

TRUE  
INCLUSION

*To LaSalle Street Church in Chicago,  
for being the first community to embody true inclusion for me,  
when I wasn't yet able to include myself.*

# TRUE INCLUSION

CREATING COMMUNITIES  
OF RADICAL EMBRACE

UNCORRECTED PROOF

**BRANDAN ROBERTSON**



**chalice  
press**

Saint Louis, Missouri

An imprint of Christian Board of Publication

Copyright ©2018 by Brandan Robertson

All rights reserved. For permission to reuse content, please contact Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com).

All scripture quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are the author's paraphrase.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (CEV) are taken from the *Contemporary English Version*. Copyright © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by Permission. Scripture taken from The Voice™. Copyright © 2008 by Ecclesia Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture marked NASB is taken from the *NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE*®, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977. Used by permission.

**ChalicePress.com**

Print: 9780827237186

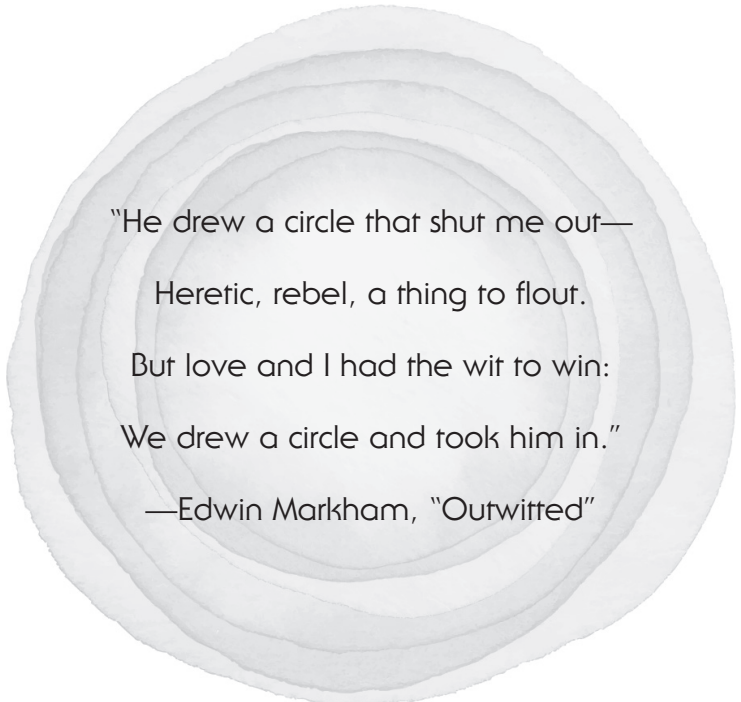
EPUB: 9780827237193

EPDF: 9780827237209

Printed in the United States of America

# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
1. Explaining Exclusion	7
2. Missing the Mark	19
3. The Inclusion Imperative	31
4. The Importance of Inclusion	43
5. The Problem of Patriarch	57
6. The Ingredients of Inclusion	71
7. Inclusion in Context	87
Conclusion	107
Appendix: Resources for Further Study	115



"He drew a circle that shut me out—  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle and took him in."  
—Edwin Markham, "Outwitted"

# Acknowledgments

This book was one that both flowed seamlessly and was incredibly challenging to write. The concepts of intersectional inclusivity have been embedded in my understanding of the Christian faith for as long as I can remember. Nonetheless, some of the insights and ideas that I share in this book have challenged me and shaken up my faith in crucial ways. I hope that they do the same for you.

Also, as any author will tell you, a book is never the product of a single person, but a single person channeling the ideas, love, and support of a multitude. Because of this, there are always many people to thank when a book is birthed into the world.

First, I want to thank Deborah Arca for sitting down with me on that sunny afternoon at Union Station in Denver and pitching the idea for this book. I didn't know how much *I* needed to write this book then, and I have greatly appreciated your encouragement and insight throughout this process.

To the entire team at Chalice Press: thank you for helping me to create this book and for believing in its message. I am deeply grateful.

