



## **A Peculiar People: A Journey in Faith and Sexuality**

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### **Preface**

*Writing has often a way for me to cope with various emotions – particularly depression. During the month of December, I hit a very low point in my life. Completely depleted emotionally, I turned to writing as a source of renewal and inspiration. There was only one topic I wanted to write about: my journey in faith and sexuality within the Independent Fundamental Baptist movement in which I spent nearly all of my life. The chronology of this essay begins in about 2004 and ends in late 2016.*

*This essay is not meant to disparage anyone or any institution. It is, however, my best effort to accurately describe the environment and events I experienced both before and after coming out. In an effort to protect people's privacy, some names have been changed and others*

*have been left as they are. Some events have been written in a broader sense to protect certain individuals.*

*Ultimately, it is my deepest desire that this essay might spark a dialogue between conservative Christians and the LGBT community, to provide a point of view from within the Christian LGBT community, to help bring some healing to those who've been hurt, to help me make sense of my experiences, to encourage others to share their story, and to help other closeted Christians know that they are not alone.*

## **PART 1**

### **Track "A"**

I was running late.

I had just had tea with a friend at Starbucks, and, as is typical, we ended up chatting much longer than we both had expected. I drove across town – way out to the east side – to the “city on the hill.” It is less affectionately known in town as “the compound.” When I was younger, I would become so offended hearing people refer to it as such, knowing that the implication behind it was in reference to a cult. But now that I’ve been out of it for two years, it would be easy for me to call it that too.

Sometimes, if I’m in that particular area, I’ll drive through the campus. All the memories and anxieties come flooding back; only God knows the amount of time I spent there. It wasn’t unusual for me to be there every day of the week. And for all the anxiety it still causes me, I still don’t fully understand why I keep wanting to go back.

The service had already started, and Mark Rasumussen, vice-president of West Coast Baptist College, was well into his sermon. I sneaked in toward the tail end of it, but I wasn't really paying any attention to what he was saying. For the past few months, I've gone back a handful of times, not knowing exactly why. To see friends? To see what's going on? To gain some type of closure after spending over twenty years there?

I couldn't help but think of all the college students sitting around me, all on Track "A" and the few that would soon derail. I had derailed from that several years ago without even realizing it. Growing up at Lancaster Baptist Church, Track "A" (as some of us who grew up there call it) was the typical, well-trodden path that we were expected to traverse: grow up in the youth group, attend the Christian school, attend the Bible college, find a girlfriend, graduate, get married, have a honeymoon baby, and go into ministry. It really is the perfect life – until it's not.

I grew up in the youth group, was homeschooled, and went to West Coast Baptist College. I derailed from Track "A" when I wasn't able to obtain a girlfriend. I was overweight, awkward, and not particularly attractive. Having "glowed up" since then, I can't help but wonder if things would have been different if I looked the way I do now back then. But I digress...

Most guys were very different from me. I already had a strike against me since I wasn't one of the "preacher boys" – a term I've always despised with all my being. The preacher boys were the favorites on campus because of their self-sacrificing determination to do God's will,

often with an air of pompous self-righteousness. It was a given that in order to be a preacher boy, they would follow “Track A,” because if you weren’t dating, engaged, or married by the time you graduated, there would be too many suspicions, and those suspicions could hinder God’s will.

It wasn’t uncommon for the staff members to pair a guy and a girl together. They would brag about their success rates – our very own Baptist match-makers. These pairings were sometimes done in very public ways, such as in classes or in the more public setting of a chapel service. To me, it was absolutely humiliating, and I was terrified that I would someday be the subject of one of these pairings. But I kept myself busy and out of sight, saving myself from the humiliation of having to be paired up with a girl because I was deemed incapable of doing it myself.

There’s a difference between being attracted to a person and being attracted to the concept of what that person embodies. We were told what the perfect life was, what God’s will was for our lives, and how we were to obtain it. God’s will for my life, according to all my pastor, church staff, professors, Sunday school teachers, and fellow church members, was to find a girl. It could be any godly girl. But I needed to have a girl in my life in order to proceed down “Track A.”

### **The White Sheep of the Family**

Growing up, I always considered myself to be the white sheep of the family. I rarely got in trouble with my authorities, very much unlike my siblings who seemed to always be under the suspicious eyes of our youth pastor and youth workers at church. But I was different in a lot

of ways, not just in the way I behaved. Part of me can't help but think that comes with being the first born of seven.

A proclivity toward obedience wasn't the only aspect to separate me from the rest of the flock. I enjoyed crocheting, weaving, needle point, collecting coins American Doll trading cards, and I was obsessed with SpongeBob. The breadth in range of my interests was quite large for someone my age. Always onto the next "kick." I started playing the clarinet when I was twelve, the oboe at sixteen, and the organ at seventeen. Genealogical research was (and continues to be) one of my favorite pastimes. Most of my formative years were spent alone, practicing or researching.

I had (have) a voice that tends to "sit" much higher than most other guys, allowing me to sing first tenor and altos parts with great facility. But, growing up, I felt like my voice was constantly betraying me. If unseen while speaking, it wasn't uncommon (still isn't) for people to mistake me for a female. That always made me feel so insecure. Now I take it in stride, knowing that what I thought used to betray me is now what provides for me. In addition to a high pitched voice and lingering S's, I came to realize at some point that I also had a bit of a lisp which made me only more self-conscious. I've since learned how to minimize it. However, when I'm really tired, or have had a glass of vodka or wine, it tends to unwantingly reappear.

Church attendance was like clockwork growing up – or, at least, for me it was. Sunday school, Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service, Tuesday evening soulwinning, and Wednesday evening were all expected times of attendance. Whether my parents and siblings

attended or not, I would go with my grandparents, or, when I was old enough, I would drive myself. I prided myself on being in church at all times, “whenever the church doors were open,” as preacher would say.

### **Old Paths**

For over twenty years of my life, Paul Chappell was the man who I called my pastor. As the Man of God, he was the mouthpiece for the Divine. Few would dare make a big decision in their life without first consulting God’s Man. When one had a need, they would bring their petitions to Pastor Chappell for him to offer up his intercessions on their behalf to God. For someone to be so close to God, it only made sense that his prayers might be heard a little more clearly.

It’s easy to be intimidated by him. He’s a tall, stout man, typically dressed in a suit, rings on his fingers so that when he pounds the pulpit while preaching, it drives the message deep into the conscious of every person listening. The pulpit is ridden with indentures he’s made from his rings striking the pulpit over the years. When a particular topic would rile him up, his shouting would cause the sound system to distort. He’d jump into the air and slam his feet firmly on the hallow platform, causing a thunderous roar. He preached God and Country. He preached the “old paths.”

On one particular Sunday evening, Paul Chappell preached a sermon that will be forever etched into my mind. In it, he called for a boycott of Starbucks because they were “promoting the homosexual agenda.” Their vehicle for doing so was a simple quote on their cup:

*My only regret about being gay is that I repressed it for so long. I surrendered my youth to the people I feared when I could have been out there loving someone. Don't make that mistake yourself. Life's too damn short.*

This was one of the first times I truly remember hearing preaching against this particular topic. I was fourteen at the time.

Curiosity drove me as I nervously typed “homosexual Starbucks cup” into my computer later that week. The quote wasn’t as terrifying as I thought it was going to be. I half way expected to see pornography displayed on the cup the way it had been described in the sermon. I promptly deleted my browsing history after that, scared that whoever used the computer after me might see what I had searched.

The line to shake his hand would extend halfway down the aisle of the church. I would usually wait my turn to shake his hand – heart rate quickening the closer I got – thank him for the sermon, and scurry off. He never remembered my name. He has a way of talking down to you; calls you son but with no sense of endearment. There wasn’t any way for me to feel anything but intimidation.

There are certain topics in a Baptist church that will bring the Spirit of God down upon any congregation. The more “war hoop” a preacher could illicit from the congregation (Amen! Yes! Shake that bush! Glory! Hallelujah! Park it right there, Preacher! I’m under the spout where the glory comes out...), the more certain you could be that God was in that service.

