

Making Things Right.

An Invitation to
Restoring LGBTQ+ Faith

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Since “coming out” over 10 years ago as a gay man committed to my Christian faith, I’ve been compelled to keep one foot in two seemingly opposed worlds: the Christian church and the LGBTQ+ community. My rolodex remains full of Christian and LGBTQ+ friends alike (with some fascinating hybrids) representing various angles on faith and sexuality—from conservative to liberal, from curious to adamant.

I’ve come to feel at home in that tension, which I have observed is not really that tense at all for most of us. While the extremes make the noise and the news, the rest of us are somewhere in the quieter middle—wary of debates and division and wondering about more productive ways to engage. That is why, and for whom, I write.

Granted, engaging this “quieter middle” within two communities who historically don’t talk to each other much is no easy undertaking. Yet I am compelled to try, for I truly believe we will figure things out better together.

Now before I get ahead of my idealistic self, I will acknowledge that my proposed collaboration may bring you pause. For my more traditional Christian readers, your beliefs are foundational and important to you. Considering perspectives and experiences outside your own can feel risky. I know and respect your hesitation. My sincere hope is that my invitation to healing and reconciliation with those who are hurting or feeling excluded will naturally resonate with your deeply held beliefs.

Empathy is the first step toward making things right.

To my LGBTQ+ readers, you may have been wounded by Christians and you’re definitely not interested in reliving that. My hope for you is to experience new depths of healing and God’s love. And to know the importance of your story in the broader movement of reconciliation, as our stories provide new understanding to those outside the LGBTQ+ community wanting to help make things right.

I invite all of us to bring our hesitations, our hopes, and our stories to the table. For at this one table we can find new empathy and common ground on what I trust we all believe in: healing wounds, righting wrongs, and reconciling what remains divided.

My Hero

Jesus has always been a hero and model to me. He brought some of the most unlikely groups of people together for the shared mission of bringing God's love and reconciliation to the world.

What impresses me most about the accounts of Jesus' life is his clear attention to the "outcasts" of the day, along with his stern corrections of those who made anyone feel excluded. I won't shock anyone by saying that Christians today are too often known for who they judge and exclude. No matter your background, I'll bet you have felt excluded from a group at some point in your life, and LGBTQ+ individuals are especially familiar with that sting.

The word "Christian" can be defined as "follower of the life and teachings of Jesus," or more simply, "being like Jesus." We can tend to make it more complicated than that. I want to help us get back to the simple ways of Jesus—for the sake of the outcast.

Within the LGBTQ+ community, there has been much wounding from church and religious experiences. Some of you know this all too well, and your stories will set the stage in the following pages. For the rest of you, I invite you deep into this awareness, as empathy is the first step toward making things right.

Finally, I want to give you *permission*. I acknowledge that's a really big word. Still, I offer you full permission to arrive at new and sacred conclusions, ones that are God-inspired and only found in the depth of things. We all can tend to live safely on the surface, without digging into the nuances of emotionally-charged topics. We follow our trusted leaders, whether pastors, politicians, or promoters of a cause. I may not be as convincing. Instead, I hope my insights will stir a small, true voice inside of you, waiting to be heard.

So come with me on a journey, if you will. Our path will have three stops:

1. **Know:** I'll present statistics and stories of LGBTQ+ experiences. Allow these to inform your heart and mind.
2. **Respond:** I'll share three stories of being at a crossroads—one being my own. You can examine where you are at, and what matters most.
3. **Engage:** I'll provide ideas and resources to continue the conversation and move the needle, in your own way.

Still with me? *Great! Let's go.*

1. Know

Letting LGBTQ+ Stories Impact You

We can't be a part of a solution in an effective, sustainable manner without being deeply aware and convinced of the *problem*.

The problem I present to you is not the culture war between the LGBTQ+ and conservative religious communities, though this exists and is certainly challenging. And I won't attempt to tackle the differing moral beliefs or biblical interpretations around sexuality, though that clearly is an unresolved debate for many (and may always be).

