

# UnClobber

*Rethinking Our Misuse  
of the Bible on Homosexuality*

Expanded Edition with Study Guide

COLBY MARTIN

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
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# CONTENTS



Foreword by Glennon Doyle	ix
Introduction: The Origin of <i>UnClobber</i>	xiii
Prologue: Summer of 2005	xix
1. When the Head and the Heart Can't Get Along	1
2. Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible	19
3. How Facebook Got Me Fired	31
4. Reframing the Story of Sodom <i>Genesis 19</i>	47
5. Unfit to Be a Pastor	61
6. Redefining the Boundaries <i>Leviticus 18:22 and 20:15</i>	79
7. In Search of the Unicorn	97
8. Reconciling a Fractured Community <i>Romans 1:26–27</i>	113
9. Imagine a Church Where . . .	137
10. Revisiting Forgotten Words <i>1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10</i>	149
Epilogue: As You Go in Your Journey	173
Afterword	177
Acknowledgments	191
Small Group Study Guide	195
Sermon Series Guide	207
Notes	213

# FOREWORD



Scripture tells that we are to work out our faith with fear and trembling. In practice, this is incredibly difficult.

And since life is already hard, we prefer our faith to be easy. We want to go to church on Sunday for a break—to sit back and (mostly) listen to our leaders. If our leaders teach something that feels off tune or insults our souls or other members of our human family—something that seems to fly in the face of the God of love—it’s tempting to let it go. Too afraid to rock the boat, too tired to wrestle, we don’t raise our hands. We sit quietly and tune out, or do one of those silent, internal eye rolls.

That silence is a really big deal.

That silence forms the future of the church.

Our children and our friends can’t see our internal discomfort. To them, our quiet translates as agreement. And we’ve missed our chance: to change, to do a *new thing*. God is always, always trying to do a new thing. And those twinges of discomfort are God’s invitations to cocreate. Our refusal to wrestle, to engage, to challenge is our refusal to cocreate with God.

The most repeated phrase in the Bible is “fear not.” And so, when we feel that something we are hearing doesn’t resonate with the God of love, we must raise our hands.

Even—especially—if our hands shake with fear and trembling. Apathy and passivity are the opposite of love. When we stay silent, we are making a big, bold decision. We are casting a loud vote for the status quo. It's a vote for fear over love. And the only thing necessary for the triumph of discrimination in the Christian faith is for doubtful Christians to stay quiet.

Colby Martin is one of my favorite hand-raisers. Colby's doubt that the will of God and the will of his human leaders were one and the same led him on a journey that took him into the desert and then toward the promised land. Colby saw that a whole lot of folks are trying harder to be good Christians than to be like Jesus—a tricky proposition because the world's definition of a good Christian is ever-changing. So Colby decided to quit trying to be a good Christian and start being like Jesus, and that has made all the difference because Jesus doesn't change. Jesus forever finds the outcast and brings her to the head of the table, invites her to lead. Jesus is the still, small voice forever leading us back to the truth—toward grace and love for all.

Even when Jesus called Colby away from his fold, away from safety and security (doesn't he always?), Colby went. With the encouragement and bravery of his warrior wife, Kate, he followed. And he took God and his incredible mind for Scripture with him. And—alone with Jesus and Kate—Colby deepened his understanding of Scripture and love. The deeper it got, the wider it got (doesn't it always?), until it included everybody.

Everybody's in, baby.

Colby doesn't play it safe. He dives right into the deep end—into the scary, wonderful, messy truth of a grace free for all.

*UnClobber* is the memoir of a brave, vulnerable, honest, beautiful couple's dance with the God of the outcast; it is also a sharp, fresh, wise take on Scripture. *UnClobber* will free its readers to love bigger and better and wiser.

As for Colby—I am so grateful that after a long road, this prophet has finally found a place to rest his fully human, absolutely divine head.

I have a feeling he has only just begun to love.

*Glennon Doyle*

*March 2016*

# INTRODUCTION



## THE ORIGIN OF *UNCLOBBER*

### ***UnClobber* . . . Did You Make That Up?**

Why yes, yes, I did. Which made it that much easier to trademark.

*UnClobber* is my attempt to say, in one word, that I do not believe that God stands opposed to those who are attracted to the same sex or that God withholds divine blessing from a same-sex relationship. *UnClobber* came out of my desire to reverse the damage of the so-called “Clobber Passages.”

At some point within the past few decades, the term “Clobber Passage” was coined because, well, I imagine being told that you are an abomination destined for the fires of hell and responsible for catastrophes like earthquakes and AIDS is probably a feeling similar to being clobbered over the head with a large object. There are approximately six verses (out of 31,000) in Scripture that appear to reference same-sex sex acts, and our gay brothers, sisters, and siblings have long felt the brunt of these six verses as the Christian church has historically used them

to deny the LGBTQ community a seat at the Table of God, as full recipients of grace, and as full participants in the body of Christ.