Homosexuality was a favorite topic to preach against. Common phrases I heard from behind the pulpit and from people within the church included “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve;” “all the homosexuals should be rounded up and put onto an island so they all die out;” “it’s unnatural;” “homosexuals are reprobate sinners.” It wasn’t uncommon to hear of homosexuality being compared to rape, bestiality, or pedophilia. One faithful church member, Jim, a bit of a loose cannon, once told me that while he was out soulwinning, he came across a “queer couple” and told them how they needed to get saved or else they’d burn in hell because of their lifestyle. I listened in total discomfort.

### **Soulwinning**

In addition to “three-to-thrive” services (Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, as they were collectively called), there was also Tuesday night soulwinning. The term “soulwinning” comes from Proverbs 11:30 – *he that winneth souls is wise*. In an effort to evangelize the lost and dying of our local community, we were paired up with a soulwinning partner each Tuesday night, went out into the city, and knocked on doors, inviting people to church – the ultimate and most lofty goal being to bring someone to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We were a peculiar people, zealous of good works. I would dress in my typical pleated khakis, frumpy black shoes, and polo shirt. This was the typical “casual” outfit for guys in the youth group. The girls had a similarly bizarre dress code, always including a modest skirt.



The first soulwinning partner I ever had was Tommy. I was sixteen at the time, and was at a point in life when my social awkwardness was at its zenith. Yet, somehow, Tommy and I both found a safety in each other's quirks and very quickly became best friends. As outcasts from the upper echelons of the social strata, we spent a good amount of time with each other. I think we knew we were both very different from the other guys in the youth group. We didn't mind that we were different – at least, we didn't mind that as long as we weren't the object of any unwanted attention from authority figures.

I very slowly became less awkward as I was pushed out of my comfort zones. Soulwinning helped with that, but even then, I would avoid talking to people at all costs. It wasn't that I wanted them to go to hell, but the anxiety of potentially being yelled at for bothering someone far outweighed my desire for them to go to Heaven.

Tommy and I were both seventeen during the 2008 presidential election, which also included the hotly contested and highly polarizing Proposition 8, an amendment to the California state constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman. We were too young to vote, but we were still very aware of what was going on. According to people at church, the country was going to “hell in a handbasket” due the election of President Barack Obama. But at least Proposition 8 had passed, protecting the sacred institution of marriage from the demonic agenda of the homosexuals.

Being a Tuesday night, a soulwinning night, we were out making some visits, driving through the chaos of all the people on the streets protesting for and against Proposition 8. As we drove past them, one of

our other soulwinning partners, stuck his head out and starting chanting with them: “YES ON PROP 8! YES ON PROP 8!” If I’m honest, had I been eligible to vote, I probably would have voted “yes” on Prop 8 too. I knew no better. But when the results came in later that it had passed, there was a part of me that was very disappointed.

Soulwinning would be a regular part of our lives for the next decade.

### **Purity Pledge**

Trying to prevent fornication in our insulated community was a top priority for our youth leaders. Once a year, our Sunday school teachers would have a few lessons on purity and what exactly it means to be “pure.” We were separated by gender for these classes so that our teachers could deal with issues specific to males and females. Us guys were taught how to treat a lady, how to protect our conscious by “bouncing our eyes” if a girl was wearing something a little *too* revealing. We were taught that we should *never* be alone with a girl; touching was to be avoided, including hugs, and certainly no kissing.

At the end of these classes, we would then be asked to sign a purity pledge card in which we promised to God, our parents, and our authority figures that we would abstain from all sexual fornications and temptations. This seemed easy enough for me. I never really figured out why it was so difficult for guys to refrain from doing things with the other girls in the youth group.

Sexual sins just weren’t a temptation for me. I was never in a situation like Joseph where I had to flee and leave my coat in the hands of some whore who wanted to have sex. The times that I was alone with

another female, I had no desire to do anything of a sexual nature – certainly not because of a pledge I had made. There just wasn't any interest. I would think at times "it's because I just haven't met the right girl yet."

## **Orchestra**

As I got older, I became a little less awkward. But that doesn't mean much with the amount of awkwardness I possessed. About the same time that I had met Tommy in soulwinning was when I started to play clarinet in the church orchestra. I would later learn how to play the oboe and eventually took all the solos away from Mrs. Henderson who prided herself on playing the oboe solos on her clarinet. It became my point of pride. It wasn't unusual to receive a lot of kind remarks for my solos on any given Sunday. I look back on those times with great fondness. A lot of wonderful people played in our church orchestra.

When I was seventeen, I started taking lessons with Mrs. Zimmerman, the organist at the Methodist Church down the street. I always wanted to learn how to play the organ, and now was my chance. The first encounter I ever had with the organ was hearing Phil Smith, conservator of the Disney Concert Hall Organ, perform a concert at the her church. I was introduced to so many new musical concepts, and my horizons enlarged, even if only slightly. Knowing that I had just started taking lessons, Mrs. Graham, the orchestra librarian at church, would talk to me about when she used to play, back when she was a Presbyterian. As Baptists, organs were too formal of an instrument to be used in worship. Those were for the "high church people." I loved Mrs. Graham. She was like everyone's grandmother:

a beautiful, round face, short white hair, glasses, a bubbly personality, and witty humor. Everyone loved her. I would help her set out the sheet music every Saturday and with any other little odd jobs. It was a great shock to everyone when she passed away after a brief illness. Her vast organ music collection was left to me, in addition to the role of orchestra librarian. I gladly took up her mantle.

I was diligent at my volunteer job, pouring in hours every Saturday and Sunday, making sure the orchestra had their music, and that the library was kept in order. I prided myself on my work, and I quickly became a visible person in the church because of these roles.

### **Counsel of godly men**

If you look in my journal, you'll see a cross next to the date... At the time, I believed this to be the day that I was officially "called into the ministry." That night, I had scheduled a meeting with our youth pastor, Cary Schmidt. People either loved or hated him – and for the most part, it depended on whether you were one of the good kids or the bad kids.

As one of the "good kids," I never got much attention from him. I guess he felt that since I was doing well, he didn't have to focus much energy on me. My siblings, on the other hand, received a good amount of attention from him. I was always a bit jealous of that.

But, on this particular evening, I had Bro. Schmidt's full attention. I needed counsel. We were taught to never make a decision without seeking the counsel of older, godly men. My high school years were quickly coming to a close, and, while I still had some time, I needed to

start applying to colleges. It was obvious to everyone that music would be my major. But for a young, Baptist kid who loved choral, organ, classical, and liturgical music, trying to find a college that would fit that description was going to be hard. Bob Jones? Pensacola? West Coast? Or – God forbid – a “secular university?”

We sat in the pews just near the baptistry. Church had just finished, and it was quite noisy with adults talking and kids running. I had hoped our meeting would be a little more focused on me, but apparently right after service in the auditorium with people surrounding us was the most that could be afforded.

“Bro. Schmidt, I need advice on where to go to college. I want to study music, but I can’t see myself *not* being involved in church music. What are your thoughts?”

“It sounds like God is calling you into the ministry. If you can’t imagine yourself not being involved in a church, that is God calling you.”

“So, where should I go?” – I had been looking seriously into Bob Jones University. The fact that they had a pipe organ really intrigued me.

“I wouldn’t recommend going to Bob Jones. They’ll confuse you theologically.” Among several other minor theological differences, they didn’t subscribe to the whole cultish King James Only-ism, a “doctrine” developed by fundamentalist Peter Ruckman which taught that the King James Version of the Bible was the only inspired English translation.

“And I wouldn’t recommend going to a secular university. They’ll push the homosexual agenda onto you. I think West Coast Baptist College would be a good place for you to go.”

I still wonder. What would my life have been like had he not recommended West Coast? What if I had attended a “secular” university or another Christian college? I still wonder. Did he suspect that I might be susceptible to the homosexual agenda? Could they convert me? Apparently music majors were more vulnerable...

## **PART 2**

### **Don’t Wink at Sin**

In the fall of 2009, I was a freshman at West Coast Baptist College. The college, the school, and the church all occupy the same property and are basically one and the same. Despite a more rigid daily schedule, it wasn’t too much of a shock going from the comforts of my homeschooled environment to that of a small Christian college.