To the church I have the honor of pastoring, Missiongathering Christian Church in San Diego: thank you for helping me to think through the concepts in this book and experiment with them on you (even when you didn't know you were being experimented on!). The Spirit of inclusion is at your heart, and I am so honored to be able to step into the work that God has already begun in your midst and continue to journey forward with you all.

To my friends, teachers, and mentors who have shaped and challenged my idea of what it means to be truly inclusive: Dr. Floyd Thompkins, Dr. David Anderson, Dr. Sharon Groves, Fr. Richard Rohr, Rob Bell, Dr. Miguel De La Torre, Dr. Jennifer

Leath, Dr. J.R. Daniel Kirk, Dr. Brian McLaren, Dr. Diana Butler Bass, Teresa Pasquale, Bishop Paul Colton, Bishop Gene Robinson, Bishop Karen Oliveto, Bishop Joseph Tolton, Matthew Vines, Vicky Beeching, Jayne Ozanne, and many more. Your collective wisdom and insight has shaped and molded me in too many ways to recount. Thank you for your work and witness.

To my friends, for putting up with my endless ramblings about this book as I wrote it and for supporting me in this season of my own journey: Isaac, Andy, Jacob, Quinton, Rich, Lee, Rebekah, Cameron, Troy, Jeremiah, and Michael.

And to you, the reader: thank you for picking up this book and exploring the concepts and practices of inclusion. I believe that places like this are starting points, and I hope and pray you continue to lean into this radically subversive gospel of inclusion, and that your life and world are transformed by it.



# Introduction

“It’s just our hope that you don’t leave here and start waving rainbow flags.”

The Dean of Students at my Bible College spoke these words to me at the beginning of my senior year. I had been called into a meeting with the Dean and my choir director on the first day of classes after another professor had circulated among the entire faculty photos of me with some well-known LGBT+ clergy at a festival that summer. There was “concern,” they said, about the company I was keeping and whether it reflected my personal theology.

You see, for a majority of Christians around the world, to be inclusive and embracing of LGBT+ people is to abandon true Christianity. This is certainly still the case in the conservative evangelical movement of which my Bible College was a part, churning out thousands of students every year to lead the Church in the fight against the culture which is growing more and more accepting of the “unacceptable”—namely, the lives and relationships of sexual and gender minorities.

Beyond the exclusively evangelical and fundamentalist denominational spheres, there are many more denominations that have chosen to call themselves “welcoming” to LGBT+ people, but that still retain a homophobic undercurrent that prevents LGBT+ individuals from becoming truly *embraced* for the fullness of our gifts and perspectives. And, of course, there are also those denominations that have been in the vanguard of the fight for full inclusion of sexual and gender minorities, led by brave saints like my friend Bishop Gene Robinson, who fully welcome and celebrate LGBT+ people at every level of church leadership. These denominations march in their local pride parades, proudly

hang rainbow flags in front of their churches, and use gender inclusive language in all of their hymns and scripture readings. They're truly and deeply inclusive.

But is all of that *really* enough?

• • •

This book is an accessible guide for individuals and faith communities who desire to embrace what I call “true inclusion.” True inclusion calls us beyond mere welcome, beyond outward signs of celebration, and even beyond the LGBT+ conversation itself and to a completely new paradigm for how we live our faith in the confines of our sanctuary and in the public square. What I propose in these pages is nothing short of a fundamental shift in posture and practice that calls communities to mirror the very posture of Jesus Christ, of whom it is written that he, “*being God in his nature, did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited, so he humbled himself, taking on the form of a servant... Therefore, God exalted him*” (Phil. 2:5-8).<sup>1</sup>

As those who claim to follow in the rhythms of Jesus, we must to learn to do exactly what Christ did himself. This begins by recognizing who we are; identifying our privilege; and willingly giving up our positions of privilege for the good of the silenced, marginalized, and oppressed—and, in so doing, maximize the light and power of the Divine in and through us and our communities.