So I want to UnClobber those who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, or queer. I want them to hear a different voice. One that says, “You are loved just as you are, by God and by me.” But it’s not just me, because there are millions of Christians around the world who are desperate for their gay loved ones to know that we see them, we believe in them, and we have their backs. I want them to hear that the Bible does not condemn them, as they’ve been led to believe. I want them to hear that their spot at the Table is open, it has been reserved for them, and, in fact, it’s probably a chair or two closer to where Jesus is sitting because of all the unwarranted persecution they have endured at the hands of churches, pastors, and Christian organizations.

I want to them to hear a better story so that they can live a better story.

### **Speaking of Story . . .**

In addition to unpacking the Clobber Passages, I want to tell you part of my story.

It’s a story of how I found alignment between my head and my heart regarding the Bible and homosexuality. But beyond that, once those two realities lined up, it launched me to a more expansive journey of seeking that head-heart alignment in my ministry as a pastor and, indeed, my life as a whole. While my inner convictions were heading in one direction, my vocational situation remained entrenched in a more conservative evangelical environment.

This book, then, is about seeking a faith community where I could be a pastor who studies the Scriptures, worships and follows Jesus, recites the ancient creeds, builds authentic relationships between people from all walks of life, and opens the doors to welcome, affirm, and celebrate the LGBTQ community.

Part of my story involves some difficult truth-telling as I talk about the challenges I faced coming out as a straight ally. It was not a popular move. But my goal is not to shame or judge those who felt differently and who did harm to me in the process. Rather, I want to be honest about what I've gone through in my pursuit of an aligned life. To that end, if I felt that a particular story does not edify the person or place in question, I have changed their names for the sake of anonymity.

### **Where Did *UnClobber* Come From?**

In a handful of videos on YouTube, I engage the topic of homosexuality in the Bible. One in particular has more than four hundred comments on it, which are split fairly evenly between supportive encouragement and hell-fire damnation. Here is a quote from one person who commented recently: "Colby, [you say] you studied the Bible and could not find God's Holy Word to be against homosexual sin? Are you kidding me? The Bible is crystal clear on same sex unions. You must have missed these verses . . ." He/She/It (unsurprisingly, the commenter was anonymous) goes on to copy and paste the "Clobber Passages."

This is not the first time I've received a reaction like this, nor will it be the last (more on that in chapter 10). For many non-affirming Christians, the Bible appears so clear on its stance toward homosexuality that the only reasonable conclusion is that affirming Christians, like myself, "must have missed" verses. I've written this book, in part, to show that I, and others like me, have surely not missed any verses.

When I came out of the theological closet, I began dialoguing with friends on Facebook about my new beliefs. Inevitably, people asked about my take on the "Clobber Passages." It wasn't long before I realized that Facebook threads are not the best format for exploring controversial Bible verses, so I told everyone to wait while I composed a

series of blog posts to articulate my beliefs. The blog series (wherein I came up with the term, *UnClobber*) grew into a series of video lectures and eventually formed the foundation for this book.

## Who Is *UnClobber* For?

If you feel the church has been wrong to demonize and reject the LGBTQ community but you're still pretty confident the Bible condemns homosexuality, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you feel drawn to a more inclusive Christian faith but are held back by what you've been taught about the Bible, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you have close friends or family members who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer and you love them with your whole heart but your view of the Bible prevents you from fully celebrating them, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you're already an affirming Christian but are struggling to articulate what you believe about the "Clobber Passages," then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you are LGBT or Q and you grew up in a Christian home or are drawn toward faith in Christ but you have been told—and maybe believe—that God sees you as less-than or despises you or expects you to remain celibate or try and become straight, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you're a Christian leader who is curious about how a straight, white, formerly conservative evangelical pastor came to an affirming position and now leads a progressive Christian church, then *UnClobber* is for you.

Some of you might be reading this solely for the chapters on the "Clobber Passages." If that is you, read the even-numbered chapters (2, 4, 6, 8, and 10). Others might be more interested in the story of how I came to align my head and my heart on homosexuality and the Bible. If so, read the odd-numbered chapters (1, 3, 5, 7, and 9).

My hope is that some of you might find yourself in my story. Perhaps you can relate when I talk about the season of my life when I believed that homosexuality was a sin but also felt it was the church's job to love and accept the gay community, not condemn and reject them. Or the season of my life when my inner convictions made me feel out of place with those with whom I worked and was in community. Some of you will undoubtedly relate to the loss and rejection I endured as a result of my coming out as an ally for the LGBTQ community. Others may not find themselves in my story in particular, but through reading *UnClobber*, you discover that the Bible you have held dear for so long has been leveraged to condemn an entire segment of the population based on the misuse of half a dozen poorly translated and poorly understood Bible verses. More than all of that, though, I want you to receive hope that your life holds the potential for abundant life when you travel the often-frightening but always-liberating path toward becoming on the outside who you are on the inside.

