



CALEB KALTENBACH
AUTHOR OF MESSY GRACE

MESSY TRUTH

**HOW TO FOSTER COMMUNITY
WITHOUT SACRIFICING CONVICTION**

**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**



PRAISE FOR
Messy Truth

“The church desperately needs wise and winsome guides that can equip us to lavishly love LGBTQ people in the context of very real, very messy churches and ministries. Caleb Kaltenbach is one of those guides!”

—MICHELLE SANCHEZ, executive minister of
Make and Deepen Disciples at Evangelical Covenant Church

“In *Messy Truth*, you will grow in your compassion for and conversation with those in the LGBTQ community. Caleb Kaltenbach is a leader and pastor who fosters relationships without sacrificing conviction, and he will teach you to do the same.”

—KYLE IDLEMAN, senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church

“As our churches and our world become increasingly polarized on the complicated issues of life, Caleb Kaltenbach’s ideas are a welcome voice of warmth and biblical clarity. Without sacrificing principle, he brings the reader a grace-filled lens of viewing the difficulties we face, which also provides practical skills.”

—JOHN TOWNSEND, PhD, *New York Times* bestselling author of
the Boundaries series

“Once again, Caleb Kaltenbach tackles this difficult subject with superbly well-balanced grace and truth. His sensitivity and empathy regarding the LGBTQ community is one to be modeled. A must-read for all Christians.”

—BECKET COOK, author of *A Change of Affection*

“Many books discuss research and theories of loving people, but this book models how we can relentlessly love people and meet them where they’re at so we can guide them to Jesus.”

—EFREM SMITH, co-senior pastor of Midtown Covenant Church

“*Messy Truth* provides a most practical guide—through stories, conversations, and tips for church leaders and Christians to show mercy over judgment.”

—DJ CHUANG, author of *MultiAsian Church*

“*Messy Truth* is a timely wake-up call for the church. It offers a road map for staying faithful to Scripture and being empathetic and gracious toward people in the LGBTQ community and beyond.”

—SEAN McDOWELL, PhD, associate professor of apologetics at
Talbot School of Theology

“Caleb teaches us the art of seeing people—people whom Jesus loves. In *Messy Truth*, we are given the tools to have healing and life-giving conversations that ultimately foster community and belonging for all people.”

—ADRIANNA CERVANTES, youth and young-adult programming
coordinator at Shepherd Church

“Caleb’s application of Jesus’s powerful formula of grace and truth gives us the guidance we need to move forward in a way that honors God and loves people.”

—RANDY FRAZEE, pastor and author of *His Mighty Strength*

“Bringing wisdom and clarity to the most complicated of situations, *Messy Truth* helps churches and followers of Jesus advance their faith beyond their agenda. This book goes beyond making a point; it makes a difference!”

—RUSTY GEORGE, senior pastor of Real Life Church

“Very few people these days combine convictions about God’s Word with the ability to unleash compassion for everyone. Likewise, very few people these days are calling the church to full commitment to truth and full commitment to grace. That’s the lesson in this book.”

—RAY JOHNSTON, senior pastor of Bayside Church and founder of Thrive

“In *Messy Truth*, you’ll learn how to best point your LGBTQ friends to Jesus and help them connect in Christ-centered communities.”

—JARRETT STEPHENS, senior pastor of Champion Forest Baptist Church

“I am often asked, ‘Who’s doing it right? Who is a model for relating to the LGBTQ community?’ I point people to Caleb Kaltenbach, whose book *Messy Truth* helps the reader catch his vision for entering into sustained, authentic relationships and provides practical examples from his own life and principles for doing so.”

—MARK YARHOUSE, professor at Wheaton College and director of Sexual and Gender Identity Institute

“*Messy Truth* is exactly what the church needs in order to navigate today’s murky cultural and relational waters with biblical fidelity and love. It forges a better way for Christians to love God and our neighbors faithfully and well, not only in the matters that are the subject of the book, but in any we might face in a post-Christian world.”

—KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, research professor of English, as well as Christianity and Culture, at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I was drawn in by Caleb’s winsome approach through the entire book and found myself wanting to talk about it with others. Gather your leadership team and dig into this book together!”