As soon as we begin this journey of self-humbling, every part of our own identity, worldview, and life becomes vulnerable to reformation. The way we believe, the way we practice, the way we worship—everything changes. True inclusion, which I believe is the very heartbeat of the Scriptures and central message of the gospel, will cause us to break down every boundary that we think is essential and throw us out into the choppy waters of *real life*, where nothing is simple, nothing is easy, but *everything is beautiful*.

This is a book for people and communities at every stage of the journey. No matter whether you're a “conservative” community that is just beginning to have conversations about the “issue” of LGBT+ inclusion, or you're a church that is fully affirming of

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotes are my paraphrase.

LGBT+ people but desires to go deeper than affirmation to full embrace, each section is intended to challenge you.

The lessons, stories, and wisdom contained in these pages come from the work that I have been privileged to do since 2013, work that has permitted me to travel across North America and Europe to meet some of the most remarkable LGBT+ leaders, theologians, activists, and other individuals. They have opened their hearts and shared their experiences with me so that I might help other individuals and communities to begin this important journey towards true inclusion.

Back to that meeting with the Dean of my Bible College: I walked out of his office that day feeling utterly afraid, shamed, and threatened with expulsion over my inclusive stance and beliefs. He had insisted that if I continued such behavior after I graduated, the “defenders of orthodoxy” would publicly question my integrity. At the time, I didn’t know what to believe, I didn’t know who I was, I didn’t know how to identify. I was confused and afraid, a young Christian who desired only one thing: to serve God by being a pastor. Suddenly, all of my hopes and callings seemed to be hanging by a thread that depended on how well I played by the rules that I was being told God had set.

The trauma and pain that I experienced in this setting was unimaginable. And within weeks of this meeting, I was forcefully “encouraged” to begin a conversion therapy program to heal me from my “same-sex desires.” All of this was to ensure that I stayed on the “right” side of the theological, social, and political aisle, instead of teetering on the edge of eternal hell—or, worse, being thrown out of the evangelical movement.

During this season, I found a small church just a few blocks from my school that identified as deeply Christian, but also deeply inclusive. Not only did this church welcome me as a closeted LGBT+ person and encourage me to take my time on my journey of self-discovery and reconciliation of my faith and sexuality, it also challenged me to take the message of the gospel to its furthest conclusion. That meant beginning to think about how to be a person that didn’t merely “welcome” individuals from all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, disabilities, backgrounds, and religions, but also *embraced* them with God’s unconditional, never-ending, all-expansive love.

Since Bible College, I've experienced the full force of Christian exclusion in many ways. In 2014, various Southern Baptist leaders took to national publications like *TIME Magazine* to condemn me and my fight for inclusion as fundamentally unchristian. I've been shamed on stage by theologians and been condescended to by Christian radio show hosts. I have also heard thousands of stories from LGBT+ people of having experienced more harm than I could ever fathom. That harm has come not only from conservative communities who exclude people outwardly, but also from within communities whose members *think* they're inclusive simply because they have a sign on the church or a rainbow flag in the sanctuary.

Since finding that small church in Chicago that challenged me and spoke words of healing and life to my fear-filled spirit, I have been committed and passionate about helping the Church reject the false gospel that excludes, and instead tap into the message of radical inclusion at the heart of the biblical narrative and Christian tradition. For me, this has taken many forms: organizing conferences that feature exclusively LGBT+ Christian speakers so that church leaders can hear our real stories and see the real impact of toxic exclusive theology; hosting closed-door meetings in Nashville, Salt Lake City, and London with the leaders and influencers of some of the largest denominations in the world; and working with political leaders in the White House and on Capitol Hill to secure full rights—not just for LGBT+ individuals, but for *all people*, without exception.

Inclusion has become a passion of mine because I deeply believe that it is the heart of God and the fundamental direction of the universe. And I believe that we are living on the brink of a new era of reformation and evolution that is causing people in every one of our social institutions to re-examine who they are and how they live as people, and to shift to be even more deeply inclusive and embracing of the complexity and diversity of humanity. True inclusion is about far more than LGBT+ inclusion, though the conversation around sexuality and gender is usually the starting point for these exchanges. Instead, inclusion is a fundamental shift in our way of seeing and being in the world that changes how we think about everything and everyone.

