

Higher Ground

Journey to Justice



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Higher Ground:

Journey to Justice Introduction

The purpose of this manual is to assist you in your spiritual journey. Our intent is to facilitate the integration of an affirming theology of sexuality with our theology of Christian justice. In creating this manual, we have immersed ourselves in the study of Scripture and our spiritual heritage as Black people exemplified by our Negro Spirituals. We have also utilized portions of the keynote speeches of Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson and Rev. Deborah L. Johnson from the National Black Justice Coalition's 2nd Annual Black Church Summit held on March 10, 2007 at Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia.

The moral and spiritual conversation concerning gay and lesbian people is at the heart of the struggle for all types of relational justice: social, economic, racial, and international. The ability of gay and lesbian people to understand and own their unique calling in the wider struggle for justice is central to the success of that struggle. This manual will explain how the life experiences of gay and lesbian people and same-gender attraction specifically equips gay and lesbian people to fulfill their calling as models of relational justice and wholeness for all people.

We believe that the recognition, affirmation and celebration of gay and lesbian people and their spiritual gifts greatly contributes to a more positive and mutually affirming world for everyone. For this reason we firmly believe that **challenging homophobia is part of the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement**. We ask that you join us as we endeavor to continue the dream of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he strove towards the creation of the Beloved Community.

We celebrate the immeasurable spiritual value of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters and we praise the Wisdom of God that is revealed in their creation.

We are thankful for the spiritual power and fierce intellectual prowess of Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson and Rev. Deborah L. Johnson, as evidenced by their words in this manual.

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You will also note that materials are included for you to sign up for social justice ministries. We feel that this is but one way to propel the movement forward.

CHAPTER ONE

Entering the Conversation: *The Practice of Holy Listening*

In Christ there is no East or West,
In Him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love
Through out the whole wide earth.

In Him shall true hearts everywhere
Their high communion find;
His service is the golden cord
Close binding human kind.

Join hands, disciples of the faith,
What e'vr your race may be!
Who serves my Father as a son
Is truly ken to me.

In Christ now meet both East and West,
In Him meet South and North;
All Christly souls are one in him
Throughout the whole wide earth.¹



IHS: An ancient monogram for the name of Jesus in Greek (IHCOYC) using the first three letters, thus IHC. When transliterated into Latin script IHC become IHS. The monogram adorns many older churches in windows, stone work, and on communion tables.

Welcome to the *Higher Ground: Journey to Justice* Christian Education curriculum. This curriculum is meant to provide the basis for congregational conversation about gay and lesbian Christian relationships and how and in what ways they can contribute to the spiritual development of individuals and the larger church community.

Conversation is a dynamic process of both sharing and receiving. Sharing one's perspective is generally quite easy. However, receiving the perspective of another, especially when one has a predetermined belief about the value or content of that perspective, can be difficult. It is for this reason that as Christians we must become reacquainted with the discipline and practice of holy listening.

As Christians we believe that God entered the world as a human being in the person we call Jesus Christ. We believe also that after his death, he was raised to new life. We believe that even now, that human being Jesus Christ is alive. We believe in a living God. The process of living is the process of movement and change. Nothing that is alive stays the same. If God is alive and is invested in the movement of love we call Christianity, invested in its vitality, then we should expect that there are ways in which God is moving now that we may not have anticipated or perhaps may be genuinely surprised by.

Being people of God, we do our best to follow what we believe God desires of us as we want to be faithful. In many situations we rely on our understanding of Scripture and the decisions of our forebears in our particular religious tradition have made before our time in similar situations in order to determine what it means to be faithful to God in our time. But at times we can be confronted with a situation in which a sustained crisis erupts in the Christian community where God is truly leading, especially when it seems God is doing something new. When this crisis occurs, Christians typically divide into at least two camps. One group will accept that God is moving in a new way, even if that new way does not neatly match what our current understanding of scripture and tradition tells us would be possible. In contrast, another group rejects the idea that God is moving in a new way and relies on the current reading of Scripture and tradition in order to ground that opposition.

This type of crisis is really an issue of communal discernment and we have had these crises in Western Christianity multiple

times in the recent past. The question how to be a faithful Christian in modern times has emerged in the crisis of slavery, the ordination of women, and now the affirmation of Christian gay and lesbian romantic partnerships.