—RICH BIRCH, author of *Church Growth Flywheel* and host of *unSeminary Podcast*

“With the wisdom of personal experience and the kindness of a pastor’s heart, Caleb helps us to love better across the lines of difference while maintaining our convictions. More than this, he helps us see that it is not in spite of our faith that we love in this way, but because of it.”

—SCOTT SAULS, senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee

“*Messy Truth* will help you think through the challenge of living and relating to people who see and live in the world differently than you do.”

—DARRELL BOCK, executive director for cultural engagement at Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement

“This book is filled with real-life, lived, and wrestled-down wisdom. Allow Caleb to be your guide to help you discern God’s truth, grow in compassion, and be able to have a conversation with anyone.”

—DANIEL IM, lead pastor at Beulah Alliance Church, podcaster, and author

“This book demonstrates why redemptive community is essential in helping others follow Jesus, and Caleb provides a biblical framework along with practical steps to reach people different from ourselves.”

—RUTH MALHOTRA, public relations and communications specialist

“As a culture, we refuse to honor people we disagree with, pretend truth doesn’t exist, or run screaming back to our echo chambers to find people who agree with us. *Messy Truth* gives us a framework to have the meaningful dialogue we so desperately need to foster.”

—CAREY NIEUWHOF, host of the *Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast* and author of *At Your Best*

“Like a handmade tapestry, *Messy Truth* masterfully weaves together truth and love across the fabric of its pages. Whether you’re leading an entire congregation or the kids at home, this is just the tool you need to navigate the world we’re in.”

—RICKY JENKINS, senior pastor of Southwest Church

“Caleb once again embraces the messiness of engaging people and challenges the church’s often-flawed reaction to LGBTQ individuals.” By establishing us all as image bearers and being worthy of not only love and respect but also viewed as beings of value, the argument of right versus wrong easily changes to simply loving and being loved by a just God. This paradigm shift is truly effective only when we make it as a community and include those we disagree with.”

—LESLI HUDSON-REYNOLDS, gender identity ministries at Posture Shift

“Conversations about faith and sexuality are at the forefront of our society. I don’t know of many people more qualified than my friend Caleb to speak to how we can engage with grace and truth.”

—ASHLEY WOOLDRIDGE, senior pastor of Christ’s Church of the Valley

“Caleb shows us—with biblical intelligence, pastoral wisdom, and lots of experience—that being radically gracious does not mean we are taking a soft approach to truth. Truth is grace and grace is truth. If we’re not being gracious, we’re not actually being truthful.”

—PRESTON SPRINKLE, president of the Center for Faith, Sexuality and Gender

“Caleb speaks with conviction and compassion, upholding biblical truth while humanizing some of the most difficult conversations today’s culture is having.”

—DAVE DUMMITT, senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church

“Caleb Kaltenbach is uniquely qualified to lead this challenging conversation around engaging LGBTQ individuals in authentic community within the church. In *Messy Truth*, he guides us with both biblically sound theology and compassionate real-world examples to a model that reflects both the love and justice of God’s truth.”

—GEOFF S. SURRATT, director of ReThink Leadership

“The way Caleb has taught us to expand our vision for love, to deepen our walks in grace in messy places, to passionately pursue, love, and commit to God’s church leaves me inspired and smarter.”

—ALBERT TATE, co-founder and lead pastor of Fellowship Church

“Caleb Kaltenbach has produced a highly readable, incredibly insightful, and richly relevant work in *Messy Truth*. It is firmly biblically and theologically grounded, yet practical, as we have come to expect from him.”

—SCOTT RAE, dean of faculty at Talbot School of Theology

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MESSY TRUTH

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To five friends who model the principles of Messy Truth:

Jason Caine

Rusty George

Lane Jones

Carey Nieuwhof

Drew Sherman

CONTENTS

<i>Author's Note</i>	xv
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1 How Far Are You Willing to Go?	3
2 What Is Messy Truth?	22

PART 1: CONVICTION ABOUT GOD'S WORDS

3 What's the Value of Anyone?	41
4 Will You Trust What Jesus Says Even When You Disagree with Him?	60
5 When Does Belonging Happen?	74

PART 2: COMPASSION FOR ANYONE

6 Acknowledging Other People's Experience	95
7 Distinguishing People from Ideas	113
8 Helping Others Think Empathetically	129