So walk with me, would you? As I go from a poster boy of conservative evangelicalism, to a conflicted theologian, to an open and affirming Christian, to a fired pastor, to a lost and searching spiritual sojourner, and finally to a co-conspirator for a faith community where the unimaginable comes to life.

I'll begin with the prayer that I say before every sermon I preach,

Lord, if there is anything I'm about to say that is good, true, or helpful for those on their journey of faith, I pray that it sticks in our minds and clings to our hearts. But if there is anything I'm about to say that is untrue or would be unhelpful for any in their journey, may your grace allow us to forget it the moment we hear it. Amen.

# PROLOGUE



*Summer of 2005  
Portland, Oregon*

After months of preparation, my vocational identity hinged on the answer to one more question. I glanced at my wife, relieved that I had made it this far. But I knew what was still to come, as though they had saved the juiciest for last.

Kate and I left our new baby at home to make the seventy mile drive north to the district headquarters. This was where young prospects like me came to be interviewed by a panel of seasoned ministers. It was the final step to become a licensed minister in my denomination. Already the interview had lasted more than three hours, which was two hours longer than I was told it typically took.

The room was small, but its high ceilings gave it importance. The decor was noticeably dated, yet it felt warm and familiar. The contrasting floral patterns on virtually every surface reminded me of visiting my grandmother when I was young. As I turned back to the panel of four ministers, I wondered if any of them had perhaps been interviewed in this same room decades ago, back when the furnishings

would have been considered new and trendy. They had all been kind and gracious to Kate and me, doling out their questions about the denomination's views on Christology, soteriology, eschatology, and every other -ology imaginable.

For the past five years, I had been working toward, and dreaming of, this moment, when at last I could be called "Pastor." Not that I wanted anyone to actually call me "Pastor Colby." That wasn't it. I felt the formality of such a name ought to be reserved for those with more years under their belts. But oh, how I longed to receive affirmation from an institution that deemed me fit to be a pastor within their organization.

As I sat there, waiting for their final line of questioning, I was anxious that my recently shaken faith might have doomed this interview from the get-go. Had I sat on that rose-colored, rose-patterned loveseat six months prior, at the height of my evangelical training, I'm confident I would have sailed through in thirty minutes, reciting each doctrinal nuance with ease and conviction. It was possible that even to the panel, in that moment, I appeared as a poster boy for the millennial pastor. But a few of my answers to their questionnaire, filled out prior to the interview, raised some red flags. Maybe I wasn't what I appeared.

So they pressed in. And I gave honest responses that eased the uncertainty for their first two flags. Ruth, the eldest minister, with her disarming smile, flipped a few pages and looked my way. Here came the third.

"Colby," she said, "why don't you explain for us your response to question 37 on page 4."

I didn't need to turn there. I knew what she meant.

# CHAPTER 1



## WHEN THE HEAD AND THE HEART CAN'T GET ALONG

### Carol and Iced Tea

As all good stories do, mine begins in a lesbian's hot tub.

Carol was short, fit, and sported a high and tight haircut. No matter when I saw her, she was dressed in shorts, a polo shirt, and white sneakers. Carol lived across the street from me growing up, and I knew two facts about her: she was a lesbian, and she owned the block's only hot tub.

I was probably eight or nine years old when my mom told me and my two brothers that our neighbor was gay. My mom knew this because Carol had been her PE teacher back in high school, and though I couldn't have appreciated how unusual it was at the time, Carol lived out of the closet in our small town of Albany, Oregon, since as long as my mom could remember.

And I knew she had a hot tub because I could see it through the fence on my route when I delivered newspapers around the neighborhood. Carol subscribed to

the *Democrat Herald*, so I interacted with her from time to time as I tossed a paper on her porch or collected her monthly payment.

Even though I was raised in a conservative Baptist home, with a dad who descended from a long line of Baptists, I think it was because my mom was a first-generation Christian that I never got the sense that Carol was anything other than, well, a retired gym teacher who read the paper. You see, while I remember my mom informing the three of us about her former kickball instructor, I don't recall her layering it with negative associations. Sure, Mom taught us that homosexuality was a "sin in the eyes of the Lord," but I think she missed the Sunday school series on homosexuality at First Baptist Church, because she never spoke a word of judgment or condemnation against Carol beyond that. Plus, to the excitement of this particular pre-teen paper boy, she said yes when Carol asked if my brothers and I wanted to swim in her hot tub. I'd never been in a hot tub before, and I wasn't about to let the sinful lifestyle of one of my longtime customers keep me out of the water.