Even farther back than these modern examples, we see that from the beginning the story of Christianity has been the narrative of this kind of crisis. We see repeatedly in the Gospels that Jesus is constantly contending with conservative biblically literate religious leaders, called the Pharisees, who try to enforce a series of legal and moral boundaries of spiritual fellowship in first century second temple Judaism. Every time Jesus eats with tax collectors and prostitutes or heals on the Sabbath holy day (on which no work is to be done), the Pharisees instead of seeing the widening of the community of God perceive the erosion of holiness and the menacing collapse of obedience to God. Through that lens, they understood Jesus to be an agent of evil. To the Pharisees, maintaining the boundary between saint and sinner, righteous and unrighteous, clean and unclean, was central to being in right relationship with God. To them, God wanted us separated and isolated from each other so that those who were deemed corrupted would not contaminate those who were pure. Jesus' habitual flouting of these legal and moral boundaries, in the name of God no less, presented from the Pharisees' point of view a potentially devastating vision that, if followed, could lead to God's rejection of the entire Jewish community, as classes of people considered to be spiritually unclean were included along those who were considered spiritually virtuous.

After Jesus passed the baton to the apostles, a similar crisis of spiritual discernment surfaces in the Early Church over the question of whether to accept Gentiles, *as they were*, as believers in equal standing. In that situation, the issue was whether God wanted gentiles to become Jewish in order for them to be accepted or could they be affirmed as believers in equal standing with Jewish Christians even as they remained Gentiles. For Jewish Christians, who at the beginning of Christianity were the only Christians, their understanding of Scripture and tradition was that only Jews and those who converted to the Jewish way of life were eligible to be accepted by God. The Early Church did in fact discern that Gentiles were believers of equal status, but that discernment was not completed without serious conflict among the apostles. That conflict is the primary subject of important parts of Paul's epistles as well as a good portion of the Book of Acts.

The process by which the Early Church discerned that God called Gentiles into the fellowship of believers *as they were*, involved several stages of exploration and conversation with both the external reality of God's action and the community's own understanding of Scripture, tradition and its own prejudices. The Early Church was able to successfully navigate these stages of exploration and conversation because they lived into the discipline of holy listening.

Holy listening is the practice of being attentive to the spiritual resonance of events and the experiences of other people. Holy listening is also a practice of community building because it is focused on hearing another's story with the openness that God may have something to teach the hearer even from a source one previously believed God could not work through.

Some of us have engaged in holy listening by surprise. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who perhaps you had never met before and that person said something to you

which seems to have a depth of wisdom and applicability to your present circumstances that feels uncanny? It is the type of conversation where you wonder if something more is happening on spiritual level. If at that time you choose to be spiritually attentive and open yourself to the possibility that God is trying to speak to you through this person—who may be homeless, or perhaps a non-believer, or a child—then you are practicing holy listening.

Now, let us take a look at the elements of holy listening for the objective evidence of God's action and presence in the world as found in the Book of Acts chapter 10. This chapter records the story of how the Early Church of Jewish Christians, whose Jewish identity was marked by their circumcision, came to understand that Gentiles could become followers of Jesus without becoming Jews. That is, Gentiles could remain uncircumcised and be Christian.

The first step in holy listening is the spiritual conviction that God is available to everyone. No exceptions. It is the shaking off of the prejudice that God is only near or among those who are like one's self and thus not near or among those who are different than one's self. In the story of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Church, *as they were*, that is uncircumcised, God brings to Saint Peter's attention that he must let go of his prejudice against Gentiles through the following vision.

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen.

Acts 10: 9b-17a. Peter's vision had the effect of preparing his mind to be open to the possibility that God was near to all things God has made. Notice that after experiencing the trance, Peter is disoriented, "puzzled" even. That God-sent disorientation, the sense that he did not know how sure he was of the boundaries between the clean and unclean, was a precursor to God moving him through a new level of consciousness. So when emissaries of a local Roman military commander Cornelius arrived, who through a Gentile had a Jewish religious worldview, arrived Peter was able to receive them with spiritual attentiveness. These emissaries then invited Peter to their commander's house. Cornelius has received a vision of an angel who told him to go get Peter to hear what he had to say.

The next step in holy listening is the crossing of the prejudicial boundary in order to dialogue with the person who is different than one's self. This prejudicial boundary is whatever moral law or rule that in one's own understanding separates one from the Other who is seen as not of God. Until we are willing to cross this boundary we cannot discover what God may have for us in the

company of the Other. The difficulty here is that to engage in holy listening requires us to break “The Law.” In other words, holy listening requires us to suspend, at least temporarily, our sense of certainty that a group of people simply cannot be conduits of God.

