

Making Things Right

Examining the Christian Response and Responsibility to LGBTQ+ People
By Brian Nietzel, © 2024 • makingthingsright.org

Since “coming out” fifteen years ago as a gay man committed to my faith in Jesus, I’ve stayed close to the church to help advance productive, healing conversations around the LGBTQ+ community. Yet I am the *exception*.

If you ask LGBTQ+ people why most of them have zero involvement with Jesus and the Church, the brave ones would share heart-wrenching stories of hurt and rejection by Christians—and needing to get as far away from that as possible. That should break our hearts, and that is what we can help make right.



ELEVATING THE CONVERSATION

While extreme voices make the noise and the news about the LGBTQ+ community, the majority of us are somewhere in the *quieter middle*—weary of debates and division, wondering about more productive ways to discuss matters of faith and sexuality. Easier said than done, as these matters bring up genuine hesitations based on our experiences and long-held beliefs.

I invite you to bring all of that to the table, for at one table we can find new empathy and common ground on what I trust we all believe in: healing hurts, righting wrongs, and restoring faith in God and each other.

KNOWING THE LANDSCAPE

In his 2016 book *Us Versus Us*, Andrew Marin presented findings from the largest-ever survey on religion and the LGBTQ+ community. It was a multi-year project that included 1700+ respondents in all 50 states, following scientific research standards. The study found that:

- 86% of the LGBTQ+ community were raised in church
- 54% left their faith community after age 18 (vs. 27% of the general U.S. population)
- Their top reason for leaving: **negative personal experiences**
- 76% of those who left are open to returning to their faith (vs. 9% general U.S. population)

Those stats tell an untold story about the LGBTQ+ community—namely, that they are indeed “us” and that many would be a part of the Christian faith and church if we made room for them. We have an opportunity and responsibility to help heal their hurts and restore safe passage to God.

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EMPATHY IS EVERYTHING

The first step is empathy, and there is no better way to build that than through story. I’m lucky to have a front row seat to many LGBTQ+ faith stories. In mid-2019, I helped launch *Renovus*, a non-profit that helps LGBTQ+ individuals rediscover Jesus in community. We are 500+

strong, and many come out of brutal experiences with family and the church. That speaks volumes to their resilience and commitment to faith. Still, the amount of unresolved hurts is disheartening—and needless.

When I coach pastors, parents and anyone willing to help make things right with the LGBTQ+ community, my advice invariably is the same: hear their stories first-hand. Let them inform and impact you. It is the quickest way to get past our biases, fears, and any hurdles to the heart of the matter, which I propose is this:

Many of us have spent our energy determining and defending positions on the moral and biblical standards of sexuality. Yet what if all of that has been at the expense of something more important?

Consider Jesus' command to love our neighbor, as well as his constant defense of those excluded by the religious of his day. Fast-forward to today and the unresolved hurts of LGBTQ+ individuals. Then consider how you have contributed—whether actively or as a bystander, whether knowingly or unaware. 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.

MAKING THINGS RIGHT

Compassion and beliefs can seem to collide, and you may not yet know how to reconcile the two. I know and respect that tension, as do many others in your shoes. For the sake of the LGBTQ+ community, it is a tension we must press through.

I don't know your story, your convictions, or the LGBTQ+ people in your life. I do know this: there is a next step just for you. You could start with coffee invitations of LGBTQ+ people in your life, and see who takes you up on it (a brave few will). Seek out stories, build empathy, and see what happens.

If you're a leader or influencer in your church (we all can be), you have an opportunity to give voice and value to these stories, which historically have taken a back seat to rhetoric and debates. *You can change that.*

Let us rise above the rhetoric. Let us love and defend the outcast, and decide that healing and reconciliation matter most. We can acknowledge wrongs and work together to make those right. Such a wide and wonderful responsibility awaits us. Who's with me?

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