

When being a "NALT" Christian ally isn't enough

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When I was in college I was involved in some anti-racism discussions. I had been born and raised in the South and, though I had plenty of examples of everyday racism surrounding me, I had always believed in racial equality. I believed that I was a good anti-racism ally.

One day some of us were working on some plans for an upcoming event when the conversation turned to those of us who were white and working against racism. One white student proudly proclaimed, "I do this work because I want to show people that not all white people are racist. Not all white people are like that."

Over the course of the next hour or so, our African-American colleagues gently changed the discussion for us. Instead of doing anti-racist work in order to prove that we are "not all like that," maybe it made more sense to do this work in order to simply promote racial equality, and to let the people whose voice had been suppressed for so long finally get to speak their own truth?

That made sense to me then, and it profoundly changed my understanding of what it meant to be an ally against racism. Which is why when the new "NALT" project, an acronym for "[Not All Like That](#)," came out, I felt a little uneasy.

NALT is doing a good thing in many ways. It is trying to get Christians who believe that LGBT people are equal in the eyes of God to tell their stories. Supported by Dan Savage, who created the "It Gets Better" project, and headed by John Shore, a pastor and straight ally, the idea is to spread the word that "not all Christians are like that." That is, not all Christians are homophobic and believe LGBT people shouldn't have rights.

Again, this is admirable. Those of us who are LGBT and Christian have been preaching this truth for years. I'm glad more are finally hearing it. But, I do have some concerns. First, I'm worried that NALT Christians are too focused on saying what they aren't (anti-gay, anti-equality, fundamentalist) and not focused enough on saying what they are, which is people who believe God's love is so broad and

welcoming that it includes all people (including those who are “like that”). I don’t want my faith to be defined by what it is in opposition to, but by what it has in abundance: things like grace, mercy, compassion, and love.

But beyond that, whenever a movement of allies (in this case LGBT allies, but this is applicable to anti-racism allies, allies to persons with disabilities, allies against sexism, etc.) makes their whole argument based on how they aren’t “like that”, I worry that we miss the point, and we miss the opportunity to really take a look at ourselves.

When I was 19, I knew that I wanted to stand against racism. But what I hadn’t done was to explore how the racism that surrounded me might have impacted my understanding of race. Likewise, when I try to advocate for people with disabilities, I need to look at what it means to be an able-bodied person, and what assumptions I make because of it. And in all these things, I need to ask, “Do I need to be the one at the microphone talking about how I’m not ‘like that’? Or do I need to be getting the microphone to people who haven’t had a chance to speak yet?”

I came out long before it was fashionable or even acceptable to be an LGBT ally in the church. Openly LGBT Christians not only never got to hear much publicly from our allies, but we were often not allowed to tell our own stories. Now that being an open ally is a point of honor for many Christians, I’m often surprised how much of the discussion of LGBT inclusion centers around the stories of the allies, and not the stories of the people who have been excluded. I often wonder how some of the most vocal Christian LGBT allies could stop, listen, and lift up the voices of those who have been directly affected by homophobia and transphobia in the church.

Around the time of a local gay pride celebration last year, one gay man said to me, “I really wish Pride could be about LGBT people again...I don’t want to listen to any more speeches by Christians about how they changed their minds and I’m okay now.” At the time I was a little surprised. Now I think I understand why he was so frustrated. After years of not being able to talk about who he was, he still was not being allowed to do so, only this time it was by allies. His words might sound harsh to some, but I don’t think his feelings are invalid.

Maybe the conversation needs to shift from “we’re not all like that” to “I don’t want to be like that, and that’s why I want to learn”. One of the things I’ve learned in anti-discrimination work is that I constantly have to confront my own privilege, and my

internalized prejudices, and when I have a chance to listen to people who can help me do that, I need to stop talking. I have learned a tremendous amount by letting other people tell their stories.

None of this is to say that the willingness of many Christians to be an ally isn't welcome. It truly is, and the LGBT people I know are generally grateful for it. But this is to say that, as a straight ally friend of mine once said, "an ally is as an ally does". NALT may be a good first step, but it's only that. If we really want to change the culture of homophobia in the church, and if we really want others to see us as the people we want to be, we have to start by raising up the voices of those most affected. This is true not only around LGBT issues in the church, but around every issue of inclusion or acceptance. In our missionary zeal, Christians have often done great damage when we have tried to speak for others. This time let's listen; only then can we speak powerfully together.

*Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)*