

GRACE

THE
TABLE



by Donna Pyle **LIVING IN THE TENSION
BETWEEN GRACE AND TRUTH**

Since the Supreme Court's ruling last summer legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the United States, I cannot think of a more hotly contested issue right now than LGBT persons and the Church. I am thankful to the *Quarterly* for creating space to open this vital conversation and think through this highly charged, emotional issue at a meaningful level. The table is big enough for all of us to gather around and discuss questions, doubts, and beliefs. The world is talking about LGBT issues and the gay movement is steadily growing louder. The Church should also lead in the talk about it so that our children will have a faithful voice to listen to.

poured through piles of research regarding the primary Scripture passages that reference homosexuality, along with countless articles regarding lesbian, gay, and transgender issues from both sides of the argument. Through that research process, God helped me grow in my understanding. While information is necessary and helpful, the LGBT discussion goes beyond this limited scope. This is also an emotional issue.

Consequently, I shut down my laptop and reached out to LGBT people. They bravely shared their stories while I simply listened. No filter. No rules. Just, “tell me about your story.” ***That’s where meaningful conversations start: with people’s stories.*** When we see faces instead of fears, our interests are engaged. Some people find themselves distant from the conversation because they don’t know anyone in the LGBT community and have not been exposed to it at any personal level. So, let’s start with the stories.

Ruth* is a strong Christian who constantly struggles with who she is and what God thinks about her. She has been in a lesbian relationship for twelve years. She concluded that the core biblical issue of homosexuality lies in sexual conduct (the “acting out” of the sin), so she lives a celibate lifestyle within that relationship. She volunteered in her church’s VBS program for three years, baked cookies, set up chairs, and performed costumed Bible stories. The children loved her and she doted on them.

When her conservative church discovered that she identified as lesbian, they asked her to resign her involvement from those areas of concern. When she explained her vow of celibacy, they said that she would still be allowed to attend regular church services but not allowed to serve with children. The Church was willing for her to be fed by Word and Sacrament ministry but wanted to narrow her areas of service. Sadly, she left that church and is searching for another.

There are many LGBT persons who identify as being Christian. They love Jesus, study His Word, and maintain an active prayer life. They long to serve Jesus in meaningful ways, but that’s where the situation gets sticky. Each of them recalls times (once their churches found out they were LGBT) where they were denied

opportunities to serve on teams or mission trips where children and youth were involved. Some were even asked to resign their church membership.

Most people will not leave one community before finding their place in another. We need to reach out in love to let LGBT people know that there is a place for them in the Christian community. Regardless of our sin struggles — whether homosexuality, alcoholism, drugs, pornography, food, or any other — our church doors need to be opened wide so that those who struggle in the depths of addictions can hear the Gospel: the only true catalyst for change.

As Rev. John Heckmann points out in his Bible study (see pp. 16–23), we do not abandon people to fight other addictions alone. Consequently, we cannot treat LGBT sin struggles any differently. We link arms with them in love to fight together, grounded in the Word of God, continuous prayer, and endless grace.

Christians struggle to understand the difference between care and approval. We are called as Christ’s followers to care for and love everyone, but that does not mean we must also approve of the lifestyle choices they make. If your teen comes out to you as gay or lesbian, it is hopeful you still care for them as your son or daughter and love them accordingly, but that does not translate into approval. Notice Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12:24b–25 (ESV): *God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.*

We are encouraged to link arms with LGBT people, starting with building relationships founded on genuine love and trust. No one likes to be treated as a project — it needs to be genuine. Jesus hung around tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes because He cared for and loved them as precious creations made in His image. He didn’t approve of their lifestyle choices; rather, He spoke the truth in love, directed them to sin no more, and never wrote them off as “less than.”

You and I meet people every week at church, work, or in the grocery line who have likely made lifestyle choices that you wouldn’t approve of. But we still acknowledge them as someone whom God created for a purpose. Consequently, we strive to care for them as Jesus did.

*Names have been changed to protect identity.



**THE TENSION
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AND TRUTH IS
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JOHN 1:17

None of the LGBT persons that I spoke with ever asked for or wanted such a burden in their lives. They held on to hope in their formative years that God would eventually transform them to be “normal” so that they could be free from their prisons of homosexuality. Some actively prayed, sought counseling, read books, underwent electroshock therapy, called hotlines, and pursued many other avenues in the hopes that they would be transformed. They lived in fear that others would find out their secret before the transformation occurred.

They kept hope alive that if they just did the right things or waited long enough that God would eventually change them. Sounds kind of like our sin and addiction struggles, doesn't it? But you and I both know that we cannot redeem ourselves. Trusting in God's Word and Christian community provides answers and avenues for His people to share grace, love, and truth.