Three things stand out to me about my first time in a hot tub, which also coincided with my first time in the home of someone who wasn't straight. First, the iced tea wasn't very good. I'm pretty sure it was unsweetened Lipton. (No offense, Carol, but this is not the drink of choice for young boys.) Second, her hot tub didn't have any fancy lights, and the jets didn't work. So it amounted to an oversized bath for me and my brothers, a bit of a letdown for my first time. It took me years to buy into the allure of a Jacuzzi. Finally, thinking back on that afternoon, what stands out the most about Carol-the-lesbian and her backyard hot tub was how, well, *normal* she was. She might have been a sinner, but she sure was a nice sinner.

Seeds were planted in my heart that afternoon in the piping hot (if sadly motionless) waters of Carol's tub. I wouldn't come to appreciate that moment until years later, nor would I be aware of the seeds' presence in my heart.

But in the pages that follow I want to tell you the story of how I discovered that both following the beliefs of my head and trusting the convictions of my heart do not have to be mutually exclusive endeavors.

In fact, I believe that the spiritual journey might very well involve the process of aligning these two realities.

## Meeting Jesus on Huntington Beach

The summer of '99, before I started my final year of high school, the trajectory of my life changed forever.

I grew up going to church religiously. My mom dragged us every Sunday, both before and after my parents divorced when I was ten years old. Like many kids, I was indifferent on my best days and indignant on my worst. So I surprised even myself when, at seventeen years old, I said yes to Jeremy, who asked if I wanted to go with him to Southern California for a week-long Christian conference called SEMP. I'm sure I agreed to go only because I thought Jeremy, one of my youth pastors, was cool. And I felt special for being invited. Plus, for this Oregon born-and-raised kid, SoCal (Southern California for the uninitiated) was a place of magic and mystique.

SEMP—Students Equipped to Minister to Peers—was an annual conference aimed at training high schoolers in the ways of evangelism. The mornings were spent in classrooms, learning tools such as the Jesus Juke<sup>1</sup> and the Romans Road<sup>2</sup>. In the afternoons, they paired us up two-by-two and sent us out to places like Huntington Beach for random street witnessing.

That first day on the beach, harassing vacationers about the eternal destination of their souls left me feeling like a fraud. It revealed my allegiance to Christianity as being in name only. I felt exposed, like the unsuspecting kid who wore all white to the laser tag birthday party. When I returned to the room I was staying in, I collapsed on the bed and sobbed for a solid twenty minutes.

Sometimes life gives you the gift of standing outside yourself, if only for a moment, to grasp the entirety of the fork splitting your road; a moment when you realize that whichever path you take, whatever you decide in this precise moment, will have consequences for years and years to come. As a teenager, obsessed with being popular and neurotic about standing out, the options before me were this: either proceed as usual and continue to live life for the sole purpose of acquiring attention and affection for myself, or make a dramatic about face (what the biblical writers call “repenting”) and devote my energies to bringing attention and affection toward Jesus.

As I lay there in a pool of snot, my pillow soaked with tears, I was confronted with the reality that I had spent the afternoon trying to convince others to follow someone whom I, myself, had never bothered to walk behind. I was introducing strangers to someone I didn’t even know. And the separation between who I was on the inside and what I was doing on the outside was suffocating my soul.

I tracked down Jeremy later that night and asked him to pray with me, to help me take that first step down the path, the path where my life would first and foremost be about Jesus. In that moment, I knew the vision I wanted for my life. Like when you plan a long road trip and you may not know every single place you’ll stop, but you know the destination and can chart out the general course, I sensed a call on my life then as strong as I still do today: I wanted to be a pastor.

I wanted to give my life to telling people about Jesus. I wanted to study the Bible, teach it, and inspire people to trust God with their lives. I wanted to invite people to consider that the Way of Jesus is the best way for a life of peace, hope, justice, and love. I wanted to shepherd people through the ongoing transformation of love in their lives.

Being a pastor has been a harder journey than I could have imagined that night, when I prayed with Jeremy. I’m not sure I would have taken that path had I known some of

the heartbreak awaiting me in full-time ministry. But after being in the game for seventeen years now, I can honestly say I am still chasing after the same vision for my life. And while I may no longer tell random strangers that they are destined for eternal damnation if they don't repeat a magic prayer, my resolve to study the Scriptures, follow Jesus, and invite others to do the same has remained unmoved.

## Oversaved

When we got back from SEMP, I was a different person. Whether it was because of my encounter with Jesus for the first time or because of my encounter with Krispy Kreme for the first time, the jury is still out. But there's no question everything changed. I was (as we called it back then) "on fire for the Lord." I began organizing prayer groups, teaching Bible studies, and putting on massive evangelistic events to save all my friends. I was unashamedly passionate about Jesus.

Allow me to pause for a moment and apologize to anyone who knew me between 1999 and 2004. Those years, while my intentions were positive and my heart was in the right place, I was a classic case of being *oversaved*.<sup>3</sup> It was annoying. I know. Every conversation had to be about my faith. Every interaction led to a discussion in theology. No one was safe, not the person next to me on an airplane or the couple at the adjacent table in Starbucks. Most of my childhood friends began to tire of my relentless pursuit to proselytize them. I was a Jesus Freak through and through, and any ridicule I received I wore as a badge of honor, assuming it was the persecution Paul spoke of in the New Testament.