The thick rulebook for West Coast clearly outlined what was expected of us. Men were to be clean shaven at all times; haircuts were to be conservative with sideburns no lower than the middle of the ear. Absolutely no earrings, and tattoos – if gotten before admission – were encouraged to be covered. A suit was required for men during all class hours, chapel, and all church services. Mondays and Tuesdays, however, we didn’t have to wear a suit jacket. At all other times, khakis and a polo were the typical “casual” attire for most men. Everyone looked so frumpy, and if you had any sense of style, you were probably considered a rebel, worldly, or a scerner.

Chapel services were held Monday through Friday. Non-attendance was not an option, otherwise one would incur a certain number of demerits. We were all given a campus ID card which we used to scan in for chapel. We used the same card to scan in for church services which were also required: Sunday school, Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. We were allowed to miss only one service a week for work or illness.

Soulwinning was another required activity, at least once a week, if not more frequently. The more the better. I typically went on Tuesday night with friends. Tuesday nights were easy. We usually made one or two visits to people who had recently visited the church, and then called it a night. But the more pious students went on Saturday morning and went door knocking, accumulating many more reached people than I ever did.

At the end of the week, we were required to fill out our Focus Report: Which services did you attend? Did you go soulwinning? Who was/were your soulwinning partner(s)? How many doors did you knock on? How many salvations? How many visits to church? How many baptisms? These were just some of the questions that were asked. Not filling out your Focus Report resulted in fifteen demerits.

Hugging girls would warrant you a certain number of demerits. Going to the movies could possibly get you expelled. No earphones. We were subjected to random laptop searches for unapproved media, though, I never had to endure such an occurrence. For those who lived on campus, curfew was at 10:15 pm Sunday through Thursday nights, and 10:00 pm on Friday and Saturday nights. There were plenty of nights

where I was rushing to get my friends back to the campus before they got demerits.

During the announcements in one non-particular chapel, my name was called to meet with the assistant dean, Reggie Williams. A group of us “Lancaster Brats” (what students from out of town called us) met him in his office for a lecture about the need to fill out our Focus Reports: “I know y’all are a bunch of fine young men. But we don’t wink at sin here at West Coast Baptist College. Make sure to fill out those focus reports.” I couldn’t help but laugh after leaving the meeting over the fact that not filling out a Focus Report was now considered a sin.

But the pastoral staff and the college administration had that power – the power to commission sin and the power to decommission it. Not filling out a Focus Report was considered a sin because you were in disobedience with your authorities. That was the typical answer for the reasoning behind most ridiculous rules. In fundamentalist culture, you can turn any amoral action into a sin under the all-encompassing umbrella of “disobedience to authority.” The implications of that topic are for another series of articles. I saw plenty of sins commissioned and decommissioned during my time there.

This culture of standards was an overflow from the church. Though there weren’t necessarily consequences, per se, many of these same “standards” were applied to the church members.

### **Keeping busy**



I never had a girlfriend. It was never a priority in high school nor in college. By the time I was in my late teens, I was starting to come to a terrifying realization:

I didn't like girls.

I never thought the words, but there was a conscious awareness within me that instead of being attracted to girls, I was attracted to other guys. I knew what that meant, and I knew the consequences of those attractions. According to what I believed, I was already saved, because I had already accepted Christ into my heart when I was four years old, right in front of the washer and dryer in the first house my parents owned. When I was eight, I was baptized. My entire life was given wholly to the church. But I knew there would be consequences if anyone ever found out I liked guys rather than girls.

I never believed those consequences would send me to hell. In a way, rather, the real consequences were worse – not being able to live a life in service to God.

I was constantly afraid that my voice would betray me. The fact that I was so immersed in music and never played sports was also problematic. I was definitely perceived as too effeminate. I hung out with the girls and felt completely comfortable with them. I didn't like most things that guys typically liked. But if I kept myself busy volunteering, soulwinning, playing in the church orchestra, helping in Vacation Bible School, working in elementary Sunday school classes, attending Saturday men's prayer, no one would question me. Right? So many things counted against me that I had to have enough things to count for me. With every responsibility, every kind comment on a job well

done, I turned them into bricks to guard the innermost secrets of my life.

It was sometime during my late high school years that I finally thought the words “I’m gay.” There isn’t much you can do to prepare yourself for a self-realization such as that. It was something I had always been aware of, but never thought. And when eventually the whispered words left my lips while facing myself in the mirror, it terrified me.

It had become real, and it had become a problem.

### **Divine Providence**

I continued to keep myself busy throughout my academic career at West Coast Baptist College. The church and the college are essentially one and the same, both having been started by Paul Chappell. I continued to immerse myself into music and genealogy, keeping myself too busy to date. Now that I had finally admitted to myself that I might be gay, I knew I really needed to pursue dating. I chose who I thought were the attainable girls in the college to pursue as potential life partners. But nothing ever panned out. It was an ugly combination of looks and self-confidence that hindered me. However, there were two girls who I grew up with that I came very close to dating: Marie Leon and Stephanie James.

One evening at church, while I was helping with the livestreaming ministry, it was pointed out to both Stephanie and I that we were wearing the same color. Something clicked with us, and from then on, we both started spending more time with each other, and eventually one night she came over to watch a movie. My sister Allison also

invited her then-crush, Jason. While the four of us sat on the couch, my mind was drifting toward Jason, who also happened to be a crush of mine. Little did my sister know how much we had in common.

Stagnantly, things continued with Stephanie. People were asking me “Are you two dating?” “Have you asked her father’s permission to date yet?” That was the next step. Ask Bro. James (all men in the church were referred to as “brother”) permission to date his daughter.

On a non-particular Wednesday evening, I finally mustered up the courage to approach Bro. James – an ex-Marine, masculine type of man, the opposite-of-me-type of man – and ask him if I could date his daughter. Only, he wasn’t there that evening. I decided this was reason enough not to pursue a relationship. Looking back now, it was probably Divine Providence. Things continued to not go anywhere, and eventually it all fizzled out, not only ending whatever could have been, but hurting our friendship for many years following.

Marie and I had always been very close friends. We went to all the banquets that the college held, hung out at the church, and ran in the same circle of friends. She played the flute in church orchestra which meant we spent even more time together.

I was perplexed. We had such a great time with each other, but there was no attraction to her on my part. I loved her, but only as I loved a best friend. I could tell she liked me, and I knew for a fact that her family loved me. Everyone kept pushing me to ask her to be my girlfriend. But, as with Stephanie, things went nowhere. I could tell I had hurt her too. But I had no idea how to rectify either situation

without outing myself to everyone. There's so much I regret about both situation.

### **Birds of a feather...**

Tommy Garcia was my first best friend. Prior to that, I honestly had no friends my age. I remember crying myself to sleep a lot when I was younger, asking God to give me *a* friend – much how I would pray to God to take away the feelings I had toward other guys. Zach and Lance were also good friends. The four of us spent a lot of time together, but you could tell that Tommy and I were not like the other guys.

Toward the end of my high school years, I struck up a conversation with a guy on Youtube who was asking about a particular male soloist in one of the church's videos. After responding to him, we began a conversation that lasts to this day. We quickly exchanged email addresses, and then moved over to having one to two hour long phone conversations nearly every day. The fact that we both had Sprint as our cell phone carriers was what saved us from the wrath of our parents when the phone bills came in. We both had the same interests in music, church, and all things atypical for most guys our age, such as the Prairie Home Companion and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, among the plethora of others. Joseph Charles went to West Coast as a freshman the same year that I did. We were just about inseparable.

While a sophomore in college, I started the first handbell ensemble on campus and directed it for several years. I carefully curated the right musicians and formed a very tight-knit family. Two of my best decisions were to add Kevin and Sam. Kevin and I became inseparable

and is still among my closest friends. Sam and I would also spend a lot of time with each other, and had some of the best times in college.

Later, I would realize that birds of a feather flock together, as the saying goes.

