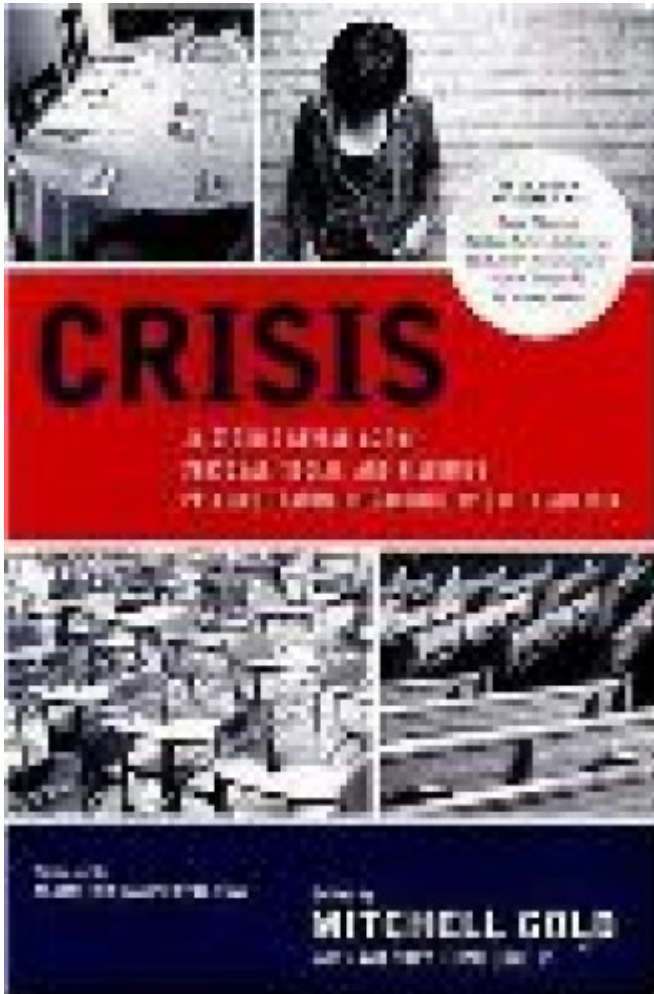


Church-based hate

By [David P. Gushee](#) in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Crisis: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America

Mitchell Gold, ed., with Mindy Drucker
Greenleaf

“‘FAG’ ran across my chest in letters eight inches high,” recalled Jared Horsford, a student at Texas Tech and one of 40 gays and lesbians who tell their stories in this book. “I stared in the mirror, bitter irony rolling through my mind about how illegible it was, bloody and backwards, in the bathroom mirror. I wouldn’t make the same mistake a few months later when I carved ‘i hate you’—backwards this time—across the same skin.”

In high school, Jared was a basketball star, student government president, church youth group leader and valedictorian. But Jared was also attracted to males rather than females. “So I fought. I got counseling; I fasted; I prayed; I dated a girl from church; I worked at a Christian summer camp.” But nothing worked. He spiraled between attending ex-gay meetings and engaging in anonymous gay sex. When his desires persisted, he would start “feeling defeated because I wasn’t getting ‘healed,’ and go home and cut myself.”

Matt Comer, who came from a conservative Baptist family in North Carolina, began experiencing same-sex attraction in his preteen years. Matt’s preacher said from the pulpit things like: “Put all the queers on a ship, cut a hole in the side and send it out to sea.” The contrast between his sexuality and the beliefs of his church and family drove Matt to thoughts of suicide. But that same religious faith told him that suicide “would have sent me straight to the depths of hell, landing me in the same spot as being gay. So, I turned to begging and pleading.”

Lying on his bed at night, “crying and praying,” Matt would ask God to spare him eternal damnation if he tried his very best not to feel attraction to males. But it didn’t work. Finally Matt told the truth to his parents. “My mother said I was crazy and sick and told me I was going to hell.” Eventually, however, his mother changed her views. “Today,” Matt writes, “she is my strength and my most avid supporter, and I know that she loves me no matter what.”

The coeditor of this collection, Mitchell Gold, grew up Jewish in Trenton, New Jersey, in the 1960s. He spent his teenage years in a cloud of depression, loneliness, fear and confusion. He tried to pass as straight but was unable to sustain the fiction. “I made a pact with myself: If I could not change and want to be with a woman by the time I was 21, I would commit suicide.”

Like a number of others who tell their stories in this book, Gold moved beyond suicidal thoughts into serious planning. Finally he received psychiatric care that

helped him toward self-acceptance. “The number one reason I work toward equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people is because I do not want kids to go through what I did.”

What exactly do such young people go through? Gold and coeditor Mindy Drucker offer not just stories but summaries of some key data. They include the following:

- Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among 15-to-24-year-olds; for every young person who takes his or her own life, 20 more try.
- Gay teens are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.
- Forty-five percent of gay men and 20 percent of lesbians surveyed had been victims of verbal and physical assaults in secondary school specifically because of their sexual orientation.
- Gay youth are at higher risk of being kicked out of their homes and turning to life on the streets for survival. They are more likely than their heterosexual peers to start using tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs at an earlier age.
- Twenty-eight percent of gay students drop out of school—more than three times the national average.

All the stories in this volume focus on the particular problems faced by teenagers from religious families and congregations. Some of the stories are contemporary; others tell of long-ago hurts.