PART 3: CONVERSATIONS WITH EVERYONE

9	Do You Have the Credibility to Walk with Others?	153
10	Prioritizing and Preparing for Dialogue	170
11	Difficult Conversations That Don't Destroy	184
12	Are You a Guide or a Gatekeeper?	201
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	217
	<i>Notes</i>	219
	<i>Reading List</i>	233

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I wrote *Messy Grace*, I wanted to discuss personal relationships between Christians and their LGBTQ family and friends. *Messy Truth* takes this to a whole new level, as it considers how people find and follow Jesus better in community rather than isolation. One-on-one personal relationships must be developed, but God uses those personal relationships to bring people into community. This book pleads with Christians of any background to make room for people not like them. I've tried to write a book that acknowledges the nuance of doctrine and life experiences in the midst of many relationships. My hope is that you will come to appreciate the tension between what is believed and what is best lived out in a redemptive community.

Please note that I have changed the names and personal details of many of the people whose stories I am telling in this book in order to disguise their identities.

HOW FAR ARE YOU WILLING TO GO?

What should we do?" The question hung heavy in the air. Three days earlier, I preached at this church's weekend services. For weeks, I had been consulting with the church leaders. Now they and I looked at each other with confused expressions. I glared at the conference room whiteboard in hopes that ideas and words from previous discussions would help, but no silver-bullet answer could alleviate the ambiguity we all felt.

We discussed scenarios the group was facing and I tried to give guidance, but the circumstance that led to the "What should we do?" question was a next-level discussion.

You see, earlier that year, two married lesbian couples with young kids began attending the church. This would have sent shock waves through most churches, but this church already had attendees who identified in some way as LGBTQ. And the sense of welcome in the community was real. The church was ethnically diverse and multigenerational, and because the leaders encouraged dialogue, attendees held various biblical perspectives. So, despite the church's conservative stance on marriage, the two families felt a sense of belonging. They felt *loved*.

But after a few months of being in community in the church, the four women agreed that marriage was a covenant between God, one man, and one woman. They had approached a staff pastor and asked a hard question.

“Should we divorce or stay married?”

Perplexed, the staff member just stared at them. (This is one of those questions not covered in seminary.)

Breaking the awkward silence, one of the women continued, “We’re not quite sure what to do. We decided to go to a staff member because we trust our leaders.”

Another one of the women looked at the staff member and observed, “You’re still not saying anything. Are you worried about us having sex? My wife and I don’t even *have* sex anymore.”

That revelation didn’t simplify things. Trying to get back to the main point, they expanded on their original question. “If my wife and I divorce, can we keep living together, as long as we don’t have sex?”

Finally, the staff member confessed that he needed to think about the situation and that he would pray with them. (Good move!)

The two families agreed to meet with him again after a couple of weeks. And that is how, one week later, I found myself in a conference room with that staff member, some of the other leaders on the team, and a whiteboard full of ideas that weren’t really helping us figure out what we should do.

In all sincerity, I hadn’t processed a circumstance like this particular one before. For a second I thought, *Maybe I can just start talking until they like something I say*. But, thankfully, as quickly as that idea arrived, it vanished. We were not here to gloss over the difficulty but rather to engage it.

Letting go of my desire to be an “expert,” I began to ask questions, two of which immediately came to mind: “What does Scripture say about sexual intimacy and relationships?” and “What does it mean to be above reproach in this scenario?”

I was barely able to voice these questions before the first opinion hit.

“They should just divorce,” said Sarah, one of the leaders.

“Huh?” I was a little caught off guard.

“Di-vorce!” she stated louder. “Isn’t that what the couples are asking about? It’s simple.”

“Is it?” I asked. “I’m not saying they should or shouldn’t end their marriages, but the word *divorce* makes me wince.”

“They aren’t *really* married,” she said as if she were pointing out the obvious.

My eyes widened. “Um, yes they are.”

“Not in God’s eyes,” she quickly retorted.

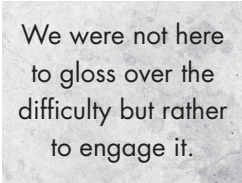
“They’re not in what you and I would call a ‘traditional marriage,’ but according to the government and their love for each other, they’re married.”

The reality sank in a little deeper as silence monopolized the room once again.