One non-particular morning in November, I saw Joseph on my way to chapel looking quite tired and disheveled. He was on his way to vice-president Dr. Rasmussen's office. He didn't seem to know why he was being called up there. What I said to him next still haunts me to this day: "well, if things go well, I'll see you in chapel. If they don't, then I guess I won't." We laughed, and I continued toward the auditorium.

I didn't see him the rest of that day.

The next evening, before orchestra rehearsal, I got a call from Joseph. I heard sobbing on the other end.

*"I got kicked out. They found out that I'm gay. Can you ever forgive me? I understand if you don't want to be friends anymore."*

My heart was beating furiously. My vision was blurred with tears. So many thoughts and emotions shot through my body all at once.

How could I hate him? *I'm gay*. There's absolutely nothing to forgive. If they found out about Joseph, will they find out about me? What will they do?

"Of course I'll still be your friend. There's nothing even to forgive." Though I didn't have all the right words to say, I was absolutely certain when I said that to him.

We chatted for a while. He told me how he was called into the office, how a student, John, asked to borrow his laptop, violated his privacy by looking through emails, discovered the secret relationship that Joseph had started, and finally turned it all over to the administration. When Joseph arrived in Mark Rasmussen's office, he had a stack of printed emails waiting for him. They called his mother at work and outed Joseph to her. He was kicked out, presented with no other option but to return home, and told not to seek the help of the church at which he was interning in Newport Beach. "Go home and seek the counsel of your pastor" was basically what he was told. Fortunately, he didn't do that. He stayed in California and rebuilt his life.

### **The Royal Wedding**

A few days after the world was abuzz with the excitement over the royal wedding, Bro. and Mrs. Hicks (she a professor at West Coast, and he a deacon in the church) invited some of us college students to their house for a time of fellowship. It was suggested that we watch something on TV since the "on-campus" college students had no access to one. It was between some type of sports game and the royal wedding. Having no desire to watch any type of sports, I was happy when it was decided that we'd watch the wedding.

Kate's dress was gorgeous. Her bridal gown flowed behind her as she walked down the nave of Westminster Abbey, accompanied by the choir singing Parry's "I Was Glad." The music was amazing. It was the primary reason why I wanted to watch it. Paul Mealor's "Ubi Caritas" and Rutter's "This Is the Day" were the highlights for me. But a quote

that Richard Chartres, the then Bishop of London, used in his sermon buried itself deep within me, and I had no idea why:

*“Be who God meant you to be, and you’ll set the world on fire”*

... a quote by St. Catherine of Sienna. There was no way that I could know the impact those words would later have on me.

### **Maundy Thursday**

I’ve always been intrigued by things that are atypical for a Baptist boy – things like handbells. In addition to learning how to play the organ from Mrs. Zimmerman, she began teaching me how to play handbells in the summer of 2010. Soon, she had me playing with her church ensemble, the Oliver Handbell Choir. The group is a close-knit family of church and community members, all primarily several years my senior.

Taking the techniques that I had learned, I formed a handchime choir that fall semester at the college. Shortly after starting this group, the college acquired its own three octave handbell set, and I had quite deliberately started the first handbell choir at West Coast Baptist College. Culture was severely lacking in the college, and I saw this as my small way of bringing just a little more diversity to the campus. I was ridiculed for a while. People thought it was a joke, or that it was an effeminate activity. But for me, it was such a great source of pride and happiness, and, eventually, the group gained some level of respect. Our handbell groups were like families. We did a lot of wonderful things together, and I will always look back on those times with great fondness.

I didn't stop playing with Mrs. Zimmerman's handbell group. I played with them for several years, subbing for special services and occasions. One such service was in April 2012, for their Maundy Thursday service. The word sounded funny to me, but I knew it had something to do with Holy Week. As Baptists, we ignored most of church history that didn't include other Baptists and never used the liturgical calendar. That would have been too "Catholic." Each year at Lancaster Baptist, we would perform an Easter musical, once on Saturday night and a reprise on Sunday evening. That was our Easter tradition.

I had no idea what a "Maundy Thursday" service was. But as soon as it started, I knew it was going to be something like I had never experienced before. It was my spiritual renaissance. It was my awakening to Christian traditions I had never known. It awoke something in me that I never knew was asleep. It was one of the first times in my life, to that point, that I felt I had truly experienced the presence of God.

The prayers, the music of Taizé, and the sense of community all created something I had never sensed before, something that I could always feel was lacking at my own church. But what moved me most was communion. I had never taken communion outside of my own church. It was really frowned upon. Lancaster Baptist has a closed policy for communion, meaning that only members in good standing were eligible to partake in the Lord's table. I was always skeptical of the logic behind that position. Looking back, it was probably done more as another way to keep control over the congregation than for any Scriptural reasoning.



I don't think I fully realized why I was so moved that evening. Looking back now, I know the reason is because I was finally called by my name.

In the twenty-plus years that I attended Lancaster Baptist, never once did I hear the man that I called "pastor" call me by name. I'm convinced that he never actually knew it. But that evening, Pastor Terry walked up to me as I stood waiting for the elements, took a piece of break, placed it in my hand, and, with a deep, sincere look in his eyes, said: "*Anthony*, the body of Christ is broken for *you*."

"Amen."

Something happened in me that evening. I realized in that moment that Terry Van Hook was more of a pastor to me than Paul Chappell. The realization was irrevocable and started me down a path that would lead me into desires for deeper worship and to have a pastor who truly cared about *me*.

### **Carefully crafted words**

I was shaken to my core after the incident with Joseph. Fortunately, that was not where his story ended. He enrolled at California Baptist University, finished his bachelor's in composition, and is now one of the strongest people that I know. I always knew that I could confide in him if the time ever came when I would need to. But I never planned on it; I never had any intention of revealing the secrets behind the brick wall. Never.

Admitting to yourself that you're gay is one thing – especially when it's only in thought and never spoken – but to admit to someone else that you have attractions to other men is completely different.

In December 2012, the Crystal Cathedral had their last performance of Messiah before they relinquished the properties to the Catholic Diocese of Orange. Joseph and I knew we needed to take advantage of this opportunity. The plan to get to Garden Grove was fairly round-about. My friend Sofia and I would leave Palmdale, pick up Joseph and his friend at Cal Baptist in Riverside, and then head to Garden Grove. It was an incredible evening, and we even got to meet the well-known southern California conductor Don Neuen. Also in attendance were some other Independent Fundamental Baptists, our then-head of the music department at the college, and some other friends. Seeing them in the Crystal Cathedral felt quite odd. Paul Chappell preached hard against their ministry and their watered-down version of Christianity. But we were all music people who wanted to see the last performance.

After dropping off Joseph and his friend, Sofia and I made the trek back to Palmdale. Right at the Cajon Junction, I could tell she wanted to ask me something. Sofia and I had been friends for a while. We both grew up at the church, but Sofia was “normal.” She wasn’t one of the crazy ones that would turn you in for something “bad” like going to the movies. We had a level of trust that made me feel comfortable with her. When I could tell she wanted to ask me something, I knew exactly what it was. She initially shied away, but I – surprisingly – prodded her to ask me.

“Anthony, are you gay?”

Dreading, knowing, waiting for this moment to actually happen someday, I had carefully crafted what words I was going to say well before then: “I’m attracted to guys, but I know acting on it is a sin, and

I will never do that.” At the time, those truly were my beliefs. I wasn’t lying, and it was a safe and sufficient answer. After a five minute conversation, some questions and answers, we changed the subject.

In that moment, she was the only person to ever know what was on the other side of those bricks.

### **PART 3**

#### **Self-confidence**

Having finally admitted my secret to myself and to another person, I started to pray more fervently for God to take away these same-sex attractions from me. I prayed this for years with no change. If anything, the desires only increased. But there was no way I could ever act out on my feelings. There was too much at stake. By my junior year, I was teaching music at Lancaster Baptist School (also affiliated with the church). If the administration ever found out, I could be kicked out of school, fired from my job, and be asked to step down from any volunteer positions in the church. At the very least, I would be forced to receive counseling if I was to continue in any way within our Independent Fundamental Baptist circles. The possibility that I could never work in another “like-minded” Baptist church was very likely. This was my life, all wrapped up in the bubble located on 40<sup>th</sup> Street East and Ave. J. I wasn’t about to end up like Joseph.