After high school, I abandoned my plans to study graphic design in New York and instead enrolled in a small Christian college in Salem, Oregon, where, to my delight, being a Jesus Freak was a virtue. Rather than being ignored and ostracized, I was sought after and elevated. Being oversaved had become an asset.

Now, I mention all this so that you get a sense for how entrenched I was in conservative evangelical Christianity. I could recite Scripture, defend the creeds, and wax eloquent on the advantages of premillennial dispensationalism with the best of them. And yet, when it came to theology around sexuality, I don't recall spending any time or energy on it. At that time I didn't have any gay friends or family members that I knew of. Carol, a distant memory and merely an acquaintance, remained my sole interaction with someone who was gay. If the topic of homosexuality did come up, whether at school or at church, the conversation served only to reinforce the party line: homosexuality is a sin. It was as much in question as it was to be a liar, a murderer, or an adulterer. And the Bible was seen as unambiguous in its views. Whether or not homosexuality is wrong in the eyes of God was a nonstarter. As a result, I never started.

Which is why it was so surprising to me, as I sat in that high-ceilinged room being interviewed by Ruth and the other three ministers, that I almost didn't get licensed to be a pastor because I had conflicted feelings about LGBTQ people and the church.

## **No Membership Allowed**

"You wrote here," Ruth went on, pointing to my written answers, "that while you agree with the denomination on the issue of homosexuality, you struggle with our church's policies. Can you elaborate on that for us?"

I thought back to the moment that led me to write down that answer. I was walking through our church lobby while reading the policies and procedures manual, squeezing in some study time during my lunch break. I was reading the sections that covered how the church elected their elders, how they allotted vacation time for staff, and what the process was for becoming a church member. And then I read a sentence that unlocked feelings I didn't even know I had.

Essentially it said, “Practicing homosexuals shall not be permitted to become members of the church.”

I froze, in the middle of the lobby, unsure of how to decipher my emotions. There was something so jarring about the phrase, “shall not be permitted to become members.” It felt like the first time I learned that Augusta National Golf Club, one of our country’s most prized golf clubs and host of the annual Masters Tournament, didn’t allow African Americans to be members until 1990 and didn’t allow women to be members until 2012.

Here was a Christian church, through which I was seeking to become a pastor, that would deny membership to someone because . . . because what, exactly? Because they were attracted to people of the same sex? Or because they had sex with people of the same gender? I wondered what all it took for a person to be considered a “practicing homosexual.” Then I saw there was more. It went on to explain that not only could practicing homosexuals not become members but also could not serve in a number of volunteer positions either.

“So let me get this straight,” I said to myself, oblivious to the fantastic pun, “the denomination will allow gay people to attend their churches, worship on Sundays, volunteer in a limited capacity—such as where people can’t see them or they don’t have any leadership—and accept their tithes and offerings without hesitation, but if a gay person seeks membership or wants to use leadership gifts to serve the body, then nothing but rejection awaits?”

At the time, I didn’t have proper language to name what was going on for me. But ten years later, with a solid decade of hindsight in my toolbox, I discovered the cause of my unsettled spirit walking through the lobby that day.

## **Pursuing Integrity**

I met with Derek once a week for nine months during 2014. He was my spiritual director, helping me discern the calling

and mission of my life. At that point I had gone through multiple painful experiences with churches, and I wondered if perhaps my seventeen-year-old self had been wrong. Distraught and a little freaked out, I turned to Derek to find clarity on who I was and what I should be doing.

During our time together, he had me go through an exercise of mapping out a timeline of my life. Using a large poster board, I wrote on dozens of colored sticky notes to chronicle the significant events and people that had impacted me. It was a brutiful<sup>4</sup> tapestry of my first thirty-two years. One morning, after some intense emotional work, Derek surveyed my timeline while he stroked the stubble on his chin. Right about the point where my tolerance for awkward silence was maxed, he leaned back in the booth at our favorite coffee shop and said, “It seems to me that integrity is important in your life.”

“Sure, I guess,” I replied, unimpressed with his assessment. “I mean yeah, it’s important for me to live upright even when no one is watching.” I wondered what his point was. Isn’t integrity important to everyone?

“I don’t mean that kind of integrity,” he continued, “I mean *integrity* in the sense of being integrated—being whole and complete.” He gestured to a number of sticky notes on my timeline, “Over and over in your life you have these significant moments that are centered on you not being integrated, where your internal convictions and your external actions are not in alignment.”

“Where your internal convictions and your external actions are not in alignment,” I repeated in my head, his words exploding like fireworks.

Do you remember the scene in *Fight Club* when Edward Norton finally realizes that he is Tyler Durden? You stare at the screen as the disparate strands of the film all click in to place, the plot suddenly making sense, and you wonder how you could have missed it.