Jarrod Parker woke up one morning at Boy Scout camp (having apparently been drugged the night before) with the word “faggot” written across his forehead, “a picture of a penis at the corner of my mouth,” and further obscenities and drawings scrawled over his chest and back. Jorge Valencia, who works at a teen crisis and suicide prevention hotline, recalls getting calls from youths whose parents had told them, “I would rather have a dead son than a gay son.” Rodney Powell, a black homosexual who marched during the civil rights movement, says: “I suffered more fear and numbing anxiety from my ‘secret’ as a teenager than I did from racism and segregation.”

Two of the stories are told by the parents of young adult children who died. Mary Lou Wallner lost her 29-year-old daughter Anna to suicide. Wallner was estranged from

her daughter because of her inability to come to terms with her daughter's sexuality. She writes that the last communication she had from her daughter was a letter telling her that "I was her mother only in a biological way, that I had done colossal damage to her soul with my shaming words, and that she did not want to, and did not have to, forgive me." Wallner decided to "respect Anna's wishes and give her the space she was asking for." The next communication she received was the news that Anna was dead.

"What do I wish I'd done? What would I do now? Grab my toothpaste, credit card and car keys, jump in the car, drive to where she lives and tell her I love her no matter what. I did not do that, and now I never can." Wallner and her husband now run an organization whose goal is to reunite parents with their gay children.

Elke Kennedy was awakened at 4:30 one morning in May 2007 with a call from a South Carolina hospital, where her 20-year-old son Sean had been brought. "When I finally got to see my son, my knees buckled. He was lying flat on his back, stitches on his upper lip, blood on his hair and neck, hooked up to a respirator. As I stood there holding his hand, he felt so cold. I wanted to hug him, to keep him warm. I kissed him, telling him I was there and that I loved him so much and to please wake up. I remember praying. A doctor came in and explained that the tests had revealed Sean had severe brain damage and his injuries were not survivable."

What had happened to Sean? "As he was leaving a bar, a man named Stephen Moller got out of the car and called Sean a faggot. Then he punched Sean so hard he broke Sean's facial bones and separated his brain from his brain stem. Sean fell backward onto the pavement, and his brain ricocheted in his head."

Sean died. Moller was convicted only of involuntary manslaughter and was jailed in November 2007. Although his request for early parole was denied in February of this year, he will finish his modest sentence in July.

Gold and his organization "Faith in America" believe that religious hostility is at the basis of violence against gays. If the problem is religion, then religion must change.

Religious groups have a First Amendment right to teach their convictions about homosexuality. By law, if they want to teach that homosexuality is wrong, that is their business. Gay advocates usually recognize this right while asking that traditional religious communities not bring such convictions into the public arena.

Gold takes a more confrontational tack. He believes that the heart of the issue is precisely what religious groups teach within their own walls and what religious families teach within their own homes. He pleads for an end to the “misuse of religion to harm gay people.”

As an evangelical Christian whose career has been spent in the South, I must say I find it scandalous that the most physically and psychologically dangerous place to be (or even appear to be) gay or lesbian in America is in the most religiously conservative families, congregations and regions of this country. Most often these are Christian contexts. Many of the most disturbing stories in this volume come from the Bible Belt. This marks an appalling Christian moral failure.

In contrast to the love and mercy that Jesus exemplified, Christian communities offer young lesbians and gays hate and rejection. Sometimes that rejection is declared directly from the pulpit. But even when church leaders attempt to be more careful, to “hate the sin but love the sinner” (as that hackneyed formulation has it), the love gets lost. Perhaps we need to focus on refining our ability to love; maybe we are not actually capable of compartmentalizing hate.

Christ’s command that we love our neighbors, especially the most despised and rejected, means that we must respond immediately to the crisis outlined in this book. Such love requires not only that we be vigilant about the impact of individual and congregational words and actions, but also that we consider seriously the broader ramifications of Christian activism that seeks to oppose all social advances for gay and lesbian people. Many Christians act as if opposing gays and lesbians is fundamental to the church’s mission, which leads many gay and lesbian people to perceive Christianity as their mortal enemy. Is this how we want to be perceived?

Reading about the murder of Sean Kennedy in Greenville, South Carolina, helped cement a conclusion for me: there is very likely a gap between what traditionalist church leaders may intend to say when they discuss biblical references to homosexuality or the issue of gay marriage and what those listening to them actually hear. Such discussions may inflame the less discerning in the pews and lead them toward hateful and contemptuous attitudes and behavior. We must be extraordinarily careful about how we express ourselves, especially in a polarized cultural climate.

We who are Christians must love our homosexual neighbors. We must treat them as we would want to be treated. We must remember that as we do to them, we do to Jesus (Matt. 25:31ff.). We must oppose their harassment and bullying in schools, churches and clubs—everywhere. We must rebuke any Christian who speaks or acts hatefully toward gays and lesbians. We must teach Christian parents of gay children to communicate unconditional love and under no circumstances evict them from either their hearts or their homes, no matter what they believe about the moral significance of homosexual inclinations. We must seek opportunities in the church to build relationships with those who so often have encountered Christian hatred.

Crisis recounts the sad stories of dozens of young people who, like the biblical Esau, cried for a blessing from their parents, friends and churches. All too often they have not received it. All too often they have been left broken, rejected as human beings—at the hands of Christians and in the name of the Bible. Obviously we must extend basic acceptance to gay youths such as these, as well as Christian love.

Moreover, after reading these stories, I feel that Christians have something they need to request from God and from gays and lesbians, and that is forgiveness.