As Peter tunes into the meaning of his vision, he then takes that boundary crossing step as he agrees to visit Cornelius.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.” So Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?” They answered, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.” And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection.”

Acts 10:20-29a. It is clear that the first step in holy listening is critical to the second. Here Peter’s ability to process that God does not share his prejudice against Gentiles gave him the moral fortitude to ground his breaking of the law against associating with Gentiles. This opened the door to dialogue.

After confronting our own prejudice and crossing exclusionary boundaries, the third step is to discover what is the nature of the dialogue the Other desires to have. In Peter’s case having opened himself to dialogue with the Other inquires, “Now may I ask why you sent for me?” (Acts 10:29b.) What he discovers is a group of people looking to hear about the Gospel, the love of God found in Jesus Christ. Peter perceives that this openness itself is evidence that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35.)

Here we see the fourth step of holy listening, the dialogue without reference to the law of exclusion or whatever grounds our belief that the other is unfit for Christian fellowship and affirmation. We do not ask them to change before we will dialogue with them. In response to the Gentiles’ openness, we see Peter offering his understanding of the Gospel. If one reads carefully his speech, in Acts 10: he does not in any way antagonize them for being Gentiles but instead sticks to the message of Jesus purely and simply. He does not ask them in effect to stop being

Gentiles before he will talk with them. As he is explaining it, the Holy Spirit descends upon the Gentiles gathered and they begin to evidence the same kind of spiritual phenomena that Jewish Christians had experienced when the Holy Spirit had fallen upon them during their conversion. This chain of events led to Peter to accept these Gentiles into his fellowship because he recognizes that God has already accepted them *as they are*, that is, as Gentiles.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Act 10:45-48. Here we see the culmination of holy listening: an expansion of the understanding of where and with whom God is present and available, that is, which classes of people God will have fellowship with.

To review, we followed Peter through five steps of holy listening: (1) allow God to confront our internal prejudice that God is not present or available to the Other; (2) crossing one's own boundary of moral exclusion in order to be available to the Other for dialogue; (3) opening ourselves to the invitation to dialogue with the other; (4) engaging in that dialogue without demanding that the Other change; (5) bearing witness and accepting the evidence of God's action and presence with the Other.

For many people in the Christian community, these five steps of holy listening have been practiced in the context of engaging gay and lesbian people who were seen as outside of the fellowship of believers and outside of the fellowship of God. Yet, like Peter, many Christians have confronted their prejudice against gay and lesbian people, transversed their own boundary of moral exclusion in order to dialogue with gays and lesbians, have discovered that gays and lesbians were open to hearing the Gospel, followed through on offering the message of Jesus without asking gays and lesbians to stop being gay and lesbian, and have found the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of gays and lesbians that have received this message even though they have not sought to change their same-gender sexual orientation. These people, like Peter, now stand as witnesses that God shows no partiality between gay and straight people.

Peter witnessed a great event of God that expanded his own understanding of both God and other people. But like those in the Christian community who have witnessed God's movement in and among gay and lesbians people, Peter had to face a larger Christian community that had not shared his experience of holy listening with Gentiles. At this point, everyone except the new Gentile converts were Jewish Christians who believed that God only accepted Gentiles who converted to being Jews. For them, Peter's actions were scandalous; he had broken what they considered to be God's law of exclusion which in turn made Peter himself subject to exclusion. However, Peter's predicament would have felt eerily familiar. Having followed Jesus as he created havoc with laws of exclusion, Peter could have easily remembered the many instances Jesus

had to defend his spiritual integrity and Jewish religious identity from the Pharisees because of his associations with the “unclean,” the sinners, and the outcasts. Thus in a very real way, in this moment of isolation from the Christian community, Peter was possibly the most Christian he had ever been.

As we pick up the story in Acts 11, we see the necessity of holy listening within the original community of believers in order that God’s work, which Peter witnessed, can be accepted and understood by the entire community. Although it may seem on the surface to simply be a repetition of the story of Cornelius’ conversion, on closer inspection we can see that it is a spiritual interpretation of that experience to others in the same spiritual community.

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Acts 11:1-18. The exchange between Peter and the other believers reveals several elements of holy listening when the participants in the conversation are within the Church. In this situation, those who were not present to witness God’s action and presence among the Gentiles needed to engage in holy listening with those who did witness that experience. Here we see the five elements of holy listening retold by Saint Peter but with an added emphasis of the spiritual basis for each move which includes the authority of Scripture. The passage turns on Peter’s opening statement

where it says, “Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step.” (Acts 11:4.) The other believers had to be willing to hear the story step by step and wait for the end. Peter explains that he crossed the exclusion boundary with Gentiles because the Spirit told him too. Also grounds in the words of Jesus his reasoning for accepting the Gentiles after they experienced the Holy Spirit in a powerful way. And he closes with an argument that he must follow the leading of God: if God blesses them with the expressions of the Spirit then who am I that “I could hinder God?” At this point the practice of holy listening in the Church community was successful.