While those conflicts tend to dominate the discussions, the problem I invite you to help me with is less publicized, more personal, equally as concerned with biblical principles, and quite within your power to help repair.

Restoration Unrealized

Andrew Marin is an acclaimed author and trail-blazer at the intersection of religion and sexuality. His 2009 highly-acclaimed book *Love is an Orientation* was ground-breaking, and his 2016 book *Us Versus Us* (released by a conservative, Christian publisher) compelled me even more. He presented the “untold story” of LGBTQ+ faith with findings from the largest-ever survey on the religious history, practices, and beliefs of the LGBTQ+ community. It was a multi-year project that included 1700+ respondents in all 50 states, following scientific standards to help produce quality, unbiased results.

And those results are fascinating:

- 86% of the LGBTQ+ community were raised in the church (vs. 75% of the general U.S. population)
- 54% left their faith community after age 18 (vs. 27% of the general population)
- Their top reason for leaving: **negative personal experiences**

And here's the whopper—of those who left their faith community:

- 76% are open to returning to their faith (vs. 9% general population)

Whoa. Check that delta. When asked what it would take to return to their faith, the vast

majority were not sure. I think it's safe to assume it would have to be the *opposite* of the reason they left. If it were me, it would take a number of positive interactions with patient folks who genuinely wanted to know and understand my negative experiences. So they could help make it right. So I would feel at home—and stay.

That's restoration.

Stories Matter

I'm lucky to have a front row seat to LGBTQ+ individuals restoring their faith. In mid-2019, I helped launch *Renovus*, a non-profit organization serving LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies. The name “Renovus” is from Latin roots meaning “*to renew, to renovate, to restore and make things right.*” Our mission is to equip LGBTQ+ individuals to reclaim their faith, and we do that through small groups, events, 1:1 support, and a network of resources. Despite a pandemic and zero marketing, we are 450 members strong with a steady flow of inquiries and a constant waiting list for our weekly groups. I could not be more proud of our leaders, volunteers, and most of all, our brave members renewing their faith.

Many of these individuals come from brutal experiences with family and the church, which speaks volumes to their resiliency and commitment to faith. Part of my research has been gathering their *stories*. Personally, I want to hear more stories, connect more dots, and let my heart get more broken and convinced of my role in helping make things right. That is what story does, or what it's supposed to do. It cuts through the noise and what we thought mattered, awakens our compassion, and moves us closer to the heart of God.

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While writing this paper, I conducted a survey within our Renovus community, focusing on their experiences with faith and family, both growing up and as an adult. If “negative personal experiences” are indeed the top reason most LGBTQ+ individuals left the church, as Marin's study proposes, then perhaps gathering those stories could raise our awareness of what needs repair.

We're still in the collection stage with the survey and interviews, yet it appears we're on to something. Here are some quotes that especially impacted me.

There were *hurts*.

“I was terrified of being found out, as homosexuality was grouped with prostitutes and drug addicts. As a secretly gay teenager, I was constantly [hearing] negative messages about gay men and women, ‘the lifestyle’ or ‘the gay agenda.’ I was internalizing all of these messages.”

“At 17, I almost killed myself and then told my parents I was attracted to guys. I thought that was God’s plan for me to die and maybe someone could be saved from my testimony... and that it would be better for me to die than to sin more.”

“I left the church at the same time that I came out because it had been drilled into my mind: you are one or the other—you are gay, or you are loved by God.”

“Things were fine in the churches I went to—until I came out. Most recently a church I had gone to for years sent me a special email to watch their next sermon ‘Human Sexuality.’ Very hurtful sermon directed at me. I have now found a church that will let me use my music talent and play in the band.”

LGBTQ+ experiences with family and church generally remain unaccounted for, taking a back seat to more ideological discussions and debates.

“No one at church got to know me well enough to realize that I am gay. Apparently I shocked everyone when I posted a picture kissing someone I was dating on the cheek. I was told I was not a Christian, I could not be a member, and I had to step down from my positions immediately. This was incredibly hurtful to me.”