I hope that this book is a starting point, a launching pad, or fuel injection for your journey toward true inclusion and full embrace. This is not a perfect or comprehensive text by any means. It's simply meant to be a resource to help each of us think through how we might reform our lives to be increasingly inclusive, how we might embrace the full breadth of diversity represented in every single person.

Let's begin our journey together.



# 1

## Explaining Inclusion

We've all been excluded from something before. Upon realizing that we were not invited to an event with the rest of our friends, or being told quite blatantly that we are not welcome to participate in some group or activity, we are overcome with a deep sense of shame: shame that we are not good enough; shame that we must have done something wrong to merit this exclusion—or, worse, that we must *be* something wrong. We question who we are, our place in our friend group or community, and sometimes even our fundamental self-worth. To be deliberately excluded is one of the deepest pains a human can experience, because we are fundamentally wired for community, to move about in tribes or families. That is how we begin to develop an individual sense of self, and how we craft the worldview and narrative by which we will live our lives.

Belonging is one of the most fundamental needs of human beings. Leading psychological researcher Brené Brown is right: “A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Christian theology, our need to belong is a direct reflection of the God in whose image we're made. In orthodox Christian teaching, God is understood to be a trinity: three persons, one substance, in eternal relationship with one another. Creator, Christ, and Spirit (or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in

---

1 Quotation from Brené Brown found in Monika Carless and Lieselle Davidson, “The Power of Vulnerability,” *Elephant Journal*, 27 Feb., 2017, [www.elephantjournal.com/2017/02/power-vulnerability-brene-browns-ted-talk-may-be-the-breakthrough-youve-been-looking-for/](http://www.elephantjournal.com/2017/02/power-vulnerability-brene-browns-ted-talk-may-be-the-breakthrough-youve-been-looking-for/).

more traditional language) exist as the three faces of God, three individuated parts of the same whole.

It is from these fundamental relationships at the heart of God that *Love* is generated, and, from *Love*, all of creation bursts forth. If God is fundamentally an interconnected, triune relationship, then it follows that those made in the image and likeness of God are also fundamentally wired for such relationships. As the renowned Franciscan writer Fr. Richard Rohr notes: “Everything exists in radical relationship, which we now call ecosystems, orbits, cycles, and circulatory systems... God is relationship itself... The Way of Jesus is an invitation to a Trinitarian way of living, loving, and relating—on earth as it is in the Godhead. We are intrinsically like the Trinity, living in an absolute relatedness.”<sup>2</sup>

If belonging is truly an “irreducible need of all people” and “we are intrinsically like the Trinity, living in absolute relatedness,” then exclusion and rejection from our communities of belonging is a fundamental assault on the humanity of a person. It is an assault on the fundamental order of creation, an attack on something generated from the very essence of who God is. From the Christian perspective, to exclude another person from relationship, and especially relationship to God, is perhaps the most blasphemous and destructive sin we could commit. To isolate another human being is to cut them off from the relationships that are so fundamental to what it means to be a human, and degrades the very essence of their humanity.

Furthermore, when we exclude a person or group of people, we are degrading our *own* humanity, acting not in the spirit of Christ, and not even acting like good humans. By perpetuating dehumanization, we dehumanize ourselves. Think about it: the more exclusive a community becomes, the more immorality tends to increase in those communities. Think of the most exclusive cults or secret societies in our world, and almost every single one of them has been plagued by abuse and immorality. Why? Because, whenever we exclude, we are pushing others away from their fundamental nature, and we are also degrading our own nature as humans.

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, *God Is Relationship*, Center for Action and Contemplation, Sept. 7, 2016, [cac.org/god-is-relationship-2016-09-16/](http://cac.org/god-is-relationship-2016-09-16/).

Isn't it ironic, then, that those who have been commissioned with the "gospel of inclusion" have, more often than not, become people of the most exclusive communities and theologies? Throughout our two-thousand-year history, Christians time and time again have fallen into the trap of dualistic thinking, declaring who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is damned, who can join communities and who is to be expelled. These behaviors have absolutely no place in the Christian narrative. Yet ask almost any passerby and they will confirm that we Christians are known more often for our exclusion than for our radical embrace of all.

