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Foreword by **Brian McLaren**

Love Is an Orientation

**Elevating the Conversation
with the Gay Community**


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Introduction

When My Friends Came Out

It's Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. As I have done each Tuesday evening for the past year, I am sitting in the first booth next to the front door at my favorite diner, talking with a man whom I love as a brother. The diner is in a storefront located in the heart of a rainbow-flagged, sex-shop-filled, bar- and club-laced, gay-inhabited ten-block neighborhood on Chicago's North Side known as Boystown.

Sitting across from me is a forty-six-year-old Orthodox Jewish man with AIDS on a unique life-ending quest: to figure out who *Yeshua* is and discover what God's original plan was for his life before it got derailed with this horrible disease.

My friend became infected with HIV almost thirty years ago, and all his friends who acquired HIV at the same time are now dead. He has been alone for a long time, one last survivor from what many originally thought of as God's final judgment on the gay community.

In the hospital a few years earlier he was lying in his own deathbed—sunken eyes and cheeks, jaundiced skin and a weight of one hundred pounds—waiting to meet the same fate as everyone he once knew. His family flew in from the East Coast and Israel to say goodbye to their shamed grandson, son, brother, uncle and cousin. The hours passed, the goodbyes were spoken, and the wait for death began.

In what his doctors called a miracle, my friend was healed. Life came back to his eyes, color came back to his skin, and his weight rapidly increased. Could it have been the cocktailed pills that healed him? Was it the IV that pumped potent medication into his blood twenty-four hours a day that pushed him back to life? Or was it rather a wake-up call that God had something more in store for him?

So here we are, every Tuesday night, meeting to intentionally seek our Father's face as we journey to discover why this man's fate is life and not an early death.

This is the neighborhood I live in and the world I have been called to. These are the stories that have become my everyday life.

BEGINNINGS

I am a straight, white, conservative, Bible-believing, evangelical male. I was raised in a Christian home in a conservative suburb of Chicago and grew up in a large evangelical church. And I wanted absolutely nothing to do with the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community.

Looking back on my upbringing, I don't remember hearing anything explicitly defaming the GLBT community from either my church or my parents. Homosexuality just grossed me out, and I sure wasn't about to have an in-depth conversation with my pastor or my parents about the subject. I just knew that my beliefs were right. I saw gay people on TV. I saw pictures of cross-dressers in newspapers and magazines. For the first nineteen years of my life I was the biggest Bible-banging homophobic person I knew. I used derogatory language about gay people without ever thinking twice about what I believed or said. I didn't care about the gay community nor did I ever want to care about them. "Don't ask, don't tell," "Don't see, don't care," "Out of sight, out of mind": those philosophies all worked great for me—until, that is, the summer after my freshman year in college.

That June one of my best friends, who went to the same univer-

sity I did, told me that she needed to talk. It sounded serious but I didn't think anything about it; best friends have deep conversations all the time. She invited me over to her apartment for dinner. As I sat on her beat-up futon in the living room I kept hearing her drop things in the kitchen. This was not at all like her, and I asked repeatedly what was bothering her. She finally came into the living room, sat right next to me, gave me one of her big hugs that I loved so much, snapped her head directly in line with mine and abruptly told me, "Don't tell anyone, but I'm a lesbian."

OUT

Is she serious?! I tried to pull myself together and look cool, like I had known all along, but I knew I was breathing heavy—I was totally flustered. The horror, pain and dumb-foundedness I felt shook me. She didn't look like a lesbian . . . I knew she had boyfriends . . . I'd even met them! What is going on? I looked her dead in the eyes and panicked. Is there a right response?

I took a shaky breath and promptly said, "OK then, what's to eat?"

