question.

“Then the good Samaritan came by, and by the very nature of his concern reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’ The good Samaritan was

²⁸⁹ Alanis Morissette, “Ironic,” May 18, 2017, 4:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jne9t8sHpUc>

*willing to engage in a dangerous altruism. In his very life he raised the question that always emerges from the good man. We so often ask, 'what will happen to my job, my prestige or my status if I take a stand on this issue? If I take a stand for justice and truth, will my home be bombed, will my life be threatened, or will I be jailed? What will happen to me?' The good man always reverses the question...The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and moments of convenience, but where he stands in moments of challenge and moment of controversy. The true neighbor is the man who will risk his position, his prestige and even his life for the welfare of others. His altruism will not be limited to safe places, but it will move through dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways to lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life."*²⁹⁰

The first question: *What will happen to me?* is a question bathed in fear. It is not to be dismissed, either. Taking stock in what might happen to us will help us make a more calculated, faithful leap into the second question: *What will happen to them?* What will happen if I don't act? If I don't stand in solidarity? If I don't speak out? How many tragic stories do we need to read in order to wake up to the reality that God's love extends and runs through each of us, including our LGBTQ+ neighbors?

Amber Cantorna is the author of Unashamed: A Coming Out Guide for LGBTQ Christians. In chapter four of her guide she asks a series of questions to help LGBTQ+ folks prepare for the potential visceral responses from their family, and I want to list a small sample of those questions below so we can better understand our question: *What will happen to them?*

- Do I have a stable job with reliable income?
- Do I have my own health insurance, or is a spouse or parent carrying that for me?

²⁹⁰ King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Draft of Chapter III 'On Being a Good Neighbor.'

- Do I have or can I afford my own cell phone, electricity, and running water?
- Do I have a vehicle with the title in my name? Do I have or can I afford my own car insurance?
- Is there any chance I will be kicked out of my home once I come out? If so, do I have a backup plan of a friend or relative who will let me live with them, or do I have the financial means to afford my own living space?
- Does coming out pose any threat of physical harm from the people I currently live with?

Cantorna asks these questions due to her own lived experience. She grew up with a father who was on staff at Focus on the Family, a “global Christian ministry dedicated to helping families thrive,” and reaches millions of people through podcasts, newsletters, books and articles each month, according to its website.²⁹¹ Cantorna tells a different story.

“Focus on the Family claims to ‘save and strengthen families,’ but really, they only focus on one type of family—a family with one mom and one dad who are married and have born children together. But there are so many other types of families—families that, by choice or by circumstance, do not fit the cultural norm or cookie-cutter shape of that family. There are families with one male and one female parent, but there are also families with two male or two female parents. There are those with adopted children or foster children, those with biological children, those with single moms or single dads, those with blended families, those with no kids—each one brings a unique richness and depth to the beautiful, diverse family of God. If we are going to focus on strengthening families, we need to focus on strengthening all families and

²⁹¹ <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/>

not favor some while pushing others to the margins. The fact is that we all want to love and grow our families to the best of our ability and we all deserve the same rights and support.”²⁹²

Reflecting on the day she came out to her parents, Cantorna remembered, “Deep down, I knew that it could potentially cost me everything. I wasn’t prepared for the fact that it actually would. Telling my parents I was gay was to them, the equivalent of dying. In fact, when I came out to them, they literally got up and walked out of my house without any conversation around it whatsoever. We didn’t speak again for three weeks, and when we did, the conversation was brutal. The first thing they said to me was, ‘We feel like you’ve died.’ They went on to compare me to murderers and pedophiles, told me I was selfish for doing this to the family and putting my dad’s job in jeopardy, and took away my keys to their house.”²⁹³

In 2016, author and founder of Focus on the Family, James Dobson, wrote about the bathroom controversy that centered itself on transgender individuals. In an article titled, “*Protect Your Kids from Tyrant Obama*,” Dobson wrote, “If you are a dad, I pray you will protect your little girls from men who walk in unannounced, unzip their pants and urinate in front of them. If this had happened 100 years ago, someone might have been shot. Where is today’s manhood? God help us!”²⁹⁴ It comes as no surprise, then, that 2016 was also the deadliest year on record for transgender people.²⁹⁵

²⁹² Sara Toce, “Amber Cantorna: Journey from Focus on the Family to ‘Refocusing My Family,’” *The Seattle Lesbian*, May 2, 2020, <http://www.theseattlelesbian.com/2020/05/amber-cantorna-journey-from-focus-on-the-family-to-refocusing-my-family/>