Some of my LGBT friends wrestled with thoughts or actual attempts of suicide. They wanted to avoid losing the love and respect of those they loved most. Though some never contemplated suicide, they prayed instead that they simply wouldn't wake up. It would just be so much easier than the oppressive fear and shame.

When these LGBT friends realized that they were wishing for death instead of embracing life, they knew something had to change. They believe that God created them for a reason, just like you and me, so they set out to find the answer. They turned to church, and most churches were unprepared and turned them away. The very community that could make a real difference failed at this opportunity.

Christians are called to live in the tension between grace and truth. Some Christians live strictly by truth and just want to recite the Bible. Other Christians live strictly by grace and just want to love others without ever courageously broaching hard subjects. Wise Christians live in the tension between both. The tension between grace and truth is embodied in the coming of Jesus: *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17 ESV).

The gravity of the LGBT struggle became clear to me one afternoon as I sat across from Robert*. He has reached the conclusion that God does not love him based solely on the way Christians and the Church have treated him. In his words, he has “made peace with going to hell.” I could only grab his hands and tell him that no matter how people treat him, he can be assured that the God who created him in His image, loved him enough to die for him. God desires all people to be saved through His Son, Jesus Christ.

GRACE

TRUTH

Are we really okay with someone thinking that way just to avoid an uncomfortable conversation? I'm not. Jesus suffered and died for ALL, so we need to intentionally link arms with LGBT people to face that sin struggle together, relying on God's guidance and His redemptive Word. Some LGBT people choose to link arms, some don't; but continuing to reach out is critical.

Ruth's and Robert's stories highlight why listening to people's stories is an important aspect to our faith and life together. Compassion and understanding grow when we put flesh tones on black and white words.

That's what stories do: they engage us. So what's the answer? Jesus said it as He washed the disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday: *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34–35 ESV). Sacrificial love for one another engages us in caring for all people.

In this *Quarterly*, Nancy Beckcom has bravely shared her story with us. I have served alongside Nancy in the Texas District LWML for over a decade and cannot think of many women with more zeal and passion to serve the Lord than Nancy. Her friendship is priceless to me. I thank God for her courage to open a painful door from her past so that we can learn through necessary conversations.

I didn't know Nancy's story until last fall. She asked to meet me for dinner in order to discuss something important. Since she lives over two hours away, I knew God was up to something and I began praying about our meeting. Nancy told me her story without flinching or breaking eye contact. I would not have been as brave.

She entrusted her story to me and I promised to walk alongside her regardless of where this journey led. We prayed together and trusted that the Lord would take it from there. This *Quarterly* issue is the result of the prayers of many. We have linked arms and invite you to join us in this vital round table discussion.

**Names have been changed to protect identity.*

Donna Pyle is an author, speaker, Bible teacher, and Texas LWML member at Salem LCMS, Tomball. Her new book, *"Without This Ring: Surviving Divorce,"* releases through Concordia Publishing House in June 2016, providing believers with Christ-centered steps toward hope and healing following divorce. For more information go to <https://www.cph.org/p-29697-without-this-ring-surviving-divorce.aspx>

By the grace of God, Nancy has turned from her lesbian lifestyle. However, our friendship would not change even if she was still struggling against that sin. I would not love her any less because, like Nancy, I am a sinner in need of God's grace. Just like you. People loved and forgiven by God love and forgive others.

God has now provided Nancy an incredible opportunity within the LGBT community to bridge the gap and facilitate conversations in circles that many of us will never have the opportunity to enter. Linking arms to walk in a Christian community together makes a vast difference between hope and despair, lost and found, death and life.

This topic was very hard on me. I see the deep pain and emotional scars in my LGBT friends. I'm heartbroken and sickened by the almost unanimous testimony of LGBT persons who were raised in church, dehumanized, then rejected, and therefore have searched for human love, compassion, and community elsewhere. We are called to do better.

I affirm and stand by the Bible's teaching that sexual intimacy is confined to the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. However, we have no right to relegate anyone to society's circumference while Jesus welcomes ALL who seek Him into His inner circle.

I know the LGBT issue is hard. You and I have been entrusted with the treasure of living out the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, to build communities that link arms to face sin struggles together — standing on the love, grace, and truth of God's Word. That means having the courage to name the sin, allowing space for repentance, receiving God's forgiveness, and then searching for solutions together.

That's why our churches need to grow in their understanding of this issue in caring for the LGBT people. Let's invite them into a new community, one that includes the saving message of redemption and forgiveness, given by Jesus on the Cross — for ALL people. **Q**