Derek’s words that morning were like that. This concept of *integrity*—aligning my external actions with my

internal convictions—brought an instantaneous and profound clarity to my timeline—to my *life*. As though an optometrist had been giving me only options one and two for thirty-two years, and now, at last, she moved it to three, and everything immediately came into focus.

This movement toward integrity has been my life's aim. Many times unconsciously. Every significant moment in my timeline, and so many of the significant people as well, were all instances of course correction. My traumatic experience as a fraudulent evangelist on Huntington Beach was a perfect example. Derek was right, my soul suffers and my life limps along when I act in ways that are incongruent with my convictions. If I can't genuinely live into what I believe to be true, or if I'm forced to keep parts of myself hidden, or if I have to act one way even though my heart believes another, then basic fruits of the Spirit, such as joy, peace, and goodness, feel unreachable.

## Aligning the Head and the Heart

One crucial step toward being integrated, where our internal convictions are aligned with our external realities, is to pay attention when it feels like our head and our heart are in conflict with each other, when what we believe to be true and what we feel to be right are not lining up.

When I look back at that moment in the lobby of my church, reading about the exclusion of “practicing homosexuals,” I can now name what was happening in me. My head and my heart were out of alignment. My head was still theologically grounded in conservative evangelicalism—a world in which being gay is unquestionably a sin. Yet my heart was pushing back with a sense of injustice when I read how my church lived out that theology.

Homosexuality might be wrong, I reasoned, but no more wrong than excluding people—real human beings—from being members in a church or using their God-given gifts, right?

Not long after this jarring moment of realization, I had to finish the questionnaire for my licensing process. There were no questions about sexuality, but toward the end there was a blank space with the words “Any other thoughts you’d like to share with us?” I didn’t have to, of course, but I wrote about how I agreed with the denomination about the sinfulness of homosexuality but struggled with the policies on membership and volunteerism.

And *that* was the line on page 4, question 37, that Ruth asked me about so many years ago.

I can’t recall exactly how I responded, but whatever I said must have assuaged their anxiety because they ended up granting me licensure. And so the summer of 2005 stands out for two reasons: one, I had finally become a pastor; and two, it was the first time I was conscious of the tension between my head and my heart on the issue of the Bible and homosexuality.

Over the past several years, while working alongside and ministering to the LGBTQ community and straight allies alike, I’ve learned that this tension is not uncommon. Many people find themselves with this sort of posture. A place you could call “open” but not “affirming.” They might feel that the church has mistreated those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and so they want to live with open arms and open hearts, but they can’t go all the way to affirmation because of their conviction that the Bible condemns such “lifestyles.” This tension between the head and the heart can be found in all but the most fundamental tribes of Christianity. To be sure, many good, loving, kind, and gracious Christians would never join a Westboro Baptist picket line, and yet marching in their hometown’s Pride Parade is just as far-fetched. For those with loved ones who identify as LGBTQ, this head-heart tension is amplified by deep mourning. Many are desperate for a way to harmonize their love for friends or family members with their commitment to an honest and accurate understanding of the Bible.

As for me, leaving the district headquarters that day, freshly minted as a pastor, I was unaware that I had begun a journey toward alignment on the subject of homosexuality, a journey that would take about five years. Yet that was only the beginning. As it turns out, finding alignment on the Bible and homosexuality would launch me in to yet another journey of finding alignment between my internal convictions and my external actions as a pastor in full-time ministry.

## Moving to the Desert

One year after getting licensed, Kate and I left the rain for the sun. We picked up and moved from Salem, Oregon, to Chandler, Arizona, a burgeoning suburb of southeast Phoenix. I had just been hired to be the Pastor of Worship and Arts at a young church plant of about five years. Full of loving and generous people, it was an ideal place for me to grow as a worship pastor. They granted me the freedom to explore creative ways to engage people in corporate worship and empower artists to make art. During my five years there, the church grew from two hundred to fifteen hundred, and we assisted in the transformation of hundreds of people's lives.

And yet . . .

Kate and I couldn't have anticipated where our spiritual journeys with Christ would take us. Nor did we realize how conservative our new environment would be. You see, not long after getting licensed (by the skin of my teeth), I picked up a copy of Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*. I had read an interview with Rob Bell where he mentioned Brian's book as one that made a significant impact on him.

I would feel that same impact.

Reading *A New Kind of Christian* was an eye-opening experience. For the first time, I discovered that there exists other expressions and understandings of Christianity than

the Western/Protestant/Evangelical/Baptist version I had consumed hook, line, and sinker in church and college. Through Brian, I learned it was okay to ask questions, and it was okay to not know all the answers. This was simultaneously terrifying and liberating for me, as I had always prided myself on being the Bible Answer Man, the guy people could come to with questions about God, the Bible, and faith. I would impress them with my wisdom at such a young age, always giving an answer to their questions—even if I had to make one up to sound smart.