²⁹³ Sara Toce, “Amber Cantorna: Journey from Focus on the Family to ‘Refocusing My Family,’”

²⁹⁴ James Dobson, “Protect Your Kids From Tyrant Obama,” *WND*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.wnd.com/2016/05/protect-your-kids-from-tyrant-obama/>

²⁹⁵ Alex Schmitter, “2016 was the deadliest year on record for transgender people,” *GLAAD*, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.glaad.org/blog/2016-was-deadliest-year-record-transgender-people>

What will happen to them? is the second question in Dr. King’s sermon, but it is the first of two questions I hope you will carry with you long after you’re finished with this book. There is one final question I hope we will take with us.

What does love require of me? You can find this question online, in a book, or in a series of sermons by beloved author and pastor of Northpoint Church in Alpharetta, Georgia, Andy Stanley.²⁹⁶ For any of us wanting to have a better relationship with our parents, our colleagues at work, our children, friends, and neighbors down the street, this question will drive us to the kind of healthy, others-centered living Jesus modeled for us through his life. At times, love requires fulfilling mundane responsibilities like doing the dishes, vacuuming the house, and remembering to pick up a gallon of milk on the way home from work. But as Christ demonstrated for us throughout the course of his life, and eventual death on the cross, loving our neighbors often requires courage, sacrifice, and the giving up of our own privilege. The writer of Hebrews states it plainly, that it was “for the joy set before him he endured the cross...” and then added what I believe to be a most profound remark about how Jesus viewed what the Roman government intended to be a humiliating death: “...*disregarding its shame* and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”²⁹⁷ *Disregarding the shame* that comes with being beaten, tortured, and bloodied because of his association with outcasts and his work of subverting the empire, Jesus instead paved the way for us to live. Reverend Emmy Kegler writes, “God was willing to be subject to the whims of the world. Knowing just how violently power protects itself, how happily the oppressed will turn complicit if it means murder

²⁹⁶ <https://northpoint.org/messages/brand-new/what-love-requires>

²⁹⁷ Hebrews 12:2, emphasis mine

is dealt with elsewhere that day – God showed up anyway and stood on the side of everyone the world called worthless.”²⁹⁸ Like God, we are to stand in solidarity with those being marginalized and oppressed, erasing the boundary markers between us and ending the oppressive policies both inside and outside the church walls that lead to death. As Father Greg Boyle writes, we are to “inch the world closer to what God had in mind for it” by “widening the circle of compassion and dismantling the barriers for entry.”²⁹⁹

1. *What will happen to me?*

Take a moment to write down all of the risks that will come to you, to your family, to your church, your friendships, or wider community if and when you decide to fully embrace our LGBTQ+ friends.

2. *What will happen to them?*

Reflecting on everything you’ve read in this study guide, heard from your friends, family, and seen in the news, write down what you think will happen to our LGBTQ+ friends if we continue to oppose and deny their humanity, or if we remain silent about the ways our theology has been a death sentence for many.

3. *What does love require of me?*

Think back to the introduction of this guide. We want to love others in the same way Jesus loves us, yes? We want to love in the same way we would want to be loved. In light of this, what does love require of me?

May we learn to love our neighbors in the same way Christ loves us. Amen? Amen.

Conclusion: If You’re Going Through Hell

I’m writing the final words of this study guide during Holy Week, 2021, which is exactly ten years to the week that God finally and fully reshaped my vision for humanity. It is

²⁹⁸ Emmy Kegler, *One Coin Found* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 164

²⁹⁹ Greg Boyle, *Barking at the Choir*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 11

April 1st, Holy Thursday, and I am sitting at a park bench under the beautiful sunshine on a crisp, spring afternoon reflecting on the death (and resurrection) of Jesus, the death (and resurrection) of my own spirit, and the *far too many deaths* in the LGBTQ+ community that have come as a result of how I and others have squelched the spirit of God in our gay friends for far too long. Thankfully, a man named John radically reset my entire world a decade ago.

“Brian, before you leave I want you to meet John. He’s the guy I was telling you about earlier this week. He came to church Sunday and loved it, but he has a few questions for you. Would you mind chatting with him real quick?”

Truthfully, I was exhausted. It was Thursday of Holy Week, one of the busiest weeks of the calendar year for a pastor. Our church was holding a special Good Friday service the following evening, I had just finished a long and painful dinner with friends where I listened to the agonizing details of how gay conversion therapy had wrecked this person’s psychology, and my wife was home, pregnant and sick. I was desperate for a break.