### Why We Exclude

Exclusion is clearly incompatible with the gospel of Christ. And yet all of us will exclude and be excluded in some way over the course of our lives. On one hand, exclusion is important to maintaining a unique identity within a family or community. We'll explore this a bit more later. When we exclude in this way, it is to preserve a unique culture or identity. This type of exclusion is not meant to marginalize others, but rather to preserve distinct values or practices of a community. The exclusion that we're focusing on is instead exclusion based on fear of difference and the human impulse to find a scapegoat for our problems.

French anthropologist René Girard has written extensively about the "scapegoating mechanism" that nearly every religion and culture throughout history adopts as a means of creating cohesion within a community.<sup>3</sup> By identifying an enemy that they can blame for their collective problems, whether a single person or a group of people, entire nations can be united. Just think of moments in your lifetime when you experienced such unity. For example, on September 11, 2001, the United States—and, indeed, the Western world—experienced a unity that has rarely been reproduced. But this unity, rooted in fear, was grounded in a hatred of Islam and Muslims, who were seen not just as the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., but very quickly as the cause of all of our problems—economic, social, and spiritual. By identifying a group

---

3 René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).



of persons whom we believe to be dangerous and to pose a threat to our collective wellbeing, we create a cohesive unity driven by a desire to exclude and often destroy those we regard as the cause of our problems.

In Scripture, this scapegoating mechanism is seen clearly from the Hebrew Bible through the New Testament in the distinction between “clean” and “unclean.” In the Hebrew mind, the Jewish people were the chosen and “pure” race of people, set apart by God to be the rightful rulers and brokers of justice for the world. Everyone outside of this ethnic, cultural, and religious group were regarded as “unclean” and as posing a threat to the cause of the Hebrew people. It was this exclusion and marginalization of all other cultures, races, and religions that unified the Hebrew people and enabled them to commit acts of mass murder as they fought to obtain lands that they believed were given to them by God, but were occupied by allegedly “unclean” peoples. For a Jewish person to mingle even socially with a Gentile was to become defiled, and caused at the very least a temporary exclusion from the life of the community.

This distinction between “clean” and “unclean” is carried throughout the New Testament and is seen most clearly in chapter 10 of the book of Acts. In this chapter, the apostle Peter falls into a trance, and is told by God to “*rise up, kill, and eat*” (v. 13b) unkosher (unclean) animals that were forbidden by the purity codes of the Hebrew Bible. Peter, being a faithful Jew, argues with God, claiming that he has always been faithful about remaining pure and separate from all unclean beings. It seems that he believed that God was testing him. But then the Scriptures say that God uttered revolutionary and infamous words to Peter: “*Do not call unclean that which I have made clean*” (v. 15b). In this singular phrase, we see one of the key ethical movements of the New Testament, a movement away from the distinction of “clean” and “unclean” and toward an ethic of radical inclusion. In this moment, the Spirit of God is tearing down the artificial barriers that had been created to separate humanity into divided factions, and, instead, was working to create what the apostle Paul calls “one new humanity” (Eph. 2:15, NIV).

Theologian and ethicist Miroslav Volf writes about this distinction between “clean” and “unclean” in his groundbreaking and award-winning book *Exclusion and Embrace*. It is something he knows about personally, as a Croatian public theologian: “Sin is...the kind of purity that wants the world cleansed of the other rather than the heart cleansed of the evil that drives people out by calling those who are clean ‘unclean.’”<sup>4</sup> In Volf’s analysis, the distinctions between clean and unclean, the included and the excluded, are matters of the heart, not a literal state of reality. We divide, marginalize, and exclude based on an inner “evil,” which I think is simply fear. The solution to this inner fear is never to drive out the “unclean” person, but rather to rid ourselves of the “uncleanness” of our own hearts. We exclude only because of our own fear and desire for self-preservation, rooted in ignorance of the “other.” It is this same fear that drove the Hebrew people (and most other cultures, both ancient and modern) to declare the people in other nations and cultures “unclean,” and to create fantastic mythologies about the wicked practices of these other cultures. In this collective exclusivity and superiority, a strong, cohesive bond is formed. But that bond perpetuates a system of fear that brings destruction to everyone.

