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Queer Theology: Reclaiming Christianity for the LGBT Community

Kelly Kraus

Key words, terms, concepts, names: queer, Christian theology, Bible, liberation theology, queer theology, sexuality, sinners, Jesus, Robert Goss

The root of homophobia in the United States is the condemnation of homosexuality in the Church. By and large, Americans form their moral conscience based on the teachings of the church and so since the church condemns homosexuality, Americans blindly accept this teaching. This condemnation has done immense harm to the LGBT community and it is time for the LGBT community to reclaim Christianity.

The tenets of liberation theology can be utilized by the queer community to liberate itself from mainstream theology. This paper will first examine the tenets of liberation theology, followed by a biblical exegesis of the various texts used by liberation theology. Next the biblical passages typically used against the LGBT community will be reexamined followed by an outline of the tenets of emerging queer theology.

The queer community needs to be liberated from the heterosexism latent in Christian theology. Queer theology can become a legitimate practice and mode of biblical exegesis if the queer community can liberate heterosexually biased Christian theology. Queer Christians need to reclaim their right to participate in Christianity and detail their experiences as gay and lesbian Christians. Christianity has traditionally been a patriarchal and heterosexual institution. Queer people challenge the patriarchal and heterosexist culture of Christianity by refusing to accept the rules laid out by traditional Christian theology, namely that one must follow the rule of males and be heterosexual. The queer community can reclaim Christian theology for themselves using the model of liberation theology to create a queer theology.

Terms

Liberation theology proposes to release exploited people from their oppressors. Liberation theology applies the principles of the Bible in order to argue for liberation from economic and social oppression.

Heterosexism is an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community. The term heterosexism is now used in place of the word homophobia because it more accurately describes the societal reasons behind the sexual prejudice LGBT people encounter individually, and as a community.

LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. LGBT is now favored over the term homosexual because homosexual has a negative connotation in that it was once associated with a medical or mental illness. The problem with the term homosexual will be further explored later on. LGBT is used in this paper along with the term "the community" which means anyone who identifies as LGBT. Another term for this community is "queer". Queer is an umbrella term for anyone with a marginalized sexual orientation or gender identity that does not fall into the four categories of LGBT. While once considered a slur against the LGBT community, queer has been reclaimed by the community and is also used in academic circles. Queer also has an activist connotation in that the queer community can no longer sit silently while heterosexist Christian theology denigrates them.

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Finally, sodomy comes from the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah which will be explicated in this paper. Heterosexist Christian theology has taught that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about homosexuality and so gay people were given the label sodomites. The incorrect usage of the term sodomites for gay people will be further explored in the re-examination of the biblical texts. All biblical texts quoted are from the New Revised Standard Version as enumerated on the works cited page.

Personal Note

I cannot write this paper without first making known my partiality. I identify as a gay Christian and it is from that perspective I write this paper. I am actively involved in gaining marriage equality for the LGBT community; hence, my arguments about marriage come from the couples I know in my own life as well as my future plans for marriage. Additionally, I was raised in the Catholic Church so I have personally experienced the degradation being done to the LGBT community by the institutional church. I write this paper out of the purely selfish need to reconcile the Christianity my father taught me with my own gay identity. In my quest to reclaim Christianity for myself I hope to help others reclaim their faith as well.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology, while often found in the academic setting, is first and foremost found in the community. Liberation theologians keep "one foot in centers of study, but their other foot is in the community" (Boff 19). The focus is kept on the community because liberation theology is primarily a theology of the people. Liberation theology is done by everyday people in base communities, "it is there alongside the people, speaking, listening, asking questions, and being asked questions" (Boff 19). Liberation theology addresses the needs of the poorest in the church therefore it is done wherever the "people of God" gather (Boff 20). It is a collective effort by the people, not the academics or church leaders in their protected offices.

All theologies can be seen in a purely theoretical aspect. Liberation theology is born out of practice and requires active participation through living in solidarity with the poor. Through practicing liberation theology via personal contact with poor communities, one is able to "acquire new theological sensitivity" (Boff 23). Those who seek to practice liberation theology must live in solidarity with the disenfranchised. Through this solidarity, liberation theology is informed "about the actual conditions in which the oppressed live, the various forms of oppression they may suffer" (Boff 24). This practice of solidarity is "an indispensable stage or mediation in the development of further and deeper understanding, the knowledge of faith itself" (Boff 25). One cannot be a liberation theologian if she does not first understand the oppression and needs of the community through living in solidarity with them.