But the harmony was not to last. The movement of God among the Gentiles was growing at a quickening pace. God was converting more and more Gentiles by the day through the work of a tireless evangelist, Saint Paul. Through his ministry and that of other Jewish Christians who saw the openness of Gentiles to the message of Jesus, the Church among the Gentiles in the ancient city of Antioch had grown to the point that it was becoming a majority Gentile church. Soon a party of Jewish Christians from Judea, where Jewish Christians were in the majority, traveled to Antioch and began teaching that Gentiles needed to “change,” that they needed to be circumcised and live under the law of Moses or else they could not be saved. (Acts 15:1.) The result was a confrontation between the Jewish Christians who had been working with Gentiles along with Gentiles Christians themselves and the Jewish Christians of the school of the Pharisees who wanted Gentiles to renounce their identity as Gentiles and take up a Jewish way of life by living under the Law of Moses. (Acts 15:5.) The fact that Christian Pharisees were the most insistent on Gentiles becoming Jews should not be surprising as they also were the most resistant to Jesus’ attempts to include various people in his fellowship that Pharisees considered unholy or outside of the fellowship of God. The debate is taken up in a counsel of Church leaders in Jerusalem which is where we see another demonstration of holy listening *within* the Christian community.

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus

says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.' Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."

Like the conversation that Peter had with other Jewish Christians after his experience with Cornelius, here those who were in favor of accepting Gentiles as they were are given an opportunity to explain themselves to the community of believers who were of a different mind. And again we see that the objectively discernible activity of the Holy Spirit being poured out equally on Jewish and Gentile Christians is offered as evidence that God accepts both groups *as they are*. We also see that holy listening in the context of conversation among believers again includes the interpretation of Scripture. Saint James is able to connect the events that have happened concerning the Gentiles with the spiritual history and prophecies of the Old Testament (which is all they would have had at the time in terms of Scripture). James basically is able to listen to the scriptures which he may have previously interpreted to mandate the exclusion of the Gentiles to now be in continuity with what God was clearly doing.

There is a clear parallel between the story of the inclusion of the Gentiles, as they were, and the current crisis over the affirmation of gay and lesbian people and their relationships in the Church. Both groups were seen by the majority Christians for long periods of time as unclean people who were unworthy of fellowship with God. They were seen as inherently immoral and thus excluded by God from the blessing of the Church. At some point, a significant percentage of both groups became receptive to the preaching of the Gospel in a way that was surprising, especially considering the hostility and condescension each group experienced at the hands of the majority of Christians in spite of their conversion. And finally in both situations, a significant part of the church used the principles of the Pharisees to demand that converts from the Gentile world or from the gay and lesbian community "change" or rather become like them. In both cases, that change required a mutilating of their embodiment, a cutting away of the foreskin for Gentiles, or a cutting away the possibility of an intimate life long partnership in the case of gays and lesbians. In both cases, each group was told that if they failed to "change" they would be placing their eternal salvation in jeopardy.

Like Saints Peter and Paul and the other Jewish Christians of the Early Church, today's Christians who have seen the action and presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of gay and lesbian Christians are in conversation with Christians who have not had the chance to witness the same phenomena or have not processed its theological significance. Just as holy listening was necessary between the members of the Early Church, it is necessary today. Christians who are skeptical as to God's action and presence in gay and lesbian people's lives or their equality before God must be willing to hear the story of the Christians that have taken a spiritual journey of exploration with gay and lesbian people and have discovered that God was indeed among them, God having invited them into Christian fellowship. In turn, those Christians who have seen the fruit of God's work with gay and lesbian people and their relationships must explain step by step as Peter did how they

have come to their conclusion. Moreover, they must explain the spiritual authority behind their actions, that is, the principles of the Spirit of Jesus they were enacting. And finally, they must help their listeners by pointing to Scripture in a way that connects how God has acted in the past with how God is acting now.

This curriculum is designed to be a conversation partner for those who wish to practice holy listening with other Christians who are witnesses to God's action and presence with gay and lesbian Christians. The curriculum will explain the gift that gay and lