Caleb Testimony

Part 1 of 2: Growing Up in an LGBT Home
with
Release Date: March 2015
Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture, and my guest today is Caleb Kaltenbach, who has an interesting life story. Caleb, we’re really pleased you could be with us today.

Thank you, happy to be here.

And we’re just going to let Caleb kind of walk through and unveil the story and unveil the topic as we move along. So Caleb, let’s talk a little bit about, first of all, your background. What are you doing currently?

I am the lead pastor at Discovery Church out in Simi Valley, California, which is on the – you know, next to northern L.A. County, we’re in Ventura County, just right on the edge. Been here for a little over a year. Before that, I was in Dallas, Texas pastoring a church for three and a half years, and before that, I was in the Los Angeles area for 11 years.

And you did your training, your theological training, where?

I did my master’s degree at Talbot School of Theology, and I am about two or three classes away from my doctorate of ministry at DTS.

Very good, okay, well, so – and you’ve written a book recently, correct, or you’ve got a manuscript in place; is that right?

Yeah, I have a manuscript in place and I’m learning from my editor how much I actually need to change to get the book ready for press, but –


That’s right, but you know what? I have a great editor, he’s a phenomenal editor, he’s very, very kind, and I have submitted the rough draft, it’s supposed to be in, I guess, pre-production by March 1st, ready for release in fall 2015.

Okay, and we’ve probably kept people – the mystery under wraps long enough. Give us the title of the book and tell us what the topic is.
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_Caleb_  The working title, and it may remain the title is called _No Matter What_, and the premise of the book is really about my story, so maybe I should just begin talking about my background; would that be okay?

_Dr. Bock_  Okay, go for it.
Caleb

Yeah, so my parents got married, both my parents were professors, my dad taught philosophy and rhetoric at the University of Missouri Columbia and at Stephens College, and my mom taught English literature at the University of Missouri Columbia. When I was two years old, my parents got a divorce, and both of them entered the gay and lesbian lifestyle, the LGBT community at that time. My mom found a partner who just got her Ph.D. in psychology, and she and her partner moved to Kansas City where my mom got a job at UMKC and my mother’s partner, Vera, started working as a psychologist. My dad was teaching full time at Stephens College, and so he was more in the closet, but my mom obviously had a partner. They were very, very active in the lifestyle. When I grew up, I was going to gay bars and clubs and weddings and I marched in gay pride parades. I have this memory, one of the earliest memories I have was when my mom had me march in a gay pride parade with her, and we were walking down the street, and the end of the street, there were all these Christians who were holding up signs saying God hates you, God can’t stand you, God doesn’t want to have anything to do with you, and they were spraying urine and water on everybody, and I looked at my mom and I said mom, why are they acting like this, and she said well Caleb, they’re Christians, and Christians hate people in our community, they don’t like people that are different from them. And I had another friend who died from AIDS, his name was Louis, and I remember, he was my mom’s friend, going in to visit him a few days before he died, and his family, who were Christians, were at the other end of the hospital bed really against the wall, not even wanting to have anything to do with him, trying to say away from him because they didn’t want to catch anything, I said mom, why are they acting like this, and she said well Caleb, they’re Christians, and Christians hate people in our community, they don’t like people that are different. And so I grew up with this mentality that, you know, Christians are the bad guys, that they’re awful, that they’re evil, that, you know, it’s basically a club, a country club that you can’t get into. And so, I mean, my parents, you know, were pretty intelligent people, so I decided when I was high school to join this Bible study, I was going to go pretend to be a Christian, I was going to be a ninja Christian, and I was going to show up and I was going to learn how to disprove the Bible. But the more and more that I went, the more and more I found that the Jesus in the pages of scripture doesn’t really reflect that kind of an attitude. He definitely had his mantle of truth, but He always clothed truth with grace, and the two were always partnered and He didn’t separate them. And before I knew it, I gave my life to the Lord. A week later, I went forward at a youth conference – this church I started attending took me to a youth conference, I went forward to give my whole life to the ministry. I told my parents and they blew up. For a little bit, my mom didn’t want to have anything to do with me, I was spending a lot of nights away from home with my dad, you know, pretty much – it was a very difficult time of my life.
Dr. Bock: Now how old were you when this was going on?