Solidarity is an important aspect of liberation theology, as is the biblical understanding of the roots of liberation. While the components of liberation theology can be found in many books of the Bible, especially in Exodus, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and Revelation (Boff 35), this paper will focus primarily on the narrative of the Exodus and the Gospels.

Biblical Exegesis for Liberation Theology

The book of Exodus tells of the beginning of the Hebrew people who were liberated by God. The book of Exodus is a narration of "the politico-religious liberation of a mass of slaves who, through the power of the covenant with God, became the people of God" (Boff 35). Exodus is a powerful account of once enslaved people overcoming their oppressors. This account of deliverance is very empowering story for liberation theology which seeks to empower the poor to overcome their oppression.

The Gospels are empowering for liberation theology because they discuss the acts of Jesus who liberated the oppressed of his day. Many parallels can be seen between Jesus liberating the oppressed people in his time and the need for liberating the poor of today. For example, in the gospel of John Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink from the well. This action was a radical move on the part of Jesus, a Jew. Some transcripts even parenthetically state "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans" (4:9b) to show just how much of a

social taboo it was for Jesus to ask a Samaritan woman for water. His disciples were shocked that he was talking to a woman, but Jesus went and stayed with the Samaritans for two days because he was not concerned with what was considered appropriate behavior at the time. Jesus liberated the Samaritans and through this liberation is an argument for liberation of the LGBT community as well.

These same biblical ideas found in liberation theology which argue for liberation of the oppressed can be applied to queer theology to argue for liberation of the LGBT community. The LGBT community has become the scapegoat in Christianity, the immoral sinners in God's perfect world. The LGBT community must reclaim the right to participate in Christian theology through developing a strong and legitimate queer theology.

Re-Examination of Biblical Passages

In order to develop a queer theology the LGBT community must first deal with the biblical verses traditionally understood to condemn homosexuality and in light of the fact that homosexual behavior is hardly mentioned in the Bible. There are a eight verses that are traditionally used to condemn homosexuality, none of which "is about Jesus, nor do they include any of his words" (Rogers 66). The minimal supposed reference to homosexuality shows how minor a concern it is in comparison to things such as justice (Hays 5). Jesus himself never gives any teaching on the subject. The Bible has been incorrectly interpreted to condemn same-sex sexual acts and therefore gay and lesbian relationships.

There are many branches of Christianity that use scripture to condemn gays and lesbians as an "abomination" or "perversion." This condemnation comes from a literal reading of the Bible, but it is important to remember the context and original languages the Bible was written in. Some branches of progressive Christianity have moved to a more modern and inclusive reading of the scriptures which focuses attention on the love preached by Jesus so as to welcome gays and lesbians into full inclusion of the church. Even with more Christian traditions heading towards inclusion, such as the Presbyterian Church, the majority of Christians incorrectly believe the Bible condemns gays and lesbians. It is important to note that this erroneous belief has led to devastating policies that unfairly target gays and lesbians because of their supposed immorality. In addition to these policies, the psychological damage done to LGBT individuals as a result of the church's stance is immeasurable.

The first chapter of the first book of the Bible is often used to argue against homosexuality. In Genesis 1 God makes all the beings on the earth, including humans. Genesis 1:27 reads "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." The term 'humankind' in Hebrew is *adam*. *Adam* is genderless, it simply means humankind. Genesis 1 shows how humans are made in God's image. Using Genesis 1 to advocate for heterosexual marriage is "an artificial construct designed to deny the rights of marriage to those who are homosexual" (Rogers 83). Genesis 1 simply states that God created humans in his image and then continues with the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. The best way for humans to be fruitful is to bond together in community. The commandment to multiply, if taken literally, can also be achieved by all couples, gay or straight, through technological advances.

In Genesis 2:18 God seeks to create a partner for the first human out of the rib of the first human. There is no male or female before this; rather, there is just a human being. The English reads "a suitable partner," which is understood to mean a man and a woman. However, the original Hebrew was *ezer kenegdo* which means "equal strength" or "corresponding help" (*Fish*). In this verse, rather than finding an argument for the complementary partnership of male and female there is actually an argument in favor of same-sex relationships because human beings are portrayed from the very beginning as needing a partner and that partner does not have a clearly defined gender.