After I finished McLaren's book, I found myself on a course that would open my mind to all sorts of beautiful realities about the religion I adhered to, the God I worshiped, and the Lord I followed. But this new journey, while taking me deeper into the heart of God's dream for creation and closer to the core of Jesus' kingdom message, also put increasing distance between me and the conservative theology I grew up with. As a result, after a few years in Arizona it became painfully obvious that we might not be as great a fit at our new church as we would have hoped.

My journey away from conservative evangelicalism was met with fear and frustration from others in our church. I discovered that many evangelicals hold their beliefs with such clenched fists that they fear and violently resist any questions or challenges to their convictions. Being in that culture, Kate and I learned to keep most of the changes that were happening in our hearts to ourselves because we didn't feel safe voicing our questions or talking about our doubts. And the few times we did open up felt like trying to feed peas to a toddler: it's messy, confusing, and nobody feels good afterward.

We had been there just over a year when it was presidential election season, Obama vs. McCain. Neither Kate nor I knew who we would vote for yet, seeing as how we were in the midst of so much theological and ideological transition, but when people from our church forwarded

a mass email about an outlandish story involving Barack Obama, it seemed prudent to investigate its veracity. As it turns out, the truth was a simple Snopes search away. However, when we replied to everyone with the link that revealed how the original story was fabricated, we inadvertently set off a storm of “concern”<sup>5</sup> in the church community about the “liberal” pastor and his wife. One lady was concerned enough to show up at our house the following night and warn us, “If you vote for Obama, then the blood of unborn babies will be on your hands.”

I shared a YouTube video one day on Facebook about a tighter gun policy that had passed in New York City. The next week a friend of mine told me over lunch, “I could not bring myself to worship with you on Sunday because I kept thinking about that video you posted and how you’re against guns.”

Then there was the John Piper video I shared online, in which he suggests that wives should endure abuse from their husbands, and I called it a #pastorFAIL, only to be told by people in my church that I shouldn’t criticize John Piper. There was also the time at an elder board meeting where I spoke up on behalf of a friend of mine—a recently discharged elder whose marriage was falling apart—because the board was suggesting that if he tried to attend church, then they would walk him back out the front door. To which I responded, “Then I guess I’ll take him around to the back door.”

In short, while I think most everyone at the church loved me, and really liked what I brought to the worship and arts ministries, I wasn’t fitting the mold of what a Christian pastor should look like. The more I grew into my newfound convictions, the more my ideas and questions were a threat to established theological systems. I believe, over time, they came to view me as the “liberal-hippie-peace-loving pastor who questioned the faith and was easy on sin!”

Meh, I suppose they weren’t too far off.

## The Power of Pizza and a Movie

Miraculously, we had procured a babysitter for the evening, affording us the opportunity to enjoy a night out at a new pizza place. As we waited for our food to arrive, conscious of the silence that eerily fills the space when your kids aren't around, Kate and I attempted a feat couples with young children rarely enjoy: a conversation.

"So what do you think about homosexuality?" I asked Kate, fidgeting with my napkin.

It was a Friday night in mid-September 2010. We'd been in Arizona for four years, and each passing year brought more and more distance between our theology and that of the church. I can't recall why the topic of homosexuality came up that night, but it had been a while since either of us had talked about it.

I listened as Kate explained that she no longer believed that being gay was a sin. She had moved to a new place in her life, that of a fully inclusive Christian, open and affirming of the LGBTQ community. It was amazing how far we had come, both together and as individuals. The journey would have been a whole lot scarier and harder had one of us traveled it alone.

Even as I enjoyed my thin crust margherita pizza, listening to Kate share her newfound resolution, I was still unconvinced with regard to the Bible. During my time in Arizona, I deconstructed most of the faith I was raised with and established during college. While I was steadily reconstructing some aspects of my theology, I still had not spent time exploring the Clobber Passages. The tension between my head and my heart remained. And while I may have felt less confident that the Bible condemned homosexuality, I still didn't have peace on the issue. I recall telling Kate that night, "While I'm no longer prepared to call gay people sinful or judge them, I still think that it's not God's best intention for humanity."

We left that night with a commitment to keep the conversation going. So a couple weeks later when we heard about a documentary called “For the Bible Tells Me So,” which shares the stories of five families who navigate having a child who identifies as gay or lesbian, we sat down to watch it together. The movie explores the relationship between religion and homosexuality. It unpacks the history of how the Religious Right has stigmatized and oppressed the LGBTQ community. What impacted me the most, however, were the powerful stories of men and women who followed after God and sought an honest relationship with Christ but who were also attracted to members of the same sex. Their stories normalized the issue for me. In fact, after watching that movie, I realized that this isn’t an issue. That’s a horrible word to use. This is about real people with real stories.