“Look,” I said, addressing Sarah, “I’m not trying to debate with you or anyone else. Like you, I believe God created sex to be expressed in a marriage between one man and one woman.”

More silence. “I’m not suggesting what these couples should or should not do,” I continued. “I’m saying we should proceed with caution and conversation. These are people’s lives.”

Just then, a board member named Robert asked, “Should we use unbiblical methods to solve extra-biblical situations?”



We were not here to gloss over the difficulty but rather to engage it.

Before we could dive deeper into that question, the children's pastor asked, "And what about the kids? They were adopted from the foster system. Should they be split between two homes when they've had stability for a few years?"

"Another good question," I commented.

Mark, a board member who had appeared uncomfortable most of the night, looked frustrated. He made the time-out signal with his hands. "Am I hearing what I think I'm hearing?"

Paul, the lead pastor, asked, "What are you hearing, Mark?"

"So far, Sarah's the only one who's on the 'truth' side of things," he said, pointing at Sarah, who was now looking at the table with uncertainty. "I understand the need for love. But are we really going to recommend that these women stay married?"

"No one's said that," Paul uttered.

Mark looked at me and asked, "Isn't that what we want? Grace *and* truth?"

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Before we go further into the story, let me ask you: *What would you do?* If you were in this meeting, what would you have suggested? How far would you be willing to go? Don't know? That's fine, because most of the time, I'm not sure either. But our discussion in the conference room wasn't about my personal beliefs. Our goal was to discover the truth about God's will in this scenario. And often, discerning truth and applying it are daunting tasks.

So, how do you define *truth*? My personal definition of truth is "what's accurate and real." Simple, short, sweet.

There are varying sources of, forms of, and perspectives on truth. People gain knowledge and truth in various ways:

- using our senses
- having innate knowledge (what we are born knowing)
- facing life experiences (achievements, failures, relationships)
- observing the characteristics of an object (for example, that the chair is orange with four legs)
- being taught, told, or demonstrated things by others

Along these same lines, Christians believe that people learn about God through *general revelation* (knowledge of truth and God from nature and learning from others) and *special revelation* (knowledge of truth and God from spiritual sources, such as the Bible, Jesus, and angels). Both general and special revelation communicate truth but do so in different ways.

The concept of *unquestionable truth* means truth is absolute, as it aligns with proven facts, trustworthy data, and science. For instance, two plus two equals four, and water in its basic form is H₂O. It's difficult to argue with this kind of truth. In some settings, there is *agreed-upon truth*, in which all or a majority of people agree on a belief, account of what happened, strategy, and so on. This type of truth is objective.

My personal definition of truth is "what's accurate and real." Simple, short, sweet.

There's also truth that is more subjective. Each person lives by a set of ethics, morals, values, and beliefs developed through their relationships, experiences, and faith. These form a person's *worldview*. Just as beauty is in the eye

of the beholder, some ideas can “become true” to people. For instance, Amy (my wife) believes cauliflower is tasty, while I’m sure it’s from Satan. She’s convinced that cauliflower pizza crust tastes just like regular pizza crust, but I’m certain that even entertaining such an idea insults good pizza! A better name for this kind of truth is *preference*.

Some people, like the philosopher Plato, wouldn’t even acknowledge preference as a category of truth. He believed there was a difference between knowledge and opinion: you learn one and are convinced of the other. He viewed knowledge (what we might call truth) as possessing greater moral authority than opinion because one can make a case for and defend what has been learned.¹

Remember that though my definition of truth is simple, our concepts of and interaction with truth are undoubtedly complex. More times than not, when people attempt to find truth in a circumstance, it’s buried underneath preferences, emotions, opinions, traditions, and even lies. This is especially true regarding the junction of relationships, faith, and the LGBTQ reality. What do you do when there’s a gap between your beliefs and feelings? How should you move forward when your convictions about sexuality run contrary to the opinions of friends and family? Where do you find strength to build solid relationships with people despite disagreements? How do you share Jesus with those who have been hurt by Christians? How do you discuss God’s words in a society that might label you an extremist for doing so?

IS TRUTH MESSY?