Caleb: I was in high school when I accepted the Lord.

Dr. Bock: Okay.

Caleb: You know, I had a lot more hair then. That since has gone away. So I ended up going to bible college, I graduated from there, came out to California for 11 years, and the amazing thing that happened, Dr. Bock, was, you know, we moved to Texas and I was looking forward to it. Texas is a great state. I’m a little partial to California, but that’s just me. And when I was in Texas, I was at a church and there was a lot of success at this church, but one of the most interesting things was that both my parents moved there separately. My mother’s partner had since died, and both my parents had moved there separately to be closer to our family, and they said we want to start attending your church, and I said my church? Really? Yeah, we want to start going. Okay. And so they started coming, and my church was nicer to them than I was, and they kept on going, and two weeks before we left to move back out here, they both gave their lives to the Lord.

Dr. Bock: Now this would have been how many years later from the time of your conversion?

Caleb: This was in the summer of 2013, and I accepted Christ in the summer of 1994.

Dr. Bock: Okay, so almost 20 years down the road?
Caleb

Yep, 19, 20 years down the road. My mom doesn’t get out to go to church very much. When my dad goes to church, he goes to Chuck Swindoll’s church, out of all places, and my mom listens to Chuck Swindoll, and I think she goes to a Bible study. She’s in a retirement home in the – well, an independent living retirement home in the Dallas Fort Worth area. So, you know, I think about God and his plan and everything that happened, and you know, you just see this whole story wrapped in grace and truth. So that’s what the book is about. The book is about, you know, with a tough issue like the LGBT community, how do you hold onto the truth of God’s word but still act loving and gracious and how do you partner the two; right? Because that’s the difficult thing, living in the tension of grace and truth.

Dr. Bock

Okay, well that’s a nice précis of kind of where we’re going to be. And let’s talk our way through this, and I want to do it in stages, so I want to talk about, you know, what it was like to grow up as a child in the midst of this environment, and then I would like to talk about your opening up to the hearing of the gospel, and then I’d like to talk about the period right after when you told your parents that this was going on and what that period was like, and then the period leading up to their own engagement with the church, so kind of in four parts, if we can think about it that way. So let’s start off here. What was it like growing up – well, let me tell the viewers this. Caleb was in a class that I taught years ago at Talbot Seminary. I was an adjunct at Talbot. And I remember going out to lunch with him during that time and him telling me his story about where he – how he had come to the Lord. And to be honest, at the time when I heard it – this shows you how much things have changed – at the time when I heard it, it was the first story of that type I had ever heard, and not only that, it was kind of my wakeup call to this entire conversation that now is so prevalent in the church and churches are wrestling with it, literally not just nationwide, but globally. And so this is nice to kind of put some detail on this. And I remember you starting off telling me you grew up in a home where this was the environment. So what exactly was that like and what kind of identity issues, if any, did that raise for you when you were growing up?
Caleb: You know, my mother and her partner Vera were both very politically active. My mom and Vera were both academics, you know, both had been professors at some point. My mom was working in grant writing, Vera was a psychologist, and so they were very, very involved politically. They were on the board of directors for the Kansas City chapter of GLAAD, Gay and Lesbian Awareness Against Discrimination. That was back in the 1980s. They attended a Quaker House for a while that was primarily filled with people from the LGBT community, and then they switched over to Wicca for a while, and they had a coven with some of their friends. And so my upbringing, Dr. Bock, was really all over the place.