“Sure, sounds good Adam,” I replied, hiding my fatigue.

Motioning down the bar to a man idly stirring his martini, Adam made sure John saw me, the pastor from Sunday morning. For the next hour or so, John (a close talker) and I stood about six inches apart as he first told me how much he enjoyed the service on Sunday, which he had heard raving reviews about from my friend and bartender Adam and a few other regulars. He said the way we spoke about Jesus’ love from the stage was just as palpable as the love he felt from those he sat next to during the service, who treated him with what he called “genuine kindness,” though they had just met him for the first time.

“Your service was so rich, and I love what you are doing in the community to serve others. I would love to be a part of your church, but I have a few questions, if you don’t mind.” For the next few minutes he repeated a story I had heard dozens of times over the past few years. It was a story, sans the most intimate and crushing details, of rejection and loss, of heartache and soul-numbing judgment from an institution whose very foundations were supposedly built on the words of Jesus who said not to judge. I had just emerged from a conversation with two other men whose stories were so similar it was no longer surprising to hear, but the shock had yet to wear off.

Perhaps because it was Maundy Thursday, a day when Christians around the globe remember Jesus and his disciples sharing a final meal together in the Upper Room, I was taking in John’s story and questions through a slightly different framework. During that meal, Jesus gave his disciples a new command, to “love one another in the same way I have loved you,” as he washed their feet before being led to the cross.³⁰⁰

Perhaps it was because the institution of which John spoke was the same institution I had been a part of my entire life, with both my father and grandfather being pastors, and nearly everyone in my immediate family also serving in the church, that I listened more intently that evening as he named the nearby churches in our so-called liberal city that had told him he was welcome to attend their services, but would need to change or abstain from sex in order to participate.

Or perhaps it was because, just after the final moments of our conversation that night when John put his arms around my neck, pulled me in a little closer than we already were, and

³⁰⁰ John 13:34-35

said, “So Brian, here’s my question for you: Will you allow me, a gay man who has unsuccessfully ‘prayed the gay away’ for thirty years, to be an active member of your church? If I join, could I one day become a leader?” The clock struck midnight, and it was now Good Friday. Jesus had been arrested, and he was on his way to the cross.

I walked home, sobbing down each city block as I considered the contrast of John’s story with the one we read about in the Gospel of John. One man ushered out of the church when the truth of his sexuality was made known; another man, ushered to Golgotha when a few religious leaders and the governing authorities understood the truth of his coming kingdom would mean an end to theirs. I walked into our apartment and told my wife I wanted to quit. *I no longer wanted to be a part of an institution that would worship a man who was killed for welcoming everyone while simultaneously denying the full humanity of another. Isn’t there enough room for everyone in God’s beloved community? Why are we considered the sole arbiters of who gets to participate in the church when the Scriptures are filled with stories of God inviting all of those everyone else has rejected to be a part of the renewal of all things? Is it possible that we’ve been wrong all along? If we were to bury the idea that being gay is a sin, could Jesus lead us to something far more beautiful?* I tossed and turned all night. I started and deleted multiple emails to our leadership team. I couldn’t see straight, think straight, or sleep a single minute. It seems that the culmination of nearly ten years of heart-wrenching conversations had finally awakened me to both the grim reality of how our church had treated our LGBTQ+ neighbors, and to the Holy Spirit’s loud whispers wooing me to the beauty of God within our gay friends that I had simply missed or dismissed for so many years. Finally, Easter Sunday arrived. It would be a Resurrection Day like no other as I shared my interaction with

John with our church (per his approval). The same soliloquy I ranted to my wife in the wee hours of Good Friday morning were now on repeat to hundreds of people who came to hear some good news on Easter morning. *Do any of us want to be a part of an institution that worships a man who was killed for welcoming everyone while simultaneously denying the full humanity of another? Isn't there enough room for everyone in God's beloved community? Can we learn to see our LGBTQ+ neighbors in the same way God sees them, as beloved?*

Several years later, I hope you'll ponder a few questions as we close. *What is the best way for us to love others in the same way Christ loves us? How do stories, data, and Scripture help us see a more beautiful picture of God than the one we often experience in our everyday lives? Am I of any true value to this world? Do I believe, deep down, that God loves me? And that God loves everyone?* I hope you'll wrestle with the questions, allowing them to percolate a bit more each day as we learn together how to love our neighbors in the same way Christ loves us.