Also found in Genesis is the most commonly used biblical story to condemn homosexuality: Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-29. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah Lot invites what he presumes are two men (later revealed to be angels) to spend the night in his house rather than the town square. By inviting strangers into his house Lot is following the protocol of hospitality found throughout the Old Testament. The people of Sodom went to Lot's house and demanded that he bring out his guests so that they "may know them" (19:5b). It is this translation that

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has led people to associate the sin of Sodom with homosexuality. The mob wanted to gang rape the guests which was a common tactic in the ancient world. The mob was not looking for sexual gratification from the guests; rather, it wanted to humiliate the guests in order to protect the city's wealth. Sodom and Gomorrah is referenced elsewhere in the Bible (Ezekiel 16:49, Matthew 10:12-15 with parallel in Luke 10:10-13) as not about homosexuality but about inhospitality. The term "sodomy" was invented in 11th century regarding sexual impropriety amongst heterosexual monks as Jordan explains: "the credit or rather, the blame for inventing the word sodomi, 'Sodomy,' must go, I think to the eleventh century theologian Peter Damian" (290). Sodomy, then, is not a blatant condemnation of homosexuality, but rather a warning against being inhospitable to strangers.

Judges 19 is very similar to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in that an Ephraimite offers a group of travelers with a Levite man hospitality and a gang attempts to gang rape the travelers. The gang wanted to humiliate the travelers and when they were denied access to them and instead given a concubine they gang rape her. Clearly this story is not about homosexual rape because the men raped the woman when denied access to the men. The stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the story of the Levite and his travelers are clearly about inhospitality to the stranger.

Also in the Old Testament is the book of Leviticus. The Leviticus verses that are used against the LGBT community are part of the Holiness Code. The Israelites had just escaped slavery in Egypt and come into the land of the Canaanites. In order to maintain independence and their unique community the Israelites had to create their own identity by separating themselves from the others. It is out of this need for identity and separation that the Holiness Code was created. The Holiness Code covers many things including proper ways to worship and how to remain ritually pure. Ritual purity was an important characteristic for the Israelites as a way of maintaining their uniqueness from other non-Israelites (Rogers 68-9). In this code is "the only exhortation against same-sex intercourse in the Hebrew Bible" (Brodsky 157). This "exhortation" must be critically examined rather than blindly accepted in order for it to be best understood.

The verse against same-sex intercourse is Leviticus 18:22: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; such a thing is an abomination." Similarly, in Leviticus 20:13 it states "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them shall be put to death for their abominable deed; they have forfeited their lives." Read on the literal level in the English it is believed to be saying that a man cannot have sexual relations with another man. In Hebrew, the word that gets translated as abomination is *toevah*. *Toevah* does not connote something innately immoral as we understand abomination to mean; rather, *toevah* is "something that makes a person ritually unclean" (Rogers 69). This view of the word abomination has been "mischaracterized as a prohibition against homosexuality" (Brodsky 157). This verse refers to a specific type of male-male intercourse and is not referring to the broad understanding of homosexuality as a sexual orientation; rather, this verse is best understood in regards to power relations. It was improper for a man to allow himself to be treated as a woman and so this verse prohibits a specific sexual act in which one man is the receptive, or feminine, partner. In the Rabbinic Period it was not common for the rabbis to use a verse from Leviticus as a ban on all male-male sexual acts. Rather, the rabbis were specifically interested in preventing anal intercourse between men and so they read the Levitical prohibitions "as limited to the act of penetration itself" (Brodsky 159). The fallacy of equating certain sexual activities with a homosexual sexual orientation will be addressed in further detail, following discussion of St. Paul's remarks.

In the New Testament the verses used against the LGBT community are all from books written by Paul. The first of which is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: "Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor boy prostitutes nor sodomites nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God." The term "boy prostitutes" is originally *malakos* which literally translates as "soft." In a patriarchal society, being effeminate is a moral flaw. Effeminate men were believed to have no self-control and to indulge in pleasures. (Rogers 71). The original Greek word that is translated in this version as sodomites (but has also been translated as homosexuals or perverts) is *arsenokoites*. This verse is the first time the word *arsenokoites* is ever used so it is nearly impossible to translate it accurately. The word *arsen* refers to male while the word *koites* refers to bed. It is possible, then, that Paul is referring to something such as rape, prostitution or another kind of sexual economic exploitation (Rogers 70). In 1 Timothy 1:10 the word *arsenokoites* is repeated, again with the same issues surrounding translation.