The film also provided what I was longing for: resources for an honest exploration of the Clobber Passages that offered alternative understandings and interpretations. The next few weeks involved a flurry of blog reading as I discovered for the first time that genuine followers of Jesus had studied this material and come to different conclusions on the issue . . . er, I mean, about the people who identify as LGBTQ.

I read scholars who explained that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing to do with homosexuality. I learned that the meaning of the word *abomination* in Leviticus is a far cry from describing behavior that is inherently sinful. I was exposed to careful readings of Paul’s letters, in which I had always believed he spoke with such clarity. But fresh insights revealed that perhaps we’ve gotten him wrong. The time I spent poring over the Clobber Passages were laying the foundation for what would eventually become this book.

Slowly, the theological corners of my brain let in light and I could see how we, how *I*, had misused the Bible on

homosexuality. My heart traveled deeper into the lush fields of compassion and mercy and turned to watch as my mind at long last allowed the warmth of the sun and the promise of integrity to coax it out of its cave.

The aligning had begun.

## **Apologizing on the Polar Express**

I thought my days of interrupting strangers in order to talk about Jesus were behind me, but it was mid-December when an interaction with a couple on a train solidified for me that the alignment between my head and my heart was complete.

Our friends Justin and Meghan invited us to join their family on a Polar Express experience up in northern Arizona. Every Christmastime, an old train and its station get converted to resemble the North Pole. Families, dressed in their pajamas, board a gorgeous steam engine to drink hot cocoa and visit Santa, who gives each kid a jingling bell.

On the train we sat next to a family of two dads with their adorable four-year-old girl in Snow White jammies, who assumed that everyone around her was her best friend. She wasn't wrong. I watched as her dads doted on her every move, lighting up the cabin with their joy. With kindness and patience, they redirected her from jumping on too many people's laps, but some people (like me) didn't mind the intrusion. It was obvious that their daughter's excitement to meet Santa matched—if not surpassed—that of our own boys, and her dads' anticipation for their child to see Santa was equal to Kate's and mine.

In other words, they were a normal family.

When the trip to the North Pole and Santa's Shop concluded, the train returned to the station with cabins full of bell-ringing, cocoa-loaded children. As we gathered our belongings and prepared to disembark, I found myself turning to face the dads of the young girl, compelled by something, but I wasn't sure what.

“Excuse me,” I said, for some odd reason, “but I’m a pastor, and I wonder if I might have a moment of your time?”

They exchanged glances with one another, bracing themselves for what might come next. Undeterred—even if I should have been—I pressed on.

“I would like to apologize on behalf of the Christian church,” I stated, as though I had such authority, “for the ways in which our judgmental and narrow-minded posture has made the LGBTQ community feel like second-class people. I’m sorry for how we have told you that you are damaged or broken in ways that straight people never have to deal with, and how we demand that you have to change who you are if you want to be right with God. I’m sorry for the hate, the fear, and the intolerance.”

They, smiled, nodded, and said thanks. Then they explained that they are part of a loving church community who had always welcomed and accepted them. So while they hadn’t experienced the things I had apologized for, they said I was sweet for saying so nonetheless.

I exited the train and realized that the unprovoked apology I pitched to those gentlemen was not for them.

It was for me.

## The Hero’s Journey

The journey of the hero in ancient mythology is a perfect illustration for the spiritual journey. There are four stages: First there is the summons, followed by a series of obstacles, after which comes the receiving of a gift, and finally the return to community to live it out. Alexander J. Shaia refers to this as the universal fourfold pattern of life and transformation.<sup>6</sup> I’m no hero, but I can see how my journey in this particular area followed this progression.

It began with a call, as I awakened to the mistreatment and alienation of the LGBTQ community within the church, through disallowing them membership and rejecting their ability to serve.

With the tension between my head and my heart established, and feeling like I'd stumbled into the summons, I then faced a series of challenges, both external (such as almost not getting licensed to be a pastor) and internal (asking challenging questions about whether or not I'd understood the Scriptures correctly). Reading different perspectives on the Clobber Passages and listening to the stories of those who wrestled with being both gay and Christian helped me work through the obstacles.

The reward for overcoming these challenges was to receive the gift, the joy, of an integrated self. My head and my heart were at last in alignment. For the first time, I could see how the Scriptures did not condemn people who were born with same-sex attraction, nor did it condemn loving, committed, mutually honoring, and respecting relationships between people of the same sex.

Yet that is not the final stage in the hero's journey. She must return to where she came from and learn how to live in community once again as a new version of herself. She must refuse to be pulled back to who she was prior to her journey but also not be content to forsake her community.

As Thelma told Louise, "Something has crossed over in me, and I can't go back."<sup>7</sup>

Something indeed had crossed over in me. Yet I was still a pastor in a large, conservative, evangelical church. Was there a way to return to the community and integrate my newly aligned self? Could I find alignment between my new internal convictions and my established external reality?

What started in Carol-the-lesbian's hot tub was only the beginning.

But for the record, I still don't like unsweetened Lipton iced tea.