A few weeks after my introduction to John, we sat down for a long dinner together at the same bar we had met at during Holy Week. He provided a more thorough history of his upbringing, rejection from family, multiple attempts at both 'praying the gay away' and suicide, along with his dogged determination to find someone who would help him see a more beautiful picture of God. As we came near the end of our meal I started a question I wasn't sure how I would end, asking John, "So if your entire life you have been rejected by family, by friends, and by pastors, who all say that being gay is wrong and that you are an abomination to God, why haven't you walked away from God? How is it that you are still in pursuit of God's approval?"

He sat his glass down, leaned back from the table, and rested his shoulders on the plush chair that held his weary body. Looking first toward the sparkling chandelier in the middle of the restaurant and then turning his teary eyes toward me he simply uttered, “I don’t know, Brian. I guess the truth is, had I given up on God I wouldn’t have anyone else.”

Please listen, friends. If you are currently going through hell, internally or externally, due to wrestling with where you’re going to land on such an important matter, please take heart. It will get better. Of course, there is a giant *Sea of Galilee sized caveat* to that declaration. It *will* get better *when* you take a leap of faith and trust God for the outcomes. Just like Jesus invited Peter to trust him, he is inviting us to step out of the boat, fix our eyes on him, and go on a journey that will bring life to all of God’s beloved children. The final question that remains is simply, “Will you be brave?” Will you be brave enough, not just to sit with someone and listen to their story, but to stand in solidarity with them, to amplify their voice, and to offer a seat at the same table so we can all break bread together? As the prophet Isaiah writes, “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”³⁰¹ If you’re lost, if you’re alone, if you’re going through hell, keep going. God is with you. We are cheering you on. All things are possible, including God finally and fully setting you free to be who you are so we can work with God to set all people free. Amen? As my professor, mentor and pastor Rev. Dr. Jacqui J. Lewis says, “God can and will, with our partnership.”³⁰²

³⁰¹ Isaiah 43:19

³⁰² Lewis, Jacqueline J. *The Power of Stories*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 100.

Recommended Resources

Books on Exegeting Scripture

Achtemeier, Mark. *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. Minneapolis, MN: John Knox Press, 2014
Gushee, David P. *Changing our Mind*. Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2015
Hartke, Austin. *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018
Martin, Colby. *UnClobber*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016
Tonstad, Linn Marie. *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018
Vines, Matthew. *God and the Gay Christian*. New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2014

Autobiographies Worth Reading

Arceneaux, Michael. *I Can't Date Jesus*. New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2018
Chambers, Alan. *My Exodus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2015
Conley, Garrard. *Boy Erased*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016
Kegler, Emmy. *One Coin Found*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019
Venn-Brown, Anthony. *A Life of Unlearning*. Sydney, AU: New Holland Publishers, 2004
Williams, Jonathan S. and Paula Williams. *She's My Dad*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018
Williams, Paula. *As A Woman*. New York, NY: Atria Books, 2021

Faith-Based Organizations

[Ambassadors and Bridge Builders International](http://abbi.org.au) (abbi.org.au), led by Anthony Venn-Brown reaches out to churches, Christian leaders and organizations to create respectful dialogues that will lead to greater understanding, acceptance and equality.
[Amber Cantorna](http://ambercantorna.com) (ambercantorna.com) has written a coming-out guide for LGBTQ+ Christians, and she tells her own coming-out story in her autobiography *Refocusing My Family*.
[Church Clarity](http://churchclarity.org) (churchclarity.org) is an organization creating a new standard for how churches communicate their actively enforced policies on LGBTQ+ inclusion.
[Freed Hearts](http://freedhearts.org) (freedhearts.org) is a faith-based organization for parents of LGBTQI children that frees hearts to love, heal, and affirm.
[Q Christian Fellowship](http://qchristian.org) (qchristian.org) is a Christian ministry offering both online and offline support to LGBTQ+ Christians and allies by creating safe spaces to make friends, ask questions, and receive and offer help.

Audio/Video Resources

[Queerology](#) is a podcast that brings together theologians, psychologists, poets, thinkers, and change makers for conversations around belief and being so we can live better as queer people of faith and allies.
[The Reformation Project](#) YouTube Channel aims to advance LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church.
[Gender Revolution](#), A Documentary with Katie Couric (National Geographic)
[Disclosure](#), A Documentary by Laverne Cox (Netflix)

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (suicidepreventionlifeline.org) 1.800.273.8255
The Trevor Project (thetrevorproject.org) 1.866.7386

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