When the Bible references "homosexuality" it is not referencing the loving, committed gay and lesbian couples that exist today, but rather it is referencing a specific sort of sexual act found in biblical times. As Siker explains, "We know of gay and lesbian Christians who truly worship and serve the one true God and yet still affirm in positive ways their identity as gay and lesbian people. Paul apparently knew of no homosexual Christians. We do" (143). The gay and lesbian individuals found today in faith communities are not the equivalent of the unchaste people in Paul's time. A false equivalence has been drawn between certain people from biblical times and people today.

While the various scriptural verses do not seem to relate to what we today understand about gay and lesbian persons, there is biblical support for same-sex relationships. Some examples in the Bible of same-sex loving relationships are David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi and even Jesus and "the beloved disciple." (Nelson 80). As Nelson explains, "the Scripture seems to hold strong emotional bonding between members of the same sex to be cause for celebration, not fear" (80). Somehow the love between two people was subsequently believed to exist only in heterosexual contexts. It is the challenge of LGBT Christians to reclaim the scriptural support for their love.

In addition to scriptural support, the terms used in biblical translations must also be examined. The term homosexual was not coined until 1869 so it is only in error that some translations of the Bible use the word homosexual. The conception of a homosexual orientation versus a heterosexual orientation did not exist in biblical times. In using these terms to discuss the Bible we have "moved from the world of the Torah about as far as a car is from a donkey" (Mariner 85). Today we use the word homosexual as a synonym for gay or lesbian, but the word homosexual has an incredibly loaded history as previously stated. In this paper, the word homosexual is used only when necessary in order to avoid the negative connotations traditionally associated with being LGBT and instead the term queer will be used in order to affirm the identity so many have come to claim.

Furthermore, sodomy is a specific sexual practice that both heterosexual and homosexual couples are capable of engaging in; hence, sodomy is not equivalent to homosexuality. The word "homosexual" refers strictly to sexual orientation which does not necessarily relate to a person's sexual practices. One reason why the term "homosexual" is a misleading label for gays and lesbians is because it focuses on the sexual aspect of their relationship with a person of the same gender and not on the "capacity for stability, growth and the affirmation of God and God's creation" that can be found in their relationship (Mariner 86). In a religious context, heterosexual relationships are evaluated on the love between the two people and their relationship with God, not on their private sexual acts. Gay and lesbian relationships should be evaluated by the same criterion as heterosexual couples are, and not on how they physically express their love in private.

Traditional Christian Theology

Some churches have spoken out against the exclusion of gays and lesbians while others have allowed (either actively or passively) for gays and lesbians to be condemned. Some branches actively work against the inclusion of gays and lesbians not just in their church but in society as a whole. A prime example of the devastating policies mentioned earlier is the role of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints along with the Roman Catholic Church in passing a same-sex marriage ban in the state of California with Proposition 8 in the 2008 election (for a more detailed look into the church's role in the formulation and passing of Proposition 8 see the film *8: The Mormon Proposition*). The church's involvement in political actions against LGBT people has left the community with a feeling of fear and resentment towards Christianity. Rather than sharing in the love of Jesus the LGBT community feels betrayed by his followers.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are churches that work for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians not only within the church, but also in civil life such as by supporting gay marriage. The United Church of Christ is on the forefront of inclusive policies for gays and lesbians, being the first non-LGBT denomination to ordain an openly gay man. The Episcopal Church elected Gene Robinson as the first openly-gay non-celibate bishop in 2003 and in May 2010 elected the first openly-lesbian bishop, Mary Glasspool. The Presbyterian Church also voted just recently, on May 12, 2011, to allow the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers and lay leaders. Unfortunately, these churches are in the minority amongst the various Christian traditions.

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Many Christians draw the all too common response to homosexual Christians by analogizing them to unchaste heterosexual Christians. Hays argues that gay and lesbian Christians must "live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence" (14). This analogy to heterosexual Christians who are called to chastity before marriage is unfair simply because of the possibility for marriage. Heterosexual Christians have hope for a recognized marriage not only through their church but also through the state so the call to chastity is only for the time before marriage. Gay and lesbian Christians on the other hand, do not have the possibility for marriage in these non-accepting Christian churches and so for them chastity is a lifelong sentence, not the temporary state it is for heterosexual Christians.