But three things happened in the summer of 2013: I graduated from West Coast Baptist College, I began exercising and losing weight, and I successfully auditioned for a community choir called the Sunday Night Singers directed by Mike McCullough.

After graduating, Tommy told me how he was going to start doing the Insanity cardio program, a video set that you could do from home. I decided to give it a shot too. I was grossly overweight and suffered low self-esteem for most of my life. Over the next year and a half, I lost some seventy-plus pounds. I also started the process of Invisalign to get my teeth straightened. My self-confidence went up with every passing day, with every pound shed, and with every set of Invisalign completed. Of course, there were still insecurities, but I felt so much better about myself.

I felt so great about myself, in fact, that I started to change little things: my haircut, my clothes, style, etc. People started to say things about me. I could feel people becoming suspicious of me. Before playing for a Sunday morning service, a fellow orchestra member leaned over to me and said “you’re the only straight oboe player I’ve ever met.” I laughed nervously. It was almost as if he was saying “I see through you.”

One Sunday, my haircut drew the attention of Paul Chappell. He came up to me, and, with an almost knowing look in his eye, he said to me “son, that’s an interesting haircut.” I had asked for an undercut a few days before at my barber: short on the sides, and longer on top, a variant of what I usually ask for. The next day, I was called into the school administrator’s office. Bro. Lee said “Pastor has asked that you get your haircut changed. He said it looks too worldly, like a boy band haircut.” This was all code for “it looks too gay.” I was back at the barber that afternoon.

After conducting our junior high choir in a service one evening, it came to my attention that an older, unpleasant woman in the church commented on how my pants were “much too tight.”

One fashion accessory that I added that I still enjoy donning is colorful socks. After playing for a service one morning, our music director Jon Guy came up to me and said “Pastor has asked that you not wear such colorful socks. He says they’re distracting and that you need to wear more subdued colors.” My friend Nate was not told the same thing about his socks that had little hotdogs on them. He was the son of the pastor of “the largest Baptist church in Virginia.”

I was really starting to feel the pressure, and I was become very uncomfortable.

### **Where life is heading**

My environment felt smaller, almost to the point of causing pain. Right after graduating from West Coast Baptist College, I started attending Antelope Valley College. I realized that the education I received at West Coast was totally insufficient, and because it is not an accredited college, none of my credits could transfer anywhere significant. I had to start all over. But a whole new world of thoughts and ideologies were opened up to me – thoughts and ideologies that I had been warned against my entire life. None of these affected my own personal beliefs about God, but they truly did change me.

My last year at West Coast Baptist College, I started taking music lessons again with my dear teacher, Margaret Benson. Through her teaching, and that of Mary Zimmerman and Mike McCullough, I grew

exponentially in my musicality. Having joined the Sunday Night Singers in 2013, I was exposed to music I had only dreamed of singing.

In 2014, our choir competed in the World Choir Games in Riga, Latvia. I raised the necessary money and was able to take this life-transforming trip. We sang in some of the most beautiful churches in Latvia. One moment I will never forget was waking up extra early one morning and attending Mass at the Riga Dom. It was all in the vernacular language, so I couldn't understand what was being said. But I could join in on the hymns. I went forward during communion, crossed my chest, and the priest placed his hands on my head and said "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you." I'll never forget that. It was one of the most spiritually moving moments I've ever encountered.

But there was another important moment that took place back at the hotel one of the nights. Josh, the other first tenor, and I shared a room. It was no secret that Josh was gay. I admired him for the fact that he was able to live openly as a gay man with his partner Steve. I felt totally comfortable talking with Josh about anything. Sunday Night Singers had become my "safe space." After a long day of singing, Josh asked me "So what are your thoughts on being gay." I knew what he was trying to get at. He was trying to see if I was gay or not. I gave him the same answer that I gave Sofia; I'm attracted to men, but I think it's a sin and won't act on it. But I made it very clear that I would never condemn anyone who is gay. Who am I to condemn? We talked for quite a while, and it really forced me to consider my life and where I was heading.

## **A boiling point**

Joining Sunday Night Singers really pushed me out of the music bubble to which I was confined. For so long, I had only known the music environment of my private teachers and Lancaster Baptist. Being exposed to new people and new music really pushed me as a musician, and I saw exponential growth in my own self. However, this made it difficult to continue living the way I was.

Shawn and Xavier, my bosses and good friends, asked if I would take on more leadership roles in the school, start working with the junior high choir, start teaching this music class, start teaching that music class. I was thrilled, and I was excited to share what I had been learning in hopes of increasing the quality of music being produced by the students.

As the 2014–2015 school year progressed, I quickly realized that the three of us had very different definitions of the word “quality,” and we had very different goals for the students. We began to clash, get into arguments – sometimes this would even happen in front of the students. Though I had taken several years of organ lessons, I have never called myself a pianist, and have never felt comfortable teaching piano. One day, while I was teaching a private clarinet lesson, Xavier interrupted the lesson by telling me I was going to teach a new piano student.

“I’m not comfortable teaching piano. I’m not going to teach him.”

The conversation grew into an argument, all occurring in front of the student. I felt it was unethical for me to teach something in which I did

not feel proficient. This was only one example of our many clashes that were to follow. And the clashes weren't just concerning music. But my views on theology, liturgy, "standards," and the overall culture of Lancaster Baptist were quickly evolving. I was often challenged about my "lengthy" choir warm ups, when in reality, they were nowhere near long enough. My views on church and worship were becoming at odds with those of the church's and school's, causing more arguments to ensue.

Things came to a boiling point in March, 2015, during the annual Fine Arts Competition. I nearly quit right in the middle of the two day event. Fortunately, I had the wits about me to wait until the end of the school year. There was so much tension between me and Xavier that it would be wrong for me to continue working there. Two weeks before graduation, I submitted my letter of resignation to the school administrator, Jim Lee.

### **Marriage Equality**

That June, I decided to do something I had never done before: I decided to go on a road trip by myself. The purpose of the trip was primarily for genealogical research. But it was also to escape some of the mounting pressures back at home. For about a week, I spent time with family and in libraries and archives. It was an incredibly fruitful trip. I found a lot and I learned a lot about myself.

One night of the trip, I was able to stay in San Francisco and visit with a cousin of mine. It was my first time ever being there. The city was electric that night. So many people were out on the streets. It seemed



like there were more gay people out than was probably typical. I had no idea what was going on until I met with my cousin.

“Did you hear? The Supreme Court has ruled in favor of marriage equality. The entire city is celebrating tonight.”

I had no idea.

Looking back now, I find it quite serendipitous that I just happened to be in San Francisco for the first time the night of the court ruling. The next day, there were parades and celebrations throughout the entire city. Because I was still conflicted inside, I wasn't able to connect with what was happening. But I knew that I was happy for what had happened.

Later in the trip, on the 101 south heading into Cambria, I called Joseph.

“Have you heard about the court ruling?”

“Yes! I'm really happy about it! It's a wonderful thing!”

“It is!” I was surprised I was agreeing with him. “Joseph, I wanted to call and tell you that when you were expelled, I told you that I couldn't condemn you. The reason I say that is because I also struggle with the same thing you do.”

I still couldn't say that I was gay. I wasn't ready to admit that. And my views were still very conservative. But being liberated from my former environments, the bonds that held me back were slowly starting to lose their hold. It was almost as if I was telling Joseph “I'm almost ready to come out.”

But not yet.

### **Afraid of two things**

My life continued to change. I was trying new things fashion-wise. I grew out my facial hair. I freely and openly went to the movies – something that as a student and employee, I technically wasn't allowed to do. There was so much more freedom outside of the confines of fundamental Christianity.

I began learning new concepts that left a profound impact on me, despite being warned of the “evils” of the secular academic system. In the fall of 2015, I took two classes that would change me significantly. Both were communication classes. The teachers challenged me in ways I had never been challenged before within the comforts of Lancaster Baptist and West Coast. Oddly enough, one of the teachers was quite evangelical, and the other a Mormon.