“I lived the gold-star Christian life... a celebrated member and leader of the church. After I came out, I was no longer allowed to even lead a small group. I was the same me all along. But now, I was a liability—an issue to be managed, a problem for church leadership to discuss and solve.”

And there was *healing*.

“When I came out, my family called me that same night... We acknowledged some of the messages from my upbringing that affected my identity development... and how our beliefs and faith have shaped since then. They made clear they fully embrace me as I am and know God loves me.”

“I came out to my grandmother and she was so accepting and gracious and I love her so much. I can talk to her about anything.”

“My parents are allies and have been very kind to the people I have dated... I know that many of my LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters have the opposite feeling about their parents, and I recognize my privilege. My mom has even taken in LGBT youth who have been kicked out of their homes.”

“I was so afraid [my mom] wouldn't accept me. When I told her the truth, she was upset I didn't come out sooner to her and told me she didn't care about theology. She just cared about me.”

In dissonant display, these voices tell the story. We plan to release initial findings from our study in early 2022. My hope is the collective statistics and stories will lead us to a deeper knowing and newfound conviction to help make things right.

To my LGBTQ+ friends:

Your story matters.

To learn about our study and how you can contribute, visit renovus.org/stories.

2. Respond

Deciding What Matters More

Whereas stories like I presented are familiar to some of you, LGBTQ+ experiences with family and church generally remain unaccounted for, taking a back seat to more ideological discussions and debates. In reading through the initial survey results, I found myself taken back by the levels of unresolved hurt and disappointment—and I am *in* this community. Imagine the broader lack of awareness.

These stories deserve our attention. For some, your response is clear and sure. Yet for many of us it's not that easy. Compassion and beliefs collide and we don't know how to reconcile

the two, or even how to prioritize them. It feels too big. So if it does not affect us personally, we may as well leave it be.

The beliefs and faith we'd known to that point were too small for our life-altering circumstances.

That's a very human response, by the way. We often don't tackle touchy subjects or unresolved conflicts until we're forced to, until it becomes personal, and we hit a crossroads and must make a decision. That's certainly how it was for me.

I spent most of my life believing the best way to honor God with my sexuality was to not act on it. I chose that road not out of fear but fidelity. My relationship with Jesus was everything to me, and mine was not a great sacrifice in the bigger picture. Not to mention, a loyal circle of friends made my life pretty darn great. I felt blessed and content.

In my 30's, dynamics changed. Some friends moved, some married and started families. I felt left behind. I had some loving relationships with amazing women, yet I could never seem to muster up a vision for marriage. After experiencing romantic love with a man, it brought me to a crossroads. I put on my "big boy pants" with God and began to have new conversations. He knew I was torn. He knew I was committed to what was right and willing to take narrow roads. I had some serious credibility there, as I pointed out to Him (which of course, He knew). More than anything, I did not want to jeopardize our life-long connection.

I wrestled at that crossroads for a good two years. I had to sift through a lifetime of messages and experiences to discern what was of God, and what was not. I searched the Bible with new urgency. At first I went after the handful of verses that address homosexuality, as I assumed that's what I needed to reconcile—but to no avail. Then God led me to the Book of John to see anew the life of Jesus and the heart of the Gospel. There God confirmed deep in my being that "we're good" and nothing could separate us.

That is when our wrestling ceased. He *released* me. That's the best way I can describe it. He invited me to let go of having to figure all of this out. To stop the incessant introspection. To trust Him, to trust *us*. He called me to move on, to go be me, and to serve others. It was beyond liberating.

I've never looked back. Sure, someday I wonder if I have all this right. Those are the times I lean on God the most and hear his reminders to trust.

Because of the Bible

For my friends Greg & Lynn McDonald, their crossroads came when they found themselves losing their relationship with their son. When Greg Jr. first came out, they doubled down on their conservative values. Lynn became a “Bible-bashing mama” as she called it, taking any opportunity to deliver unsolicited scriptures and advice. Eventually their son stopped coming around.

After several months of silence, they began to understand the damage done. When I asked Lynn what changed her mind, she stated matter-of-factly, “The Bible,” and how the “greatest commandment” of loving God and your neighbor applied to her son. She said, “The pain of no relationship with our son helped us understand our job was to love Greg Jr. and his friends, and not try to change them. We learned it’s not about being right; it is about being right with God and our son, and becoming imitators of Jesus.”

It took a while for Greg Jr. to trust their change of heart but eventually the reconciliation came. Over time, the McDonald’s affectionately became referred to as “McMom and McDad” to many LGBTQ+ friends who had been rejected by their families. Six years ago, Greg and Lynn devoted their lives to building bridges between LGBTQ+ individuals, their families, and the church even when they seem at odds with each other. They founded Embracing the Journey Inc. and have counseled hundreds of parents and pastors, and through their book, curriculums, and ministry team, have helped thousands of families with LGBTQ+ loved ones reconcile. As Greg so often says, “It’s not in spite of the Bible, but because of the Bible, we do what we do.”

Love Makes Room

My long-time friend Staci Frenes had her crossroads as well. In her new book, *Love Makes Room*, she describes a tense and pivotal conversation with her husband Abe soon after their daughter Abby came out. They were struggling with how they could possibly reconcile their love and concern for Abby with their long-standing conservative beliefs. Let’s pick up the scene.

“I just can’t throw out everything I’ve believed,” Abe exclaimed. “That would be like admitting I’ve been living a lie, following a God I don’t obey.”

Riled up, Staci replied, “How could we possibly obey a God who, it turns out, pulled a prank on us by giving us a daughter who’s gay? Something which, by the way, God hates and can’t forgive. Because that’s what you’re saying!”

“I don’t understand it either, Stace! I just know we can’t pick and choose Bible verses to fit what we want to believe. Do you think this is easy for me?!”

“Okay”, Staci snapped, “but I’m choosing to believe that when it’s all over, we’re going to be surprised at all the people not going to hell! Including our daughter!”

Staci stomped up the stairs in tears. She waited for Abe to come to bed. He never did. Abe’s sleepless night of pacing brought him to a resolute conclusion. That next morning, he told Staci:

“I don’t have any control over the next life, and maybe that’s not for me to try and figure out. But as long as she’s my daughter, she’ll never be loved by anyone outside this house more than she’s loved by me.”

For Staci, her bottom-line emerged weeks before when Abby “came out” to her in the car on the way to school. Realizing in that moment the weight her daughter must have carried up to that point, it was unthinkable to let her bear that alone. Putting her questions and fears aside, she pulled her girl in tight, whispering the words she’d been saying to her since she was little, “*I love you. We’ll get through this together.*”

“I learned to live in the tension of uncertainty and, to my surprise, discovered a richer, truer relationship with my daughter and with God because of it.”

— STACI FRENES

Heart of the Matter

I hope you noticed that none of these three stories were marked with confidence or certainty. All each of us knew was that the beliefs and faith we’d known up until that point were too small for our life-altering circumstances. Each of us wrestled and came to new realizations. We charted new paths, compelled by love and unproven conviction. As Staci

puts it, “I learned to live in the tension of uncertainty and, to my surprise, discovered a richer, truer relationship with my daughter and God because of it.”

For you, your proverbial “crossroads” may be in the rear-view mirror, and I am preaching to the choir here. For others, all of this may seem a bit daunting, or even insulting. I hope for many that my invitation finds you at precisely the right time and place. Wherever you’re at, I urge you to consider what I am convinced is the *heart* of the matter:

Many of us have spent our energy determining and defending positions on the moral and biblical standards of sexuality. *Because we thought that is what mattered most.*

Yet, what if all of that has been at the expense of something more important?

Consider how Jesus lived, and his consistent defense of the outcast. Consider the exclusion and wounds of LGBTQ+ individuals, such as the examples I have presented. Then, consider how you may have been a part of this—whether individually or institutionally, whether actively or as a bystander, whether knowingly or unaware.