Hays continues his argument in drawing on the Catholic Church's mandatory celibacy for priests. The fallacy in his argument, however, is in the assumption that it is a mandated celibacy. Celibacy in the Catholic Church is seen as a gift, not a mandated choice. Those who are given the gift of celibacy are called to become priests. Hays gives the idea that becoming a priest comes first and the mandated celibacy comes as a result when actually the gift of celibacy and the call to religious life are not mandated. Hays extols the value of the single life, but forcing a gay or lesbian person into the single life is different than the Catholic vocational calling to the single life. In saying that the church is a place of support for single persons, both heterosexual and homosexual, Hays is forgetting the one key difference between the two: the heterosexuals are choosing to be single while the homosexuals are being forced into the single life.

Others compare same-sex attraction with intimate acts between two people of the same-sex: "homosexual *acts* of genital intimacy, on the other hand, involve choice and may even be performed by someone having, in general, a heterosexual preference" (Cahill 69). It is true that homosexual acts are not necessary for the homosexual identity, but the identity is irrevocably tied to the sexual acts. While a heterosexual person can engage in homosexual acts (and vice versa) it is the sexual acts and the sexual attraction that define a gay or lesbian person. The debate in the church about homosexual inclusion seems to view homosexual people simply by their sexual attraction, or even merely their sexual acts, and not by their humanity. Again we see how using the term homosexual is problematic because it focuses in on the sexual aspect of the gay and lesbian person rather than the humanity of each individual.

The debate in Christian churches so often focuses on whether the LGBT individual has the right to participate in sexual activity with a same-sex partner and whether it is morally acceptable to do so. The morality of same-sex sexual activity is based in the possibility for a gay or lesbian person to "act otherwise" as Jones explains: "moral accountability usually presumes the capacity of the individual to act otherwise" (93). People who are oriented towards the same sex do not have the capacity to act otherwise; similarly, people who are oriented toward the opposite sex do not have the ability to be oriented toward the same-sex. The morality behind same-sex acts is an unfair judgment of LGBT couples, and in fact only makes sense at all against the background presumption of the immorality of same-sex acts.

Like all debates that include LGBT people, the debate over marriage for LGBT couples focuses solely on the morality of gay and lesbian sexual activity. On the other hand, heterosexual couples who seek to marry in the church are judged based on their love and their desire to procreate. The Catechism of the Catholic Church cites Genesis 1:28 where God commands creation to "be fruitful and multiply" and states "Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unending love with which God loves man. It is good, very good, in the Creator's eyes" (Catholic Church 1604). Heterosexual couples are told that "unity, indissolubility, and openness to fertility are essential to marriage" (Catholic Church 1664). LGBT couples are capable of meeting the standards outlined in the Catechism for marriage; for example, Michael and Mark are a married couple who are currently in the process of adopting a child. They have what the Catechisms calls "essential" to marriage, yet they are prevented from marriage because they are a gay couple. LGBT couples are told "there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family" ("Considerations" 1.4). LGBT couples are evaluated by different standards than heterosexual couples. LGBT couples are judged on the morality of their sexual activity while straight couples are evaluated on love and their growing relationship with God and one another.

One interesting point about the ban on marriage for LGBT couples as religiously motivated is that "the Vatican Library even has a record for "a marriage ceremony for two persons of the same sex" (Mollenkott 148). The Catholic Church has been a leader in denying marriage to LGBT couples. The Catholic Church sees marriage as so important it considers it a Sacrament, yet it denies this Sacrament to all of its own LGBT members and publically denies this Sacrament through political action such as the aforementioned support for California's Proposition 8.

Despite the prohibitions against marriage, LGBT people are fully capable of experiencing love. They are not "inhibited by their sexuality from realizing in their character morally commendable qualities" (Cahill 73). For all Christians, the focus must be on "character and moral values or characteristics (for example, honesty, fidelity, love, service, self-denial), rather than on physical values and material acts (for example, acts of genital sexuality)" (Cahill 73-74). Christians should not be so concerned with the sexual acts of their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters; rather, the focus should be on helping each individual (regardless of sexual orientation) to attain proper Christian ethics.

The condemnation of homosexuality has resulted in tragic policy that excludes gays and lesbians from basic rights. The condemnation of anything but heterosexuality forces young gays and lesbians to internalize this homophobia before they are even able to put a name to their sexual orientation. This internalized homophobia has drastic effects on young people when they are constantly told they are immoral sinners by their place of worship. Lesbian and gay youth are four times more likely to commit suicide than their straight counterparts (Trevor). This high suicide rate can be tied to the homophobia professed by churches. Gay and lesbian Christians must continue the difficult task of calling for acceptance in their churches; the lives of younger gay people literally depend on it.

