

Voices: When the ones you love get it wrong

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I love Baylor University like I love a member of my own family. And this week, it felt like a family member got a DUI and hurt someone. You don't stop loving them—but the pain is real, and the failure has to be named.

When I talk to people about Baylor, I often say it's one of the only truly Christian universities that doesn't lead with fear or rigidity. It's not like most Bible colleges where everything is a rule, and every rule is a dare. When something is off limits, young people will run straight at it.

But at Baylor, faith isn't enforced through shame. It's lived out in a culture of trust, curiosity and grace. And what I've always loved is that Baylor never seemed afraid of science.

You could wrestle with the evidence around evolution and other scientific questions, and it didn't have to threaten your faith. That integration—faith and intellect, belief and exploration—is what made Baylor special to me.

That's why the recent decision to rescind a research grant from the Baugh Foundation to the Diana Garland School of Social Work hit so hard. This grant was intended to fund research into how religious communities—often unknowingly—have contributed to mental health struggles among LGBTQ+ individuals and how churches can play a role in healing rather than harming.

It wasn't some progressive campaign. It was pastoral. It was humble. It was meant to help.

Love above all

Years ago, I was at the Sundance Film Festival guest teaching a film class with Fuller Theological Seminary. One evening, I found myself in a packed Sundance theater watching *For the Bible Tells Me So*, a documentary about LGBTQ+ individuals and their families—many of them deeply rooted in Christian traditions.

The director was there. So were several of the families featured in the film. We watched it all together. And we wept together.

The stories in that film were devastating. Again and again, we heard from people who had been told by their churches and their parents, “If you’re going to be gay, you’re dead to us.”

Families cut them off. Churches exiled them. They were written out of the lives of the people who once claimed to love them most. And that is the ultimate form of harm. It’s captured in one father’s desperate prayer from the film, “God, please don’t let my son grow up to be a faggot.”

That kind of hatred and fear lived in the hearts of many churches—including churches I’ve pastored, and likely many represented by those who signed the letter to rescind this grant. I don’t say that to assign blame, but to acknowledge the reality that we’ve all ministered among people carrying wounds from misguided beliefs. Some endured conversion therapy. Others were excluded. Most have at least one family member who was harmed. The damage is real, and it’s still with us. Which is why this kind of research doesn’t threaten us—it helps us. It tells the truth so that we can love better.

So why oppose a research project aimed at healing? Why not ask: “What do we need to learn so that we never do that again?”

If you know that harm has been done in your own church, then research designed to help you love better is not a threat. It's a gift.

No matter where you land theologically, we have to acknowledge this truth: When exclusion leads to despair, when it pushes people into isolation and shame, we have failed in our primary calling, which is to love.

Courage to love and grow

The kind of research that was being funded by the Baugh Foundation was aimed at addressing that failure with humility and grace.

It asked: "How can we do better?"

That's not a threat to faith. It's a reflection of it.

I want to believe Baylor can do better. I believe our university has the capacity to model a way forward that holds both faith and compassion, biblical conviction and scientific insight.

But it will take courage, especially in a political and cultural climate where fear and outrage too often lead the conversation.

To the pastors and leaders who signed the letter opposing this research, I invite you, respectfully, to watch *For the Bible Tells Me So*. Sit with those stories. Ask yourself if our role as spiritual leaders is to build walls or to open doors.

You don't have to change your theology to care deeply about people. But if we claim to follow Jesus, we are called to love and love requires listening, humility and a willingness to grow.

To President Linda Livingstone, I still believe in your leadership and your heart for this university. You have the opportunity to help Baylor reflect the

best of its mission—informed by faith, guided by truth and committed to human dignity.

It's not too late to right this wrong. It's not too late to show the world that Baylor is a place where hard questions are not feared but embraced in the light of grace.

This moment is about more than a grant. It's about who we are becoming. I'm grieving, but I'm not giving up. There's too much at stake.

Chris Seay is the lead pastor of Ecclesia Houston. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The 11th paragraph was edited after the article initially was posted.