Every day, ordinary people—conservatives, progressives, celebrities, politicians, religious leaders, and activists—post to social media their many opinions about life. When we blindly post about anyone or any community, we often forget that we’re describing actual human beings with emotions and experiences. No wonder faith and LGBTQ conversations can be so complicated.

A great example of this mess is found in the literary world. After the conclusion of the Harry Potter series, author J. K. Rowling stated that a main character named Dumbledore (an older wizard who is a wise sage) was gay and used to be involved in a passionate relationship with someone who later became his enemy.² Of course, the internet lost its mind. Harry Potter fans had mixed feelings about Rowling’s announcement. There were excited fans, indifferent fans, and offended fans. Many were annoyed that she defined aspects of Dumbledore’s character after the series was completed. The fact that Dumbledore wasn’t going to be portrayed as gay in the *Fantastic Beasts* movie franchise disappointed several fans.³ Unfortunately, some voiced their disapproval with negative clichés that inappropriately judged anyone on the LGBTQ spectrum.

First, remember that Rowling is the author of the series. Regardless of anyone else’s opinion, as the creator, she’s entitled to say what she wants about her books and their characters. Second, negative catchphrases and buzzwords are not loving or necessary. They don’t represent the majority of those who relate in some way as LGBTQ. People have depth, and it’s dehumanizing to charac-

terize a person's life, beliefs, and relationship decisions with simplistic negative phrases.

Yet the complexities of relationships, faith, sex, and the LGBTQ reality run deeper than literary series and hit movies. It's personal for all of us.

In my book *Messy Grace*, I share my story of being raised by two lesbians and a gay man. Having roots in their LGBTQ community, I was taught, "Christians hate gay people. If you are not like them, they will not like you." Because of that often all-too-true sentiment, it was challenging for me to see Jesus past the pseudo-Christians who protested pride parades, ignored their children dying of AIDS, and so on. I mean, how does an all-loving God have such hate-filled followers? I grew up thinking, *If Christians are this awful, I can't imagine how horrible Jesus must be.* But our feelings are no match for how Jesus loves people. I finally saw his love reflected in the way some believers lived their lives and treated me.

Eventually, I came out to my parents as a Christian. Let's just say that Mom, Dad, and Vera were less than thrilled. They basically kicked me out of their houses for a while. Several years later, some Christians in Dallas opened their arms to my parents, and they started following Jesus. Grace can certainly feel messy, right? The discrepancy between Jesus's love for people and legalists' contempt for my family made grace feel messy. Although grace *looks* and *feels* messy when it intersects with our messy lives, God's grace is anything but messy. In the same way, God's truth is perfect even though it may seem messy to us.

In Psalm 19:7–9, David described God's words as perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, and firm. Truth appears messy whenever God's words contradict my sinful desires and decisions.

Even though God's words are *not* messy or irrelevant, our feelings can lie to us and tell us otherwise. Emotions can be so loud that it's easy to regard them as true even when they are not. Those sinful emotions can seduce us into misinterpreting God's words, making them feel messy.

Truth *feels* messy when it

- creates conflict between our beliefs and emotions
- questions our decisions, ideas, habits, and plans
- challenges our morals, personal values, and theological convictions
- causes disagreement among family members
- initiates concern over a friend's decision
- necessitates tough conversations with someone we care about

Notice a commonality of why truth can feel messy? Our emotional attachments to people. The distinction between God's truth and our emotional attachments can tempt us to *perceive* truth as messy. In turn, we make unhealthy decisions like overreacting to circumstances, offering unsolicited opinions, and avoiding difficult conversations because we are scared of facing emotional pain.

It's completely normal to be afraid of hurting individuals we care for. No one wants to give the wrong impression, communicate their beliefs poorly, or lose relationships. You can relate, right? I know I can. But conceding to fear is far from healthy; it's spiritually lethal.

Toxic fear always diverts us from Jesus's mission: loving people well. It prevents us from embracing anyone unlike us or engaging

in complicated situations. Fear can provoke us to ask unhelpful questions, such as “What’s at stake if we engage?”

What’s at stake if we walk alongside individuals we assume to be messy? What’s at stake if we challenge others’ opinions? What’s at stake if we invite people to church or attempt to share Jesus with them? Such questions are never helpful, because they origi-

What’s at stake if
we *don’t* engage?

nate from fear. They focus on what we might potentially lose instead of what God and others stand to lose. It reveals our fixation on personal losses rather than on what others might gain. Posing

the question “What’s at stake if we engage?” is comparable to telling God, “Even though you’d get the glory if they followed you, don’t use me as a catalyst for a pivotal moment in another person’s life!”