For gay and lesbian religious devotees, more work must be done to create spaces of inclusion and acceptance. Christianity and queer relationships have the same basis: love. This shared foundation is "no mere 'activity,' not a pastime nor a behavior; it is absolutely fundamental to our religious consciousnesslove is the amplitude of religious devotion" (Michaelson 218). As the amplitude of religious devotion, true love cannot be deemed sinful, deviant or any other negative trait. It is the duty of gays and lesbians in each respective religious tradition to begin (or continue) the work of creating places of acceptance in their religious traditions. Christians need to get back to the essence of the Christian religion: love. In the gospels Jesus affirms the importance of love when he is asked "Which commandment is the first of all?" (Mark 12:28b). To this question, "Jesus answered, 'the first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'" The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31). In Matthew 25:40 it is stated that "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Through Mark 12 and Matthew 25 Christians are given a directive that is summed up in John 13:34-35: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." The commandment to love is repeated throughout the gospels and so as Christians we should love God by loving one another.

Our current Christian theology is not an expression of love towards LGBT people. It is strictly for heterosexual people adhering to heteronormative ideas about gender and sex. There is very little room for people who do not fit neatly into the heterosexual male/female binary. Theology largely "is the product of people with power and privilege, influence and wealth. This gives their theology a partisan bias that renders it meaningful to only a limited audience, particular not universal" (Goss, *Queering Christ* 140). This biased theology is the reason the LGBT community must stand up and create their own theology. Queer theology is a reclaiming of the gay and lesbian experience. LGBT Christians have a distinctly different view of Christianity from their heterosexual counterparts and it is this difference that necessitates a unique Queer theology.

Queer Theology

Queer Christians must first claim the oppression they have endured at the hands of heterosexist Christianity. In order to reclaim theology "we must name our oppression, analyze it on the basis of our experiences, not just accept the terms provided by the oppressor" (Cleaver 41-42). Heterosexist Christian theology has oppressed the

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queer community. This oppression must be recognized and examined along with the experiences of queer Christians in order to create a queer theology. Gay and lesbian Christians have been victim to heterosexual Christian theology, but it is important not to remain victimized. The only way to come out of this persecution is to create a new theology; a theology that accepts and values the contributions gays and lesbians can make to Christianity.

Part of understanding the oppression is learning about the misconceptions surrounding sexuality and reclaiming this important aspect of humanity. Sexuality is not typically something celebrated by the masses; rather, when sexuality is expressed in what is considered the "proper" way it is merely tolerated. For many Christians, "sex in general is profane rather than sacred, part of the fallen, physical realm and not the spiritual" (Moon 151). Sexual acts are seen as appropriate only in the context of a heterosexual marriage. Any sexual acts outside of a married couple are seen as immoral. The consequence of this belief is that same-sex couples are unable to enter into a marriage contract and so they are denied the ability to engage in sexual acts. Sexuality, rather than celebrated, is merely tolerated between heterosexuals. As one interviewee put it "sex can be very scary" (Fish) so naturally it follows that gay and lesbian people find their sexuality denigrated amongst heterosexual Christians who themselves are afraid of sex. The lack of understanding of their own sexuality leads them to fear other sexual acts that they understand even less about, namely sex between non-heterosexual people. Queer people do not fit the "proper" model for sexuality and so their sexuality is criticized. As a result of this criticism the community struggles to find acceptance in their church communities.

In order to reclaim sexuality and Christianity, the two opposing ideas must first be reconciled to one another. Sexuality is often seen as opposite, hedonistic and contrary to Christianity. In order to create a gay lesbian theology, sexuality and spirituality must be seen not as "opposites, but the single reality of the erotic grace from God and toward God" (Goss, *Queering Christ* 35). Sexuality is part of being human; rather than a purely hedonistic pleasure, "sexuality is a foundational aspect of our total, integrated bodily well-being" (Harrison 145). Sexuality is an important aspect of humanity and it has been severely limited by heterosexist Christian theology. This limitation on the range of human sexual expression has led to incredible discrimination of the queer community based on one aspect of queer life. Queer theology must reclaim the right to a queer sexuality because it is a way to connect with one another and with God.