The next morning I woke up feeling strange, almost like there had been a death in my family. But I thought, *If I can pretend long enough that she didn't come out to me, I can actually keep my best friend.*

The next month I received a call from another one of my best friends. She too had something to tell me. It was dusk when I got to her apartment where I was greeted by a barrage of hugs from some of our other friends. That night we all hung out and had a great time. When just about everyone else was asleep she pulled me into her room where her roommate was sleeping. She sat me down, grabbed my arms, looked at me with a warm gaze and, in a whisper faint enough that only I could hear, said, "I'm gay. I'm a lesbian. I've always been this way."

I kept quiet because I didn't want to cause a scene in front of everyone, but inside I kept thinking, *No, no, no. Not her too!* I felt queasy, and questions rapidly exploded in my mind: *How could she*

be a lesbian? What the heck was I missing? Did my other best friend know about her? Did she know about my other best friend? Were they together? Do I have a stamp on my forehead that says, "Gay? Need a best friend?"

I just couldn't take it; my stomach churned, my head hurt, and I felt like I was going to throw up. All I could do at that point was lie down and go to sleep.

As the sun rose I woke up, said my goodbyes and drove home in tears. I knew what the Bible says. My friends knew what the Bible says. They knew that I knew that they knew what the Bible says. How could I get past the gigantic pink elephant in the room and keep being friends with these lesbians?

The very next month I was sitting with another good friend in his car the night before he was to return to his university downstate. We had been friends since second grade; we grew up in the same elementary school, middle school and high school. We had gone to the same church, had the same friends and played the same sports. He said he needed to talk to me, and jokingly I said, "Let me guess. Now you're going to tell me you're gay, right?" As soon as I uttered those words he began to cry, nodding his head yes. What more was there to say? Tears started flowing down my face, and we sat in his car and cried together.

Three best friends, three consecutive months. I started to ask God why he would give me three friends in the one community that I had purposefully spoken against all of these years! I spent the next few weeks searching for anything that I could get my hands on that would offer reason to that unreasonable summer. Then it came. I felt the Spirit tell me, "If you want to find the truth, you have to seek it for yourself." I knew exactly what that meant. I called my three best friends and told them we needed to get together.

When we were finally able to talk I could not hold back my emotions and my feelings. In one fell swoop of nervous energy I blurted, "I believe that being gay is a sin. It's a choice. You can change. You're going to hell. You're going to start obsessively drinking and doing

drugs. You're going to be promiscuous. You're going to be butch and flamboyant and you're going to get HIV/AIDS or STDs at some point.

"Now give me something that explains what I feel! Help me understand!

"Oh yeah, and all three of you are gay."

We talked until the early hours of the morning. Each shared about their lives—what life was like trying to deal with these thoughts and feelings on their own, what it was like to have me as a best friend, how they weren't sure whether they were right or wrong, weird or normal, sinful or not sinful, whether this was nature or nurture, their fault or God's fault. Each of them had their own answers, but we all realized that a journey had just begun.

IMMERSION

People tell me the decision I made at that point was the strangest decision they have ever heard. In order to completely answer the Holy Spirit's call, I decided to fully immerse myself in the GLBT community. My ultimate goal was to become, as I put it back then, "the most involved, gayest straight dude on the face of the earth." I sought out only GLBT friends, went exclusively to GLBT events and functions, and spent my time hanging out at GLBT bars and clubs to talk, learn and listen.

I began this immersion during my sophomore year in college. I would go to Boystown with my best friends upwards of four nights a week. I would go to a GLBT bar or club, order a Pepsi, find a corner to sit in and wait for someone to talk to. Every time I would walk into one of the establishments, heads would turn and the whispers would begin. I'll never forget the very first time I went to a gay club. No more than five minutes after entering, I was approached by someone who asked me if I was gay. When I said no, they smiled, turned around to a waiting group of friends, pointed at me and yelled, "I told you so! Pay up!"

I have since discovered that the GLBT community has an extremely accurate "gaydar." They can pick out a straight guy from ten

miles away! The unique side effect to their gaydar was that I became a walking icebreaker by doing nothing other than stepping into a world I knew nothing about. A flow of people would approach me asking why I was there—what I was doing and why I would even care to visit. Nightly, I ended up in life-altering conversations for hours upon hours.