This is why God’s words in Acts are so crucial: *there is nothing unclean*. And the New Testament echoes the dissolution of all false boundaries and borders with its declaration that “there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one!” (Gal. 3:28). The gospel calls us to abandon our fear-based versions of unity through exclusion, and embrace the way of Christ. That way calls us into proximity with our “others” through acts of radical hospitality and service, for Jesus knew that it’s hard to demonize from up close. When we serve our “other,” we quickly recognize our shared humanity, and we are drawn to a radical inclusivity rooted in love. As Volf concludes: “By embracing the ‘outcast,’ Jesus underscored the ‘sinfulness’ of the persons and systems that cast them out.”<sup>5</sup>

We exclude because we are afraid, and fear is a powerful tool for unification. But the unity that emerges in exclusive systems

---

4 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 74.

5 *Ibid.*, 72. {Gail, check page number}

is a shallow, temporal unity that only harms everyone involved. The inclusive unity embodied and taught by Jesus is a unity that comes, not through recognizing our differences, but via our common humanity. At our core, we are all one. Christ is in all of us, and we all live, move, and have our being in God. In the recognition that beyond all of our identities and uniqueness we share the same common core of being, we find the key to lasting unity.

All of our divisions are human constructions with no grounding in reality. Our color, class, culture, sexuality, gender, political positions, or religious beliefs do not actually cause substantial divisions, because at the end of the day we are still human beings, participating in the same life and light. At our deepest level, we are one and we have the same goals. But sin obscures this. Our egos create masks and draw lines where there is no need to do so. This is what Jesus came to destroy. Whereas the rest of the world is inclined to create unity through separateness, Jesus proclaims a much more difficult but also much more generative path: unity through inclusivity. Whereas exclusion breeds only harm, inclusion leads to abundant life.

## The Harm of Exclusion

In recent history, no community has experienced such fierce exclusion from Christian communities more than has the LGBT+ community. I myself have been threatened with expulsion, forced into “reparative therapy,” and declared a heretic simply because I believe that God does not condemn me for my same-sex relationship and attractions. And in this modern era, there are studies on the tangible impact of exclusion on the lives of LGBT+ people who grow up in exclusive religion environments, studies that show the lasting damage that is done when faith communities, families, and individuals push sexual and gender minorities away because of what I believe are their God-given identities.

The following brief summary of some of the best of these studies comes from my book *Our Witness: The Stories of LGBT+ Christians*, in which I briefly summarize the negative impact of nonaffirming theology on the psyche of LGBT+ people:

“In 2012, the European Symposium of Suicide and Suicidal Behavior released a groundbreaking survey that suggested that suicide rates among LGBT+ youth were significantly higher if the youth grew up in a religious context. Similarly, dozens of studies from 2001–2015 have found links between religious affiliation and higher rates of depression and suicidality among LGBT+ adults. A study published in 2014 by Jeremy Gibbs concluded: “[Sexual Minority Youth] who mature in religious contexts, which facilitate identity conflict, are at higher odds for suicidal thoughts and suicide attempt compared to other SMY.”

Every year, new studies come out that suggest that non-inclusive religious teachings result in higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation among LGBT+ youth and adults alike. These facts must be heeded by those in Christian leadership and cause deep reflection on how their teaching and practices are complicit in these concerning trends.”<sup>6</sup>

These numbers should concern every person who reads them, especially Christian leaders. While in the past we might have been able to get away with saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” the overwhelming evidence from psychological research shows that exactly the opposite is true. When we preach messages of exclusion based on fundamental and unchangeable traits and characteristics of human beings, we are doing tremendous harm that affects individuals for a lifetime.

And, of course, the effects are exacerbated when the individual being excluded is a child or young person, in the early stages of their development. Just imagine being told as a child—by leaders who are supposed to speak on behalf of God—that you are fundamentally flawed, broken, and must change yourself or else be expelled from your community and potentially even be damned to hell for eternity. The trauma and harm done to that young soul cannot be overemphasized.