On a non-particular day, in passing, one of my professors said “we're only afraid of two things: not getting what we want, or losing something we already have.” It was like a simmering coal was dropped inside me. It didn't initially take effect, but the longer it remained, the more of an impact it would eventually have. I started to question everything about me, everything I was afraid of. Was I afraid of not getting something? Was I afraid of losing something?

I was afraid of losing love. I was afraid of losing relationships. I was afraid of losing respect.

### **Los Angeles Master Chorale**

There's a reason why people who grow up here in Palmdale move away as soon as they can. When people ask me what there is to do here, my list usually can be surmised in ten truly interesting places or less. The lack of entertainment is only part of the reason why many people opt to move away.

But with roots that dig deep and were planted here long ago, I feel that may have affected me differently than it has many of my friends. My grandparents all came here in their youth, and I was born in the same hospital as my parents. We're considered "old timers." The desire to move away isn't quite so strong. There's an openness here that can't be found in the city. Swaths of open land and the ability to see the vastness of the universe give one a sense of how truly insignificant we really are in the grand scheme of things, and a gratefulness to God for caring for us.

Still... we go elsewhere for our entertainment.

One evening, A few of us – probably Tommy and Marie – drove down to The Grove in Hollywood to escape the monotony of a typical evening. Among all the hustle of people shopping and enjoying their own evenings, there was a group of carolers. I recognized the insignia on their pamphlets that they held. It was the logo for the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

One of the most influential performances I had ever seen, up to that point, was a concert by the LA Master Chorale in 2013 for the High School Choir Festival. I remember sitting in Walt Disney Concert Hall, my first time, thinking to myself "I would love to sing with a choir like this someday." Naturally, I couldn't resist going up to them

to ask them a little bit more about the group, and to let them know that I was a musician too. The man I spoke with said “well, we have auditions coming up soon.”

I had thought about auditioning the previous year but knew I wasn't ready. I didn't have the experience nor the repertoire to audition. But this coming year felt different. I still didn't have the experience nor the repertoire, but what was the worst that could happen?

*“We are afraid of not getting something we want.”*

A few days later, I looked up the requirements for the audition process. I called my voice teacher to ask her what pieces I should use from our lessons. She was just about to leave for vacation and couldn't give much help. So, I compiled a stack of solo repertoire with which I felt comfortable and called Mrs. Zimmerman to ask if she could accompany me.

“Oh! Anthony! I'd love to! I know you'll make it in!”

“When can we record? Can we do next week?”

“I leave the day after tomorrow, and won't be back till next Friday” – the due date for audition material – “could we do tomorrow?”

I had one day to gather all my music, brush up on it, and record.

## **Two words**

I continued to ponder what exactly it was that I was afraid of. What would make me lose everything that I knew? Admitting two words could cause me to lose everything I had built up in my life to that point.

On another non-particular evening in about November, Tommy and I went to dinner as we typically did. It wasn't unusual to end up sitting in his car for another hour or two, listening to music and chatting about life. On this non-particular evening, we sat outside of Dickey's BBQ, discussing where we'd like to potentially travel during the new year. For no particular reason, deep inside me, a thought occurred: "I could tell Tommy now." But an invisible force kept those two secretive words from escaping. For the next two months, I struggled. Every time I tried to share my secret, the invisible force grew stronger and stronger.

The need, the desire to confess who I was to someone was growing intolerable. The weight that a secret can carry is nearly impossible to explain. It wears you down in ways that you don't realize. It suppresses aspects of your being. It affects you mentally, emotionally, and physically. You're constantly on guard to make sure that no one even comes close to suspecting. It makes you fatigued and leery. Only when this burden is lifted do you realize the damage that it has caused.

Eventually, I came to realize that there would be no way I could reveal this secret verbally. But I knew that I could write it.

After another failed attempt of telling Tommy after dinner on January 14, I went home and sat in bed with my laptop and typed out a three paged letter:

*Tommy, I've been wanting to talk to you about something since we ate at Dicky's back in about December. So apparently the only way I can do it is to write it out. It's even incredibly hard for me to type this. But Tommy, I'm gay.*

## **January 15**

I emailed the letter to Tommy at 2:00 am on January 15, 2016. I couldn't sleep the entire night. I was freezing and shaking with nerves. I had no idea what his response was going to be. Every bad and ugly situation that could take place ran through my mind.

Yes, people had asked me if I was gay in the past – three specific times – and yes, I admitted to being attracted to other men. But this was the first time I willingly admitted that *I am gay* – the first time I accepted who I was, the first time that *“be who God meant you to be, and you’ll set the world on fire”* made sense. And despite being an emotional wreck, I could feel myself lightening as the secret lost its strength.

I woke up early. I couldn't sleep, so why continue to fight it. I was constantly checking my phone to see if I had gotten a response. At 8:00 am, I refreshed my phone again, and there was a response:

*“I love you right now more than I have.”*

I stopped reading there and cried.

After reading the email through a few more times and trying to comprehend what he was saying, I submitted my audition material to LA Master Chorale – the day of the deadline.

## **PART 4**

### **De profundis**

The brick wall that I had built up around my heart to keep others from looking in had taken a significant blow. I've always felt very deep

emotions, but each brick that I had strategically placed over the years kept me from truly being able to feel. All of the sudden, joy became inexpressible; but depression was as dark as the deepest parts of the earth, as deep as any hellish pit, and as cold as any biting winter.

With each person that I told, every day that I lived out in truth, a brick was dislodged, exposing a little more of me each day. I wasn't just exposing my innermost self to others – I was always learning more about myself.

Shortly after telling Tommy, one of the strongest feelings I have ever known consumed me. Feelings I've never felt took over, and it felt like the depression that was swallowing me was going to devour my entire being. "How do I continue?" "How can I be gay and continue to live out my faith?" These were questions I was constantly asking myself.

I was taking a winter intercession online math class (one of the worst decisions I've ever made) during the midst of all this. With any spare time that I had, I was studying and doing my math homework. I was doing well in the class until I had to confront my emotions and the very real fact that I had finally come out. I ended up failing the class. Other emotions of wanting a relationship were also consuming my mind, driving me further and further into the pit – *de profundis*.

God did not want to hear from me. If I was gay, *God did not want to hear from me*. This is what was implicitly said to me throughout my life – that God would not listen to the prideful, the reprobate, the scorners. Though I had never once acted out on my "impulses," they were in me. The thoughts were just as evil as the deeds, as we had been taught. I couldn't pray. How was I supposed to? My entire life, I was

taught that homosexuality was among the worst sins one could commit.

One night, after failing an online quiz, dark emotions welling up inside of me, struggling to figure out how to proceed with life, I broke down and cried. To that point in my life, I had never felt so alone. It seemed that there was no way I could ever escape the depths to which I had fallen. But something in me said “God wants to hear from you.” The thought persisted: “*You are His child*, and He wants to hear from you.”

*De profundis clamavi ad te Domine.*

I had no words. They were truly groanings which could not be uttered. But in the midst of what felt like time suspended, I was able to simply pray “God, help me.”

### **Safety and Survival**

Eventually I told more friends. I met with Josh at his house. He read the letter I sent to Tommy, and we discussed it, and what some of my plans might be. I will always treasure the advice that he gave me that day. I told Joi as we sat chatting at Starbucks. She cried for me. I told Kevin. He was ecstatic. Hilary, Marie, and others soon knew.

Depression was still a very real presence in my life. But with each person I came out to, it slowly – *slowly*– started to dissipate. I wanted everyone to know, but I was terrified at the thought of that. To that point, my family still did not know. It was hard to look any of them in the eye, to even have a simple conversation with them. One particular evening, I walked through the front door of our home and was overcome with anxiety at the sight of all my family gathered in the front



room. Allison had just announced to the family that she and Shane were expecting a baby. The energy in the room was buzzing, but I felt completely dead.

I hurried off to my room and secluded myself from my family. I knew I needed to tell *someone*. The burden of keeping it from them was beginning to take its toll. I knew I would be safe to tell Allison. I remembered some years previous us four older siblings were together, when out of nowhere she said: “If any of you came out as being gay, I would support you one hundred percent.” I carried those words with me from that point forward, knowing that if I had any ally in the family, it would be Allison.