Instead, maybe we should ask, “What’s at stake if we *don’t* engage?”

Asking this question takes the spotlight off us. If we don’t engage, who will? If we refuse to take the mission of Christ seriously, who will?

What’s at stake if we don’t engage? The answer? People.

THE NECESSITY OF COMMUNITY

Before following Jesus, I attended a Bible study in a misguided attempt to prove Christianity wrong. I assumed every Christian was just like the ungodly “Christian” street protesters who treated my parents and their friends like trash. Make no mistake: I wanted

to dismantle their faith. Little did I know how quickly my plans would crumble.

Despite my desire to bring down their Christian faith, I kept attending the Bible study, and in the summer before my junior year in high school, I trusted Jesus. Specifically, there were two primary reasons I decided to follow him.

First, I realized that Jesus was nothing like the street-corner pseudo-Christian protesters. He was unlike anything or anyone I had imagined. Those were some of the best days of my life. I couldn't wait to read the Bible before school, during class, after school, and even in the middle of the night. I wanted to learn as much as I could about Jesus and tell everyone about him. I took every opportunity to volunteer at my church and attend classes, and I joined the church's student ministry.

The community I experienced with these Christians afforded me the chance to discover Jesus, learn how to follow him, and figure out how to share my faith with others. It was a snapshot of truly authentic relationships, and I assumed most Christian communities were the same. At least that's what I thought until the following summer.

I had been a Christian for a year when a friend named Allie invited me to attend summer camp with her church's student ministry. Excited for another chance to meet new people and grow spiritually, I accepted her invitation. The first day of the camp was fantastic! I made some new friends and gained further insights about Jesus. That evening, new students were encouraged to share their testimonies by the campfire. I had a strong desire to tell my story, but I was nervous. Memories of people who protested my mom's parades were still fresh, but I was convinced that

none of those angry fundamentalist tendencies resided in the people at this camp.

When we gathered for campfire time during the next evening, I mustered the courage to share my fledgling testimony. I didn't leave anything out: my parents' divorce, raised by two lesbians and a gay man, hating Christians and then trusting Jesus, and growing over the previous year. Although most of the students appeared fairly receptive, I later discovered that the student-ministry pastor and some of his volunteers were anything but compassionate.

The next morning, my cabin leader told me that the student-ministry pastor and a couple of the volunteers wanted to speak with me. I was only seventeen and completely oblivious to what was about to happen. I endured almost an hour of questions and a small lecture, none of which was appropriate: "Are you gay? Have you ever been with another guy? Are you attracted to any students at the camp? Do you think your parents are trying to recruit you? Why are you here? Why are you *really* here?"

Afterward, they prayed for me and cautioned me to be on my best behavior.

"We'll be watching," one of the volunteers told me.

It goes without saying that I decided to go home after the meeting. From that day forward, my friendship with Allie was okay at best. I'm still not certain what they told her, but in all likelihood, it wasn't good.

Rarely have I shared that story. Even today it's still painful. However, the experience changed my life in a good way! It taught me how to distinguish between unhealthy and healthy Christian community. Because I was attending a good church and Bible study, I understood that not all Christians were like those camp

God used a bunch of messy people to reach a messy person like me.

leaders. My true community loved me even though my life was messy. The people from my church and Bible study comprised the second reason I trusted Jesus and kept following him. Even though I was messy, these believers

- showed kindness
- didn't expect perfection
- allowed me to disagree
- gave me margin to process life and faith
- owned their mistakes
- openly shared about their pain and doubt
- never got offended when I asked tough questions

One of the most important days of our lives is when we realize that God uses us to make a difference in the lives of others. The example of these Christian friends compelled me to drop my assumptions about and prejudice against Christians. I began to believe that God loved me despite my messiness because *they* loved me despite my messiness. God used a bunch of messy people to reach a messy person like me. Those relationships influenced me to start my lifelong journey of loving God and people.