---

<sup>6</sup> Robertson, Brandan, ed., *Our Witness: The Unheard Stories of LGBT Christians*, (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2017): 2–3.

Of course, exclusion doesn't only impact the LGBT+ community. In fact, dozens of studies have been done that show that exclusion has similar effects on *everyone* who is forced from their community or social group. A National Institutes of Health study on social exclusion concluded, "Social exclusion led to a decrease in positive mood ratings and increased anger ratings."<sup>7</sup> A University of California, Los Angeles, study found that social exclusion literally results in physical harm to the body, including intense physical pain.<sup>8</sup> A similar study done by researchers in the United Kingdom concluded that social exclusion "causes a number of dysfunctional reactions including lowered self-esteem, greater anger, inability to reason well, depression and anxiety, and self-defeating perceptions and behaviours."<sup>9</sup> Study after study shows that exclusion from social groups has measurable negative impacts on human beings of all backgrounds.

Jesus entrusted us with a gospel that is supposed to bring life, hope, and redemption to everyone. Yet for a majority of our history, we in the Church have proclaimed a message of exclusion, death, and hopelessness to most people. Jesus himself taught that if our lives and teachings bear bad fruit, they should be disregarded as not from God (Mt. 7:19). James tells us that there is no "favoritism" with God (James 2:9). In other words, everyone who has been created is declared "very good" and stands equal in the sight of their Creator, and anyone who says otherwise is preaching a "false gospel" that cheapens the magnitude of the Love and creativity of God. Any time we find ourselves asking whether or not someone "belongs" in our communities, we can be certain that we have stepped firmly outside of the realm of the gospel and have started down a path that leads to destruction—not simply of those we exclude, but also of ourselves.

- 
- 7 E.M. Seidel, et al., "The Impact of Social Exclusion vs. Inclusion on Subjective and Hormonal Reactions in Females and Males," *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, Dec. 2013, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3863951/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3863951/) (last accessed March 5, 2017).
- 8 Sian Beilock, "Dealing with the Pain of Social Exclusion," *Psychology Today*, March 7, 2012, [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/choke/201203/dealing-the-pain-social-exclusion](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/choke/201203/dealing-the-pain-social-exclusion).
- 9 Dominic Abrams, et al., "The Social Psychology of Inclusion and Exclusion," *Research Gate*, Jan., 2005, [www.researchgate.net/profile/Dominic\\_Abrams/publication/226768407\\_The\\_Social\\_Psychology\\_of\\_Inclusion\\_and\\_Exclusion/links/56b4903008ae8cf9c25b8dcf/The-Social-Psychology-of-Inclusion-and-Exclusion.pdf++](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dominic_Abrams/publication/226768407_The_Social_Psychology_of_Inclusion_and_Exclusion/links/56b4903008ae8cf9c25b8dcf/The-Social-Psychology-of-Inclusion-and-Exclusion.pdf++).

True inclusion demands that we recognize that only in our diversity do we more perfectly reflect the divinity of our expansive Creator. Whenever we are compelled to declare that someone doesn't belong, whether it's because of their sexuality, ethnicity, background, beliefs, political affiliation, disruptiveness, neediness, inconvenience, struggles, immaturity, etc., we are dehumanizing ourselves and the one(s) we are excluding. That is an assault on the very image and likeness of God in the world. We are attempting to cut off a unique incarnation and manifestation of the beauty of God, simply because we do not agree, do not feel comfortable, or don't know how to interact with such a person. But our discomfort is never an excuse to marginalize or exclude. In fact, discomfort is a sign that we are being called to go deeper, to do the hard work of getting to know another person, and to work on our own shadows that predispose us to discriminate.