Sexuality is an integral part of being human for reason of the intimate bonding that occurs in all loving sexual acts, whether procreative or not. Sexuality is "part of God's creation and a means for beginning to understand love and the love of God" (Goss, *Queering Christ* 113). Traditional Christianity has convinced its followers that the only "proper" expression of sexuality is within the context of a thoroughly heterosexual, monogamous, married couple. This idea of sexuality is limiting for gay and lesbian people who find themselves unable to engage in "proper" sexuality. They are limited not only by the fact that they are not heterosexual, but also in that they are often unable to enter into a married relationship due to the various bans enacted in many states and on the federal level. These limits leave no place for gays and lesbians to participate in "proper" sexuality thus forcing them into the fringes of Christianity. While sexual activity is not the only aspect of the LGBT identity, it is a major definer for those who identify as LGBT. Having such a defining aspect of one's identity being sequestered to the outskirts of "proper" sexuality leaves many LGBT people feeling as though there is no room for them in Christianity, but it also gives LGBT people a unique perspective which they can bring to Christianity.

Queer sexuality, rather than a sin, is a sign of God's love. Through the love of a partner, a gay or lesbian person experiences a small fraction of the love of God. In the more physical sense, "queer love-making coempowers God's presence in the world" (Goss, *Jesus ACTed Up* 166). Jesus experienced extreme discrimination due to his unpopular views and teachings, yet he still loved; similarly, LGBT people experience incredible discrimination for whom they love. When an LGBT couple is able to find love together despite all of the discrimination, they get a sense of the love Jesus has for them. God's presence can be sensed in two people on the fringes of society making love because God blesses the union of two people experiencing discrimination the way his son Jesus did. God is present in a gay or lesbian couple being intimate with each other because "God's revelation is found in the lives of the oppressed. The God of the Bible is the God of the oppressed" (Goss, *Jesus ACTed Up* 89). An LGBT couple, being intimate despite all the oppression they face, is empowering for them as well as enlightens them to the love God has for

them. Through the love they feel for one another, they experience a small fraction of the love of God. All through the Bible the message is that God is incredibly aware of oppression in the world and thus gay and lesbian people should find an ally, not an enemy, in God.

A perfect example of finding an ally in God is his teachings throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament an emphasis is placed on taking care of the widow, the poor, the orphan and the stranger. This charitable sentiment continues in the New Testament with Jesus who associated himself with outcasts, and encourages others to do the same. As previously explored, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink and stays for two days with Samaritans. As Jesus befriended these social outcasts, he encourages others, "when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13). The continued solidarity on behalf of God with the outcast and marginalized leads to the understanding that Jesus is on the side of the LGBT community. The Bible shows us that "God rejects the political sanctioning of injustice, oppression, and exploitation of the innocent. God stands in solidarity with the innocent and the oppressed of history. God takes the role and perspective of Jesus in his solidarity with the oppressed" (Goss, *Queering Christ* 162). Rather than condemn gays and lesbians, God stands with them because he knows the feeling of being an outcast. God relates to their experiences in Christianity and in society at large. This incredible connection with God can serve as a foundation for queer theology.

Queer theology can utilize the story of the exodus from Egypt just as liberation theology uses the Exodus as an empowering narrative that can liberate the oppressed. Through Moses God led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and so too God can lead LGBT people out of the discrimination from heterosexist theology. Rather than continue to be the victims of heterosexist theology, the queer community can empower themselves and become the chosen people of God much like the Hebrews.

The gospels are another place the queer community can find strength. For liberation theologians, the gospels serve as a way to argue for the liberation of poor people modeled after the acts of Jesus. Similarly, the queer community needs to be liberated. In the gospels Jesus is said to have "dissolved the 'holy' boundaries of clean and unclean, holy and profane, and saint and sinner" (Cheng 80). Jesus freely associated with social outcasts such as lepers, tax collectors and Samaritans. Jesus chose to fraternize with the outcasts in an attempt to dissolve the strict social boundaries of the day. Today's Christians can model this important aspect of Jesus' ministry by welcoming today's social outcasts, the queer community, into their churches.