When you’re in the closet, you learn to carefully listen and analyze everything that everyone says. It’s a matter of safety and survival. I told her that night. She cried. And as she promised, she has supported me every step of the way. A few nights later, I told Angelica. Aaron found out next. A few weeks later, I wrote my parents a letter. “*We love you and accept you for who you are.*” I could not have asked for a better response. Things slowly got better.

God was helping me.

## **Victory**

Since resigning my job at Lancaster Baptist School, my relationship with the church had changed so drastically. One day, my old boss and friend, Shawn, invited me to lunch. Conversation remained very light, initially; then we progressed deeper. Not planning to do so at all, I came out to Shawn and told him what I had been going through the past

several months. His response was adamant, solemn, and sincere: “you’ll get victory over this.”

Over the next several weeks, we would meet a handful of times for several hours. He was trying desperately to convince me that I needed to seek counseling, that I needed to “get right with God.” But how do you rectify something that God created? How do you “get victory” over a nature that God instilled into you?

### **Accosted**

My relationship with Lancaster Baptist Church disintegrated in a matter of months. I was accosted by Paul Chappell several times in an incredibly aggressive manner, each time leaving me totally shaken. I became incredibly afraid to be around him and would avoid crossing his path at all cost. There is a history of maltreatment of anyone who resigns from working at the church. I was warned of this by Mrs. Hicks, who endured mistreatment after resigning as a professor from West Coast. But she was fortunate to not have the added complication of sexuality.

Things came to a boiling point after Sunday school one morning. I was in the area known as the back hallway where the choir and orchestra lined up prior to services. I was chatting with Marie, Melissa, and Tracy as I typically did between services. I could sense something horrible was about to happen. Just as I finished the thought, Paul Chappell walked by, turned back around, looked at me, and said in the most demeaning manner:

“You’re not supposed to be here. What are you doing here, and why are you constantly bothering our musicians? You need to leave this area and take your seat in the auditorium.”

He scolded Melissa, Marie, and Tracy too. Everyone saw what had happened; I was humiliated in front of people that I had known for years. I don’t believe I’ve ever been so unjustly belittled by someone with so much power in my entire life.

I took my seat in the auditorium, totally dejected and not having any desire to be there. It was Memorial Day, 2016. Paul Chappell began a very politically charged sermon, and in his typical fashion, started to rant and rave, shouting and stomping. My mom and grandpa were the only other members of the family there with me. Sitting there, humiliated, feeling completely beaten down, I had to endure him shout from the pulpit “*Adam and Eve; not Adam and Steve.*” My grandpa eventually got up and left, followed by my mom. I don’t know why I sat there and endured the rest.

I’ve noticed that it’s Paul Chappell’s habit to not apologize directly to anyone. Instead, he sent Jon Guy (our then music director) to talk with me. There was no apology, only that Paul Chappell was “not angry with me.” He also suggested to me that I not hang out with Roger who was a “known open homosexual.” The fact that the church knew who I was hanging out with really disturbed me. I had met Roger through Kevin just a few months previous. “How does the church know who I’m friends with?”

Not long after, Jon came again to reiterate that Paul Chappell was not angry with me. This time, however, I countered him, summoning a

source of strength that I never knew I possessed. I asked him why Paul Chappell never came to apologize to me directly for the way I was treated. How could the man I called “pastor” treat me so poorly? How could I ever call him Pastor again? Jon could not offer a sufficient answer. I then told him that I did not trust Paul Chappell and that I could no longer call him my pastor.

### **Scorner**

Shortly after all this had happened, I finally came out to my voice teacher, Mrs. Benson. The emotional stress from coming out and dealing with all these different issues really took a toll on my ability to sing.

We sat in her dining room after one of our lessons, and she listened to me as we sipped on tea. I told her everything that had happened, how I was told that I needed to get counseling, and about my traumatic run-ins with Paul Chappell. She looked at me and said with a seriousness in her eyes I had not encountered from her: “If you feel like you *need* to get counseling, do *not* get your counseling from anyone at the church. Get it from a professional in LA.”

As difficult as it was to attend Lancaster Baptist on Sundays, I couldn’t stop going to church. I needed church. I needed God. I wasn’t going to give up my faith for sexuality. We talked about how I could look for another church once I moved away; this would cause the least amount of attention. So many people have left Lancaster Baptist totally disgruntled, and would slander the church any time they got. This was not my intention, but now it’s easy to understand why people would do that.

In June, Tommy and I took a road trip to Seattle at the beginning of his summer internship with Costco. During that trip, I met Ray through Sam, an older gay man who really helped me in those early months. He introduced me to many of his friends from the Seattle Men's Chorus and to new perspectives on life. Coming out in his late twenties after leaving Mormonism, Ray and I could relate on many issues. I felt like he truly understood me.

However, my time with Ray was only briefly lived during that June trip. I returned to Seattle again, this time to stay with him for a week in August. With two months having elapsed, I had grown a little more and had even more questions for Ray. He took me under his wing and tried to help me in any way that he could. It's hard to describe that single week. A month's worth of experiences occurred in that short time. I met new people. I walked around the entire city, around Capitol Hill. I had coffee with Fr. Ryan, the pastor of St. James Cathedral. I considered becoming a Catholic. I went on what I can truly call my first date with a guy named Brian. It felt like a lifetime had been lived in those seven days.

I was nobody in Seattle. Yet, I was truly Anthony in Seattle.

My flight arrived at LAX late Tuesday evening. The next night, I was sitting at Lancaster Baptist Church for Wednesday night Bible study. The thought of sitting in the midst of such a conservative congregation after having just gone on a date with another guy made me chuckle to myself. But that feeling of secrecy was short lived. After the service, Sofia and I ended up chatting with each other. In the middle of our conversation, she said:

“I have something to tell you, but I don’t know if I should.” Sofia knew that I had come out because I had told her a few months previous.

“Just tell me. Nothing will surprise me at this point.”

“I had lunch with Pastor a few weeks ago and another church family. I asked Pastor how I should feel about homosexuality and told him how I had a friend [me] that had recently come out, that he was doing well, and that I actually felt happy for him. His response was:

‘I know who you’re talking about. Our church men have been counseling him, but he’s refusing their advice. He’s a scorner, and you need to distance yourself from him.’”

*He’s a scorner.*

The words severed any remaining emotions I had toward Lancaster Baptist.

*He’s a scorner.*

He never once personally approached me to ask me how I was doing, what I was going through, to see if I needed help. My “pastor.” The man who is supposed to be the “under shepherd” of the church. The man who we are supposed to be able to trust.

Whatever attachments I had left to him were completely severed.

A few days later, on Sunday, I sat down in my room and typed out the following letter:

*Dear Pastor Chappell and church deacons,*

*Please accept my formal request for resignation of membership from the Lancaster Baptist Church.*

*Sincerely,*

*Anthony Ray*

I didn't go back for months.

### **Interim**

From conversations with people who knew about the situation, a picture slowly began to form of what actually happened after coming out to Shawn. He eventually would tell Paul Chappell about our conversations, causing our drastic run-ins. Paul Chappell then emailed Jim Lee, the school administrator, ordering him to direct teachers who were also friends of mine to restrict their time spent with me. Staff meetings were held, and blame was placed on the single's pastor for not addressing this issue soon enough. I'm sure there is still so much more that I still don't know.

People started to share their experiences with me. On two separate occasions, I was told how Jerry Ferrso, the assistant pastor who oversaw the outreach program, specifically told two different individuals not to keep bringing their lesbian friends for discipleship – they would try to infiltrate the church and cause dissension.

I was repulsed at the thought that I had attended a church that was turning away people based on their sexuality – literally turning away people from learning about God. It was so easy to leave.