Dr. Bock: You wouldn’t call it a Christian home in the way we normally think about it?
Caleb

No, no. Post, anti, whatever you want to put, un – whatever you want to put in front of Christian, that’s what it was, you know, because it definitely wasn’t Christian. So it was an environment, as I said, that was very political, you know, they worked on Clinton’s first campaign, they worked on Dukakis’ campaign, they worked on everything they could because they saw Christians as the enemy, they saw Republicans as the enemy, people that wanted to take their rights away or not wanted them to have any rights, and so that’s what I was taught to believe. I was taught to believe that Christians were the enemy, Christians didn’t like them, and there was a lot of anger that my mom and her partner had. Now, this is not true of everybody that is in the LGBT community, but there were things that happened to my mom and Vera to where I could see where they would be so angry at men and make the choices that they made. As far as my own identity, I don’t know, I’ve just always like girls; you know? I even found one to marry me, so that’s good. But you know, my mom always talked to me about well, you know, if you’re attracted to men, that’s okay. And I’d say I’m not. Well, you know, if you are, it’s okay. I’m not. And so I kind of almost felt like, you know, she kept on hoping and wondering if I would be, but you know, I just never had that in me, I was never tempted with that once, you know, and who knows, with both parents, you would think that I would be, but I wasn’t, whatsoever. It was definitely – it was an interesting upbringing, but to me, Dr. Bock, I mean it was normal, it was just what I grew up with. I grew up with my mom and her partner going to rallies, you know, I knew that song that they sing in night clubs, we are family, I got all my sisters with me, that had a whole different meaning for me when I was growing up because I remember going to bars and clubs with my mom when I was 4, 5, 6 and 7, and I’m like don’t most kids do this? And then when I got to elementary school and I got invited for birthday parties and I said wow, they have a mom and a dad, and I have two moms and one dad, and kids would always want to come over my house, and I’d be like no, no, no, no, no, no, because I knew at that point there was something different about me and about how I was being raised. Again, I’m not slamming my mom or her partner at all, I’m just saying at least in the 80’s, it wasn’t the norm whatsoever.

Dr. Bock

Now, I take it from the way you’re describing this, obviously you were living with your mom during this time after the divorce. Is that right?
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_Caleb_  
I went back and forth between the two a lot. I spent a lot of time with my dad, but I also spent a lot of time with my mom, so honestly I was back and forth a lot.

_Dr. Bock_  
Now were there any relatives around from either of their families, uncles and aunts and that kind of thing, or did they end up being pretty isolated?

_Caleb_  
My dad was very isolated. My mom and her partner, they’re all from – I mean my mother’s partner is from Wisconsin, my mom and dad are from Kansas, all their family is in Kansas. My dad’s family is all the way out in western Kansas, so they’re kind of isolated. My mom’s family was more around. My mom’s mom I knew, she was a Christian and she was always praying for me. My mom’s aunt was a Christian, I knew my cousins. Her brother, I don’t know if he was a Christian or not, but there were people around me that were praying for me on a consistent basis.

_Dr. Bock_  
Now did they communicate to you at all during that time about the context that you were living in?

_Caleb_  
No. My mom’s mom, I could tell she didn’t approve of it, her name was Bernice, I could tell she didn’t approve of it, and when she would come over to visit, she would always tell me stories about Jesus or tell me stories about God, you know, she’d bring me, you know, back in those days when we had VHS; right? She’d always bring me videos, like Chronicles of Narnia the cartoon or something like and she’d say I want you to watch this. You know, I was a brat, and I would just imitate my parents and make fun of Jesus and I’d see my grandma praying and I’d, you know, walk by and say nobody is listening and just make little comments like that, and I think back, if I could, I’d go back and kick myself in the rear end for doing all that. But you know, it was just an example of how I was reflection of the attitude of my mom and her partner and even of my dad.

_Dr. Bock_  
Now how did you address Vera in particular? I mean, how did – and how did you – is the reference you’re saying, my mom’s partner, is that kind of the way you described it and talked about it and thought about it?
Caleb

Yeah, we were never really that close. Her family was in Wisconsin, they were kind of her family, she had a son, a grown son, and he had kids, and she had a daughter. They would come and visit. I was closer with them than I was with Vera. Vera was very cold. I always felt like, even from a – as a young kid, I felt like I was competing with Vera. It was very difficult living with her. She just really had a big issue, she had big emotional problems, and you could see it. My mother and Vera were always very, very I think offended because I would never refer to Vera as a mom.

Dr. Bock

That’s actually the next question I was going to ask, so that’s great, keep going.

Caleb

I would never refer to her as mom, I would always refer to her as Vera, and I remember several times my mom would say why don’t you ever refer to Vera as your mom, and I’m like because she’s not my mom; you know? I don’t feel close to her, you know, she hardly ever hugs me, we’re not in the same room, when we’re in the same room there’s tension, she’s not my mom. Not to mention the fact that she’s not my mother. And I think that was always a source of hardship for my mother and for Vera. And my mother is a very co-dependent personality, love her to death, but you know, she really was co-dependent on Vera, and I think somewhat Vera on my mom, because my mom loved to have somebody to support her and I think Vera loved to be a rescuer, and so they really were co-dependent on each other. And so their relationship was much stronger than my relationship with my mom or my relationship with Vera definitely.

Dr. Bock

And what about on your dad’s side?

Caleb

Well real quick, I’ll tell you this, and you may want to hear this later on or you may not want to hear it now, I don’t know, but you know, Vera died the year after I got married and I flew back to share the gospel with her, and that was an interesting exchange, so I don’t know if you want to get to that later on.

Dr. Bock

Well, let’s go ahead and pursue that now. Go ahead and talk about what that was like.
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Caleb

So I made a lot of mistakes when I started witnessing to my mom and my dad. My dad was very much in the closet. I didn’t find out about his lifestyle until I was in college later on, I never found out about it. I kind of suspected it, but I was never sure, you know, he had other friends, and so I really didn’t know what to do about that. But Vera, you know, I had made so many mistakes with her and my mom and my dad when I first became a Christian, and being a high schooler, I didn’t know much about the Bible, I had never really studied, I had never taken an interpretation class, hermeneutics, whatever you want to call it, I had never done any of that, and so I would sit down and I would say okay, this is what the bible says and you need to obey it. And then they would pull out all the, you know, well, the bible says that a big dragon is going to come out, you know in Revelation, out of the sea, do you believe that? And being high schooler, I didn’t know, I’m like well sure, if the bible says that, yeah, absolutely, I believe that there will be a big red seven head literal dragon come out of the sea. And so she – you know, they trapped me all the time. And so I made so many mistakes, I was so worried about straightening out their behavior that I kind of overlooked the whole fact that I was trying to win them to Christ, I was trying to share the gospel with them. And so my mother’s partner got sick, she got cancer and she refused treatment, so they set up a hospice room in my mom and Vera’s dining room, and that kind of turned into a makeshift hospital bed. And so my mom called me in February of 2005 and said if you want to see Vera, you need to come back quick. And so I got a ticket and flew out there, and when I was on the plane, I said okay Lord, I’m coming out here, if you give me the opportunity to share the gospel with her one last time, I’m going to do it in the right way, and I’m not going to push my way through, and just give me that opportunity, I’m not going to force it. So I was there about four or five days, and all the days, nothing ever happened, she was in and out of sleep, her family was there, just no opportunity came. And then the night before I left to go back to California, I was sitting with her, sitting next to her bedside, and she opened up her eyes and she looked at me and she said Caleb, what do you think is on the other side? And it was a perfect opportunity; right? And I said “Vera, Jesus is on the other side, and I said if you accept Him now, if you trust Him and submit your life and make Him the Lord and Savior of your life, then guess what? He’ll accept you. You don’t need to do anything. You’ll be with Him in paradise, just like the thief on the cross.” And I’m just imploring her. And she looked at me and she said, “No.” She said, “You want to know what I think about people like you, people that believe in Jesus?” And I said, “I don’t know; do I?” And she said, “I think you’re weak and I think you use Jesus as a crutch.” And I said, “Well Vera, you must be halfway to salvation, because He’s not my crutch, He’s my wheel barrow and in fact I’m not even in the passenger seat, I’m in the trunk, and He’s living my life for me. Yes, I am weak and that’s the whole reason why I need to be saved.” Unless something happened, she went to a Christ-less eternity. That had a very profound effect on me, and taking serious this issue in our culture,
Dr. Bock
Now let’s talk about your father’s side of the equation. You said you really didn’t know about what his lifestyle was, so I take it you just saw him as a divorced dad?

Caleb
Yeah, I saw him as a divorced dad. He had a lot of anger, and probably rightly so, about the divorce and what happened. He was a hard-working professor and as most hard-working professors, didn’t make a lot of money as a professor, but impacted a lot of students. He was a very, very sharp person, educated me a lot in history and literature and so on and so forth. He never dated, I always thought that was awkward, never had any interest in that whatsoever, but hung around some different guys a lot. And you know, as I got older, I kind of suspected it, but I never really believed it until later on in Bible college. I saw proof one day and I just was blown away, and I was just kind of thinking, “Lord, really, both parents? Really? Really, God? Really?” And it was a new experience for me, because my dad and I, you know, we had a good relationship but he was very, very stern; you know? He was loving, I never doubted that either one of my parents loved me, and especially my dad, I know that he loved me a lot, but he was – where some parents want their kids to excel in basketball and football, right, especially in Texas, my dad wanted me to excel in 4.0’s and 4.1’s and 4.2’s.

Dr. Bock
Okay, let’s talk about your transition. So you come out of this environment, and you can’t say that you were exactly predisposed to welcome the thought of becoming a Christian, but you decided to be, what did you say, a ninja Christian? I’m trying to figure out what garb comes with that. But anyway, so talk about that. What was – why – was the desire to undercut the faith a reflection, you think, of your background and what you’d heard about Christianity kind of a way to get them back?
Caleb

I look at that, Dr. Bock, and I think I was emotionally hurt from what I had seen a lot of evangelical Christians do to my mother and to people in my mom’s community. I think I was hurt by that, I think that a lot of my mom and her partner Vera and my dad’s political aspect of things and outlook on life kind of rubbed off on me. They were very much people who want to be part of a cause, who want to be part of a movement, who wanted justice; right? I mean that was huge for my parents, and so I saw this as an opportunity where I can have that justice. I can let people know how wrong they are, and I can let these Christians know about how much they’re hurting people. And so when I went to this Bible study, I was invited by this one guy named Jeff to this Bible study over and over and over again, and I always said, “No, no, no, no, I want nothing to do with it, nothing whatsoever.” And so finally I said yes because I saw it as an opportunity to learn. So I didn’t have a Bible, and so I grabbed this old revised standard version of the Bible off my dad’s shelf. I mean, it was probably old enough where Paul wrote in it, and it still was dusty and it smelled funny, and I took it with me, and it was really weird. We went into the house and the Bible study was downstairs in the basement, so we went down there and we all sat around and we started, you know, praying, and when my dad did take me to church, he took me to an Anglican Episcopal church, and so I was always used to reading the prayers, and we didn’t go that often, even though I was an altar boy, but we didn’t go that often, and so I’m just, you know, thinking wow, you’re just praying on your own, that’s strange, I’ve never seen that before. And then they have us all turn to Corinthians 9 and read these like really nice words of the Apostle Paul; right? Well, everybody else is in First Corinthians 9, and I’m in First Chronicles 9, and they get to me, and all these nice verses by Paul, and then I read something like and He will strike them down with the sword and there will be blood. And they all look at me like I had wasps just crawling out of my ears and they said Caleb, where are you? And I said I’m in First Chronicles 9, and they’re like oh, you’re in the Old Testament. And I said old? So I guess there’s a new one if there’s an old one? Because I really had no clue, I mean, it’s so funny, with these parents who are professors and intellectuals and academics, I really didn’t know anything about Christianity, and yet I was so insistent on attacking it, and I didn’t even know anything about it. And so I walked out of that Bible study extremely embarrassed, just thinking to myself I’m a complete moron, you know, how could I not even know that? And I kept on going back and back and back, because I just said I’m not going to let these Christians get me down, and I really started falling in love with the person of Jesus; you know? I felt convicted. Whereas I went to go convict somebody else’s lifestyle, Jesus was slowly undermining and changing my worldview, and in a good way, ruining my life.
And so you come to the Lord, and I take it that your concern about how Christians treat people in your parents’ community is still something that you are concerned about? Is that fair to say?

Absolutely. I am still definitely concerned about that, you know, especially in California there’s definitely an audience for that, there’s definitely a huge climate out here where there’s a lot of tension surrounding the LGBT issue and all the different issues surrounded with this community and things like same sex relationships and marriage and benefits and insurance, and so on and so forth. And so yeah, even today, I mean in Southern California, there is still a bible belt in Southern California. A lot of people don’t know that, but there is still a bible belt, so yeah.

Okay, so let’s press on here. So you come to the Lord, you accept Jesus as your Savior, you become a Christian, a Christ follower, however you want to describe it, and you tell your parents and the reaction you said initially was they disowned you, so what was that like?
**Caleb**

It was difficult, it was difficult to hear my dad say something like when you got baptized, because I had been baptized as an infant, but when I got baptized, I was told I spit in God’s eye, spit in the eye of God, and my mom called me one of them, which is funny, because Christians had always called her one of them, and now she was using that term or that phrase to apply to me, one of them. What really made it difficult was a week later when I gave my life to the ministry and I said, “Hey I’m not going to go – I’m not going to go to MU, I’m not going to go to KU in Lawrence, Kansas, I’m going to go to a bible college and I’m going to train to be a pastor.” And you know my mom told me she wasn’t going to pay for it, my mom said I’m not going to help you, and I didn’t go see my mom for a while. My dad told me that I was choosing, you know, this over him, I was going against his wishes, but I felt like I needed to; you know? He said you know in a way you’re disowning me, and that really hurt. And there were nights when my dad didn’t care if I came home or not, so I spent a lot of nights over at friends’ houses. I had an opportunity from a campus pastor at the University of Missouri Columbia to come live with his family. I turned them down on it because I felt like somehow maybe God wanted my parents to be my mission field in a sense, to I spent a lot of time at my friends’ houses and didn’t have a very active social life. But whenever I got home from school, you know, I had saved up my money and I bought this Bible, one of the original NIV study bibles, if you remember, back in the 90’s, the original, and any chance I got, I sat down and I read it. And then I bought a life application bible and I read that, I read all the different character sketches, and I just spend hours and hours during the weeks just learning as much as I could about God’s word and about what it was all about, and it had such a huge impacting effect on me. So the issue with my parents and their reaction was definitely negative, but their reaction afforded me a lot of time, in a weird way to say it, to learn more about the Bible. I know that sounds weird, but –

**Dr. Bock**

So you were engaging them, and I take it eventually you continued to kind of relate to them, but it was awkward?
Caleb

Yeah, it was very awkward. I mean, and some people do this with family members, but honestly, we couldn’t talk about philosophy, politics or religion. We talked about the air, we talked about the Kansas City Chiefs, of which I’m still a fan of. We talked about, you know, my mom was huge into football, so we talked a lot about that. We talked a lot about different events that were happening. But any time philosophy, politics or religion was brought up, it was always a really bad turnout, because a lot of my views on obviously religion, but also on, you know, philosophical ideas as well as politics were turned around when I became a Christ follower. And I’m not trying to say that people that have different political views from me are not Christ followers; I’m just saying that the more I study the Word, I felt convicted of how some things were connected with politics, and I changed my view on it honestly, so I don’t know if that makes sense at all or not.

Dr. Bock

No, it does.