Jesus also challenges societal and purity boundaries when he cleanses a leper in Mark 1:40-45 (with parallels in Matthew and Luke). Jesus willingly associates with someone who was deemed unclean by societal standards and takes on the priestly function of cleansing him. This radical act shows how Jesus stood up to the wisdom of the day which stated that lepers were to be shunned from the rest of "clean" society. Jesus challenged the idea that women were not equal to men in Luke 10:30-42. In this story Mary sits with the men and listens to Jesus teach while Martha served them. When Martha gets frustrated because Mary is not performing her role as a woman and helping her, Jesus explains "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." In this story Jesus is again challenging what was considered to be proper roles for each gender. Jesus gives Mary an equal footing in society by saying it is better for her to listen to his teachings than to worry about serving the men. Just as Jesus challenged these boundaries, the queer community must challenge the boundaries drawn by heterosexist Christian theology.

The queer community can also find support from Jesus in the gospels. Jesus refuses to cast judgment on those many in his day would consider sinners. In John 8, the Pharisees bring a woman to Jesus and accuse her of adultery. Many would gladly condemn her and sentence her to be stoned to death, but Jesus refuses to condemn her. This lack of judgment by Jesus, when read with a queer perspective, can be understood as Jesus not seeing supposed sexual impropriety important enough to warrant his disapproval. Rather than take a stand against the woman's actions, Jesus reminds the Pharisees that they too are sinners and so they have no right to judge what is considered a sin. Queer theology can use this story to show how traditional Christian theology is like the Pharisees, viewing the queer community as sinners deserving of condemnation. Jesus, however, does not condemn the woman accused of adultery, nor the leper nor the tax collector; rather, he encourages them to join in his message of peace.

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Due to heterosexist Christian theology, Jesus has been painted as the ultimate model of heterosexuality as well as celibacy. It is inaccurate to paint Jesus as a model for the heterosexual family when Jesus himself never married. Portraying Jesus as strictly heterosexual limits his ability to reach out to queer people and distorts the unconditional nature of his love for all humankind. Jesus is seen in a whole new light in queer theology. Jesus was not what we consider to be the ultimate example in heterosexual masculinity; rather "Jesus shared his feelings, empathized with those of others, and was not afraid of intimacy. He was sensitive and vulnerable" (Goss, *Queering Christ* 164). The radical love of Jesus has been lost to Christian theology. This "radical love," as Cheng names it, is where the gay and lesbian community can find their place of inclusion in Christianity.

Rather than exclude loving LGBT couples from Christianity, Jesus would welcome them into the kingdom because "in the life and teaching of Jesus, we see that loving human relations take priority over everything else" (Cleaver 49). Jesus was concerned with love and so queer theology reclaims the LGBT person's right to love a person of the same gender as Jesus loved others.

Jesus spent his ministry working for love, as Goss points out, "Jesus' focus in his ministry was on justice, love, and inclusion. He saw hypocrisy and injustice as far greater threats to the realm of God" (*Queering Christ* 197). Jesus was concerned with love above all else. He loved the outcasts of his day and he loved them fiercely. Jesus did not concern himself with what was considered a "proper" expression of love; rather, he loved freely. In his ability to love freely, the sexuality of Jesus is best examined. Jesus can be seen as a member of the gay and lesbian community, as he can be seen as a member of any loving community.

For many LGBT Christians, seeing Jesus as a member of the gay community is essential in connecting with him. Similar to the African American Christians who have claimed the black Christ and the Christa figure for the feminists, the gay Christ is a powerful tool in gay and lesbian theology. Seeing Jesus as gay is liberating for the community. Rather than being the model for heterosexual celibacy, "Jesus exalts the spiritual dimension inherent in a truly liberated expression of sexuality" (Goss, *Queering Christ* 164). Jesus can be read in the gospels as being very aware of his sexuality, a sexuality that he expressed through his close friendships with John and Mary Magdalene. This gay Jesus figure can help gay and lesbian Christians to reclaim their right to participate in Christianity and dramatically influence Christian theology.

Concluding Remarks

Queer Christians deserve a queer theology that is not just inclusive, but takes into account their distinct experiences. LGBT people are constantly pushed to the fringes, not just in Christianity, but in society as a whole. LGBT people endure violence towards their community, struggles with coming out and political discrimination. Queer theology uses these experiences to help the community find God. Queer theology, in addition to using the unique experiences of LGBT people, also reclaims the right to sexuality and reclaims the love originally taught by Jesus. The community needs the church on its side as we fight for the right to employment, housing and marriage, and with us, in turn, is where the church of Jesus should be. Queer theology will allow the LGBT community to reclaim their space in Christianity.

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