I had visited Palmdale Community Church once before. The music was nowhere near what I could appreciate, but Pastor Dean was a good man, and his messages – though quite lengthy – were very well thought out, considered, and presented. I needed a new faith community, so I started attending regularly, and finally approached Pastor Dean about church membership. During an inquisitor’s meeting on church membership, I said to him: “I have no idea how long I will be here. And I need to be honest with you when I tell you that this will only be an interim church for me. I don’t know if you would want me to join” His answer was not what I expected: “Do what the Spirit moves in you. If you’re here six days or six months, I’m happy to have you.”

Spiritual leaders continued to be a great source of anxiety for me. Whenever I had an encounter with Pastor Dean, my heart rate would quicken and I would tense up. There was absolutely no reason for this other than that he was a spiritual authority in my life. One specific instance really made me realize how truly messed up it was to be so afraid of my spiritual leaders:

Habits die hard. All throughout my family’s time at Lancaster Baptist, we called ourselves “backrow Baptists.” This habit followed me to Palmdale Community Church. I typically slipped in half way through the music portion of the service and found a seat near the back of the auditorium. One Sunday morning, I felt an arm slide around my shoulder during the music portion of the service. I looked, and it was Pastor Dean. My heart started beating faster, my palms became sweaty, and I immediately tensed up. But then it hit me:

Why am I so afraid of this man?



I made a decision that day to never be afraid of any spiritual figure in my life ever again.

## **Silence**

About the same time that I started attending Palmdale Community Church was when I started visiting St. Andrew's Abbey in Valyermo. Tucked away in the foothills of the northern San Gabriel Mountain range is the small Benedictine monastery. Little did I know the first time I visited how much this place would come to mean to me and how frequently I would retreat there to meditate and pray.

One of the first times I visited was for a noonday Mass. I arrived about 11:45 am and sat in the chapel with one or two others, all in complete silence. Outside of the chapel, you could hear the sounds of life and work: birds, ducks, lawnmowers, air conditioning units, people chatting. Five minutes later, one of the priests rang the large bell located right outside of the chapel, signaling the call to worship. All of the sudden...

silence.

The entire grounds went still. Even nature itself seemed to take notice and keep its peace. It was unlike any silence I had ever encountered before. It was weightless, it was holy. Mass commenced shortly after. It was one of the few times in my life I had ever attended Mass. I've always been drawn to the liturgy of the Catholic Church, but never had the opportunity to experience. And through my own inquisitory nature, I would learn about the teachings and customs of the church in my late teens and early twenties.

It was exactly what I needed and what I had desired to experience for so long, completely opposite of any church I had ever been to previously. Certainly, it was different from the chaos I felt week after week at Lancaster Baptist Church. From prelude to postlude, there was never a moment of silence to reflect on prayer, Scripture, or the sermon. Silence was viewed as “dead time.” Sermons could last up to an hour. Even the layout is completely different: in evangelical churches the pulpit, the word of man, the sermon is the central focus. In most liturgical churches it is the altar where communion is offered up, remembering Christ’s sacrifice for us. Growing up, church always felt like a show, a performance; but that noonday Mass was different – it was very real.

## **Welcome**

After submitting my audition material to Los Angeles Master Chorale, I completely forgot about it. Depression has a way of shrouding everything, causing all to vanish into the peripheries. I was at the Antelope Valley High School District, applying for secretarial positions when, exactly three weeks later, I received an email notification from Kevin Koelbl with a subject line of: “Los Angeles Master Chorale 16-17 Season Auditions”

I froze.

It caught me totally off guard. My heart stopped. I hesitated to press my finger against the screen of my phone. I had to eventually open it, but my heart had started to race at the thought.

*“I’m happy to invite you to a preliminary audition for the Los Angeles Master Chorale.”*

The only way I could react was to laugh. For the first time in weeks, there was a ray of hope that pierced the thick blanket of darkness that covered my existence. For the first time in weeks, I actually felt like there was a reason to keep going. I had to constantly tell myself “Don’t get your hopes up... don’t get your hopes up... don’t get your hopes up.”

The first round of auditions included singing a solo for the assistant conductor and then sight reading three different pieces: one in Latin, one in French, and one in German. That evening when I pulled into my driveway, there was already an email inviting me back for a second audition. Another hole was punctured in the darkness that enveloped me, and I felt like I was slowly coming back into the light of life. The second audition took place the following week. I was asked to prepare my solo again and to prepare excerpts from certain choral pieces. I would sing in a quartet for Grant to listen for blend. I knew that if I got to this portion of the audition, I could make it in. The audition for Grant went better than I could have anticipated.

Then I had to wait.

April 18, I was driving when I received an email notification on my phone. I pulled over and read:

*Artistic Director Grant Gershon and the Los Angeles Master Chorale would like to welcome you as a Supplemental Chorister for the 2016/17 Season.*

Life has never been the same.

### **Communion**

My first rehearsal with the Chorale took place that November. An intimidatingly large stack of music was waiting for each of us in a large manila envelope with our last name written in the top righthand corner. I opened the package and was immediately overwhelmed by the amount of music waiting to be learned. But as soon as we started singing, all those anxieties dissipated, completely melting away. Despite my initial self-doubt, I could feel my confidence growing as we plowed through the stack of music. However, I left the rehearsal that evening with a massive headache.

A few weeks later, I stepped out onto the stage of the Disney Concert Hall and performed my first concert with the LA Master Chorale, my thoughts harkening back to that first time I ever heard the Chorale. Those memories came with me as I walked onto the stage, seeing thousands of people staring down, waiting to hear an incredible holiday concert – there's no way to adequately describe the feeling.

Surreal. Totally and utterly surreal.

After our matinee performance, I walked out in front of the concert hall and happened to run into Phil Smith. It was Phil who performed the first organ concert I had ever heard. Our paths wouldn't cross again until 2015. We had reconnected at an organ concert in Pasadena and then lost touch again – until that afternoon. He walked up to me, gave me a big hug, and then asked what I was doing on Christmas Eve:

“Would you be interested in singing for me at my church that evening? There will be food, and of course, you’ll be paid.” He had me at food.

I don’t think anything could have prepared me for what I experienced Christmas Eve 2016. It was a baptism by fire in the Episcopal tradition. I think Phil had thought I was steeped in Episcopalian liturgy, not knowing that I was nearly verdant to all the formalities of a traditional rite. Having grown up with no liturgy, it was nearly all foreign to me. And yet, somehow, it felt deeply familiar. It felt like I had arrived at home.

After a brief rehearsal that evening, we had some time before the service started. I was very concerned about taking communion. I wasn’t Episcopalian. I was never confirmed. I never had a “first communion.” Could I receive communion? I happened to be walking with one of the sopranos, Rebecca, when I thought to ask her.

“What is the protocol for receiving communion.”

Her response has left an everlasting imprint on my heart, words that I will carry with me for the rest of my life:

*“God’s table is open to all people.”*

As I kneeled at the communion rail later that evening, for the first in a long time, I felt truly and completely accepted as a child of God – complete in how he made me.

## **Epilogue**

Life is not black and white. Life is not a straight line. The longer I’ve been out – both sexually and out of fundamentalism – the more I’ve

realized how gray life is, how little I know, and how much I depend on God. Faith is not lived in the black and white; faith is lived in the gray.

I'm thankful that I have a loving and supportive family; that I have old friends and have met new friends who lift me and encourage me; for creative and musical outlets at the highest level of professionalism.

In 2017, I joined St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church (a high church, Anglo-Catholic parish) my spiritual home. I have the immense privilege of singing in the choir and being involved in various parish activities. My life has been so enriched through the liturgy and through the most incredible people who share similar experiences in faith and sexuality. They challenge me in so many areas of life and help me to grow in my faith every time I come around them. I also make it a point to visit St. Andrew's once a week where I've had the pleasure of getting to know the monks and have the privilege of calling them friends. They, too, encourage me in my faith in ways that I had never considered before. I've completely left evangelical and fundamental Christianity and have wholeheartedly embraced a more historical form of Christianity.

Faith and sexuality are not mutually exclusive. The church would have you believe they are. And so would the LGBT community. "There is no such thing as a 'gay Christian'" is what Mark Rasmussen once said.

But he's wrong. In the middle of these two opposing communities, we exist. We love God deeply, and we've come to accept ourselves just how He made us.

We are a peculiar people.