FIGHTING FOR INFLUENCE

Since 2017, I've been helping churches, ministry organizations, and Christian learning institutions discover how to love and foster

community with LGBTQ individuals without sacrificing theological convictions. Basically, I offer guidance in developing systems that allow anyone to attend while honoring the organization's doctrine and values. It's a blast to journey with leaders by assisting them in endeavors like training small-group leaders for every age level, working with staff teams, and developing policies with church boards.

Much of my time is spent in meetings or in coaching conversations with ministry leaders, pastors, all-star volunteers, attendees, and those who don't attend church. I've sat in living rooms crying with married couples, parents, and teenagers. I've pleaded with family members not to walk away from relationships regardless of how they view sexuality. I've tried to show people that loving others doesn't require a doctrinal shift on the subject of marriage. It's not unusual to find me meeting in a coffee shop with someone who has different views than I do. Ultimately, I believe our differences should be driving us to dialogue instead of dividing us.

Whether I'm strategizing with a pastor of a twenty-thousand-member church or fifty-member church, a small-group leader, a mom, a sibling, or whomever, people ask the same questions every time:

- “Do my biblical beliefs about marriage betray my friends?”
- “Is my church safe enough for me to invite my friend?”
- “What should I do if a family member came out to me and it didn't go well?”

Churches should want everyone to feel welcome. Students who have adopted gender-fluid pronouns need to feel loved by

Christians. The dad who confessed his attraction to men still needs community, and so does his family. First-time church guests in same-sex relationships shouldn't be asked to leave but instead should be encouraged to keep returning. Short of sinning, believers should be doing whatever is necessary to earn influence so they can point people to Jesus.

Influence is all about people. Having influence in another person's life is tremendously valuable. The more influence you have with someone, the more weight your words and actions carry. Influence can also help you answer questions that are emotionally complex.

For instance, people regularly ask me if they should attend the wedding of a loved one who is marrying someone of the same biological sex. I used to give reasons for both attending and not attending. However, now I ask them two questions. First, I ask, "If you didn't attend the wedding, would it cost you influence?"

Usually, they answer yes. Then I ask the second question: "What are you willing to do to keep and build influence with _____?"

Whoever's name is in the blank at the end of the second question usually determines their answer. Put yourself in their position for a moment to understand the depth of the dilemma. What if it's your son? Daughter? Spouse? Best friend? Sister? Nephew? Coach? How far would you go to be one of their first calls or texts when life punches them in the face? Are you okay with other Christians misinterpreting your efforts? Would you be satisfied with only God knowing the true intentions of your heart?

"What are you willing to do to keep and build influence with _____?"

Your love for others is measured by what you will endure for them. Influence comes from relationships, and relationships can be strengthened in the midst of community. Influence is worth fighting for.

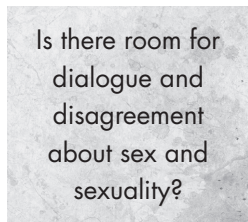
But how do you best earn influence? What does it look like to cultivate the kind of community that deepens relationships? How can your influence and community inspire people to follow Jesus?

THE MESSY PATH FORWARD

New Testament leaders such as John, Paul, and Peter understood a difficult yet simple principle: following Jesus doesn't spare us from the struggle of being fallen humans. If anything, Romans 7:14–25 confirms that Paul was well aware of his continued need to surrender, even while having a relationship with Jesus. If there was ever anyone that wasn't afraid to admit his messiness, it was Paul. We should adopt his authenticity, because *messy* refers to all of us.

The pages ahead contain stories of people who either relate to, identify as, or have experience with the LGBTQ reality. We're going to dive into the relational contours of faith, sexuality, conversations, and community. You may or may not appreciate some

of the stories you're about to encounter. After finishing this book, you might believe that I went too far or didn't go far enough on certain topics or theological issues. I cannot force God's words to conform to our expectations, nor can I offer perfect solutions for every question



Is there room for
dialogue and
disagreement
about sex and
sexuality?

you have or scenario you face. However, I commit to walking alongside you as we analyze three areas of messy truth that can be applied to almost any relationship or community setting. I hope you'll consider how these ideas could be implemented in your context. Who knows? You might be solidified on what *not* to do!