After a while I started to notice two very specific trends. One, people would inevitably end up in tears telling me their life story. Two, the tears were usually brought on by a story about a negative experience with Christians or a church. The weird thing was, I never told any of them that I was a Christian.

I started to realize that there was something happening within the GLBT community regarding God, faith and religion. I didn't know what to do with this new information, so I just stored it away and waited for the Lord to move next.

THE BIBLE STUDY

I attended college on a baseball scholarship, and the semester previous to my friends coming out, at the urging of some of my teammates, I had started a Bible study for athletes. One of my lesbian friends eventually asked if she could come. Of course I said yes, but inside I was puzzled as to why a lesbian would want to come to a Bible study. I couldn't understand why people who are gay would be interested in studying a book that condemns their life. But she showed up and really liked it, and ended up telling some of her gay and lesbian friends about it. Those friends started asking me eternally significant questions and then went on to tell their gay and lesbian friends, and the process continued to repeat itself. Soon I was receiving random phone calls from GLBT people all over the city of Chicago and its suburbs—all ages, races and demographic backgrounds. Within six weeks the Bible study went from seven straight baseball players to me and thirty-six GLBT people meeting in smaller groups throughout the week; all the straight people left because they were too weirded out by what was happening.

The totality of the group grew to over one hundred people who were either gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and me. One week two older men pulled me aside and told me that they had left their gay-affirming church and were treating our time together as their church. Humbled and yet confused, I walked in front of everyone and asked two questions: “Why do you come? Why do you tell others to come?”

Their profound answers, along with many new concepts and questions, will be thoroughly unpacked within the following chapters as we move forward and learn how to elevate the conversation in order to build peaceful and productive bridges with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Evangelical churches, families and individuals all across the country are being challenged by the GLBT community. The dichotomized relationship between evangelicals and the GLBT community has a traumatic history and continues to grow further apart. Each group talks past the other rather than to the other group. The result is that, by and large, evangelicals know gay people only in a narrowly focused, two-dimensional light, and the GLBT community is left to search for God without the body of Christ to assist them, encourage them and validate their human existence as children of God.

Some of what you are going to read is not going to be easy to hear or grasp; it will challenge everything you ever thought about the GLBT community. Believers need to hear, understand and fight through their own hesitations and learn about the GLBT community’s arguments, theories and stories as valid to their experiences in this world. Their lives are as real as ours, and our faith in Jesus Christ requires us to meticulously seek honest transparency not only within the GLBT community but in ourselves as well.

For much of the last decade I have journeyed to the threshold of everything I thought was true. My organization, The Marin Foundation, has been all over the country working to elevate the conversa-

tion between conservative Christians and the GLBT community. Learning how to build bridges with a GLBT family member, friend, coworker, congregant or local GLBT community can be the most difficult task ever brought to your doorstep. This book will challenge how you think about and relate to gays and lesbians. We will explore the principles and techniques that The Marin Foundation has found invaluable, keeping aware of our very real differences but also of the hurdles that unnecessarily complicate our conversations and relationships.

Along the way we'll consider the psychology of sexual identity, the social challenges of being gay in a straight culture, the history of evangelical-GLBT dialogue and the current state of affairs. We'll also look at how the question of homosexuality has shaped different people's reading of Scripture and revisit the question of what, ultimately, the good news of the gospel is. Finally, we'll explore a distinctive set of practical commitments to help these two divergent communities work together toward something supremely important to both: the love of God and the spiritual yearning in our souls.

My experience at The Marin Foundation has also been informed by our unique research project—the largest of its kind—looking into the religious convictions and experiences of the GLBT community throughout the United States. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people across the country have told us their stories about religion and described their understanding of God; evangelicals will be surprised to learn that when the ambient noise of genetics, psychology and politics is tuned down, the GLBT community is ultimately like every other: compelled by the gospel as they taste and see that the Lord is good.