## The Results of Exclusion

All discrimination and exclusion is rooted in our own unhealed wounds or prejudices. We discriminate and exclude based on false narratives we've been taught. Those false narratives often put the unfair blame for our own pain or the struggles of our society on a person or group of people. They scapegoat. Unsurprisingly, the LGBT+ community has often been a scapegoat, not just for Christians, but for society as whole. In the early 1980s, the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States wouldn't allow LGBT+ people to work for the agency because of fears that their "perversion" would result in the downfall of the agency. As recently as 2017, the United States military has embraced discriminatory practices against LGBT+ individuals, saying, most recently, that trans\* individuals<sup>10</sup> are "disruptive."<sup>11</sup> Who can forget the prominent evangelical televangelists throughout history who have blamed LGBT+ people for everything from hurricanes to terrorist attacks?

---

<sup>10</sup> Trans\* is a modern and inclusive way to write about transgender and gender nonconforming individuals.

<sup>11</sup> Laurel Wamsley, "Trump Says Transgender People Can't Serve in Military," NPR, 26 July 2017, [www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/07/26/539470211/trump-says-transgender-people-cant-serve-in-military](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/07/26/539470211/trump-says-transgender-people-cant-serve-in-military).

While these examples might seem extreme and absurd, they are a symptom of a pervasive distortion that runs deep in the human psyche. We discriminate because we buy into the scapegoating narrative. That narrative puts the blame for our problems on anyone but ourselves, and then suggests that if we could only get rid of such people, our problems would go away. Of course, this narrative is fundamentally false. Nonetheless, all of us, in some way or another, buy into it. The problem is always the “other people” who don’t look like, act like, believe like, or love like us. What can we do when we sense ourselves falling into this scapegoating mentality? We can remind ourselves that the problem is never simply *another* group of people, but more often than not the powers and systems that have been created in our consciousness by generations of diverse peoples.<sup>12</sup> This is what the apostle Paul was getting at when he wrote: “For our struggle isn’t against flesh and blood people, but against powers, principalities, and dark forces in the unseen realms” (Eph. 6:12).

The forces that cause our most significant problems as a human family are far more insidious than *one group* of people. Getting rid of those people won’t get rid of the problem. Most of our problems are fundamentally *human* problems, not racial, ethnic, religious, social, or sexual. They’re problems that we, as a species, must come together to address in the midst of all of our diversity, rather than falling into the archaic, tribalistic mindset that causes us to go to war with one another, believing that this will somehow solve our problems.

When the LGBT+ community (or any other community) is excluded from the Church, we as the Church are buying in to this scapegoating narrative that dehumanizes both the excluded and excluders. We reveal that our true motivations are coming from a place of fear, which causes us to revert to lower, tribalistic levels of human consciousness. And when we function from fear, we are not doing the work of God, for the scriptures proclaim: “God is love and love casts out all fear” (1 Jn. 4:18). Such love propels us towards inclusion and unity.

---

12 Such mimetic theory was explored most thoroughly by French anthropologist René Girard. For more information, see *The Scapegoat*.

When we are connected to God, we are functioning in love, and love expels any fear we might have about one another, bringing us together. And when we commit to pursue life together, in community, with those who are different, we amplify and enable the supernatural power of love to heal and transform our lives and our world through us. This work will be hard and it will require much grace. But at the end of the day, all of us will become more human and will have further humanized one another. This is what it means to be saved, after all. To be “conformed to the image of Christ” (Rom. 8:29) is to be refined and reformed into the image of the “second” and true *adam*, the Hebrew word meaning “human.” In Christ, the walls that divide us are torn down and we are united across all of the boundaries and borders that separate us, creating “one new humanity” (Eph. 2:15, NIV).

This is the only hope for humanity. Unless we are willing to do the hard, painful work of sanctifying and reforming ourselves through extending grace, welcome, and *unconditional love* to our friends, our neighbors, and even our enemies, we can never truly be conformed and transformed into the people and the communities that we are called to be. And as long as the Church continues to function in a way that excludes, demonizes, and marginalizes *any* community, we are pushing ourselves further from God, and perpetuating the “dark forces” (Eph. 6:12) that are at the heart of *all* of our world’s problems. In excluding, we become the very ones of whom we are seeking to rid ourselves and we become agents of death and destruction, which is the greatest of sins.