Hopefully, this book will be more helpful than harmful. Whatever your reasons for reading it, please keep an open mind. *Messy Truth* isn't just another book written by a straight white guy telling some Christians to be nice to their gay neighbors, lesbian cousins, or transgender coworkers. If you assume that my social privilege or theological view of sexuality compromises the validity of this book (even though I was raised by three gay parents within a large activist-oriented LGBTQ community), then consider this question:

*Is there room for dialogue and disagreement
about sex and sexuality?*

Whereas the narrow-mindedness of some Christians devalues people, has society's views on sexuality become so closed-minded that diversity of thought isn't allowed? Are only certain people allowed to engage in discussions about sexuality? Should disagreements dictate how people treat each other? Is it harmful to disagree on aspects of sexuality? Might there be room in the discussion for people of every race, social standing, gender, and sexuality? Perhaps a diversity of thinking and experiences would help us dialogue better about sexuality. Personal experience definitely amplifies a voice, but a lack of experience doesn't eliminate anybody's voice.

Instead of worrying about whether you agree with my ideas, I'm obsessed with helping you develop the tenacity to be inten-

tional about loving people as Jesus does. In lieu of being stuck in your office, hiding in the crevices of a book, dozing off during a webinar, scrolling through social-media feeds, or eavesdropping on coffeehouse conversations, let's shatter your routine so you can leverage whatever to reach whomever for Jesus. People find and follow Jesus better in community, not isolation. Messy truth is best experienced and understood with others.

I eagerly anticipate your next steps to foster a culture where messy truth is acknowledged and lived out. I pray you will help start or improve a community where people can ask questions about Jesus, have difficult conversations, encourage one another to grow, and carry each other's burdens while following Jesus together.

BACK IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM

Let's finish this chapter where we began: in the conference room. I eventually made some observations about the women who had approached the staff member:

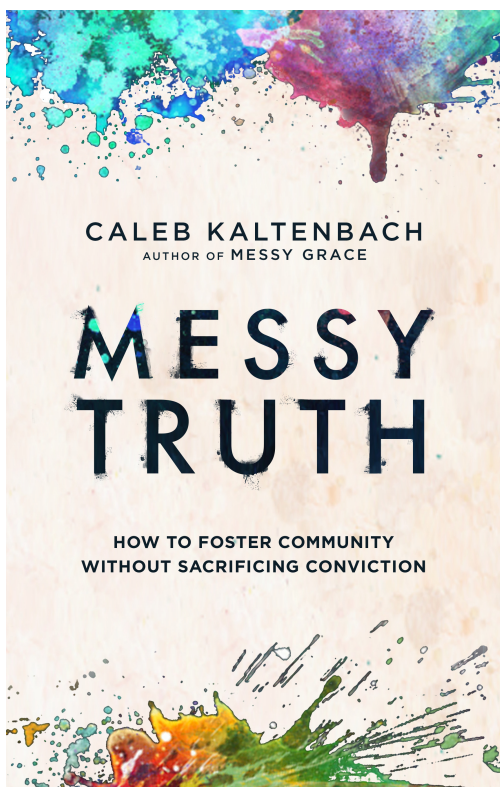
- Each couple loved God and sought to understand him.
- The women felt as though they belonged at the church.
- Ordinary individuals in the church influenced them.
- The women trusted the church leaders.
- The women never stopped loving one another, but at some point their theology shifted.
- The couples were brave enough to ask the staff for help in discerning God's will.
- Neither couple was looking for a quick answer.

After spending time with the church's leaders, I was pleased with the intentionality of their thinking and the substance of their conversation with each other:

- The church leaders cared for both families.
- Each leader loved God and desired his counsel.
- Challenging questions were allowed.
- People weren't scolded for not having answers.
- No one was judged as they shared thoughts or asked further questions.
- There was healthy dialogue and consideration for each other.
- Having the discussion as a group made each of us sharper.

Building on the couples' relationships with other people in the church, the leaders chose to embrace messy truth together. Unified as a team, they graciously faced reality, prioritized God in their conversations, and worked to discover God's will for the families. The whole situation felt and looked messy, yet the circumstance was uniquely beautiful.

Are you ready to be part of a community where people like these women were given margin to pursue Jesus? Interested in knowing how you can help your church, small group, friends, and family welcome such stories? It depends on how far you are willing to go. If you're ready, let's begin talking about messy truth.



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