Consider how
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of the outcast.

Many of us have played some part in these hurts. I know I have. **All of us can be a part of the healing, which I propose is what matters most.** I invite you to join me and consider your unique role. Of course, I can’t discover that role for you but I’ll provide some ideas and resources to help you along. I can say that for me, looking back at my turning point years ago, I found a new lease on life and purpose.

3. Engage

Discovering Your Way

It has been over a decade since my personal crossroads where I wrestled, came to new realizations and headed in a new direction. What has been most liberating, both initially and to this day, is the *exchange* that has occurred. Up to that point I think most would have said I was a good friend, Christian, and citizen with a genuine concern for others. Still I was unknowingly myopic, as most of my attention was on *me*, trying to fix myself and do what I thought was right. All of this required an enormous amount of energy.

It was frightening and freeing when I started laying that down. I released the burden of certainty, as I began to see that “getting it all right” was not the ultimate goal. I repented of the circular self-focus that arose from such thinking. In exchange I got a whole bunch of bandwidth to be me, to trust God, and serve others. Being on the other side, I can’t imagine living another way. My faith and relationships have deepened, and I’m taking long-awaited steps toward my true vocation—like writing this paper!

Many of us have played some part in LGBTQ+ hurts. All of us can be a part of the healing.

But I remember well the real concerns and fears that held me. I’ve learned to respect wherever people are at. At the end of the day, we all must come to our own conclusions and we should honor each other’s findings. I have presented my learnings and convictions to the best of my ability and I hope respectfully so. You can decide what’s next for you.

As it helps, here are some possibilities for your next step...

- Simply re-read and reflect on this paper and talk through it with a friend, God, or both. You could share *Making Things Right* with select individuals in your world to advance the conversation.
- Reach out to LGBTQ+ individuals in your life and learn more about their stories.
- Visit briannietzel.com. There are some short videos from yours truly, with one that’s all about “Next Steps” to help you find your way. You can explore the books referred to in this paper and various resources featured on my site.
- Check out renovus.org. There you can get plugged into LGBTQ+ Christian community and share your story with us in our [LGBTQ+ Faith & Family Survey](#). Or you could refer a friend in need to Renovus.
- Consider theologians who have carefully re-examined the Bible around matters of sexuality. Check out [Changing Our Minds](#) or [God and The Gay Christian](#), as well as the organization [The Reformation Project](#).
- Explore ways in which your church can serve the LGBTQ+ community. You could examine any policies or positions that limit or exclude LGBTQ+ individuals and consider what is just. You could invite LGBTQ+ individuals to that table and together find empathy, common ground, and compromise.

In your own fashion, I urge you to *engage*. Consider the issues I’ve presented. Engage with

God and trusted counsel as you examine things and consider your response. And ultimately, engage the outcast. Just as Jesus did, as that was simply his way.

Let us replace what was lost with *beauty*.

If you need help finding *your* way, connect with me at briannietzel.com. We have a host of trusted individuals and resources at your disposal.

As Isaiah 61 commissions, let us replace what has been lost with *beauty*. Let us restore the broken places, and renew what has been devastated for generations.

Join me in that mission. Join me in brave, new dialogue and relationships, bridging divides between Christian and LGBTQ+ communities. Let us champion the outcast as Jesus did, and decide that healing and reconciliation matter most. Let us acknowledge wrongs, and work together to make those right. Such a wide and wonderful opportunity, and responsibility, await us.

So, who's with me?



Brian Nietzel is a new author and long-time facilitator of bridging divides between Christians and the LGBTQ+ community. He is co-founder of *Renovus*, an organization that helps LGBTQ+ individuals rediscover Jesus. He resides in Atlanta with his partner Dan and their puppy Kila.

To learn more, visit briannietzel.com

Credits:

- “Us vs. Us”, Andrew Marin, ©2016 NavPress
- “Embracing the Journey”, Greg & Lynn McDonald, ©2019 Howard Books
- “Love Makes Room”, Staci Frenes, ©2021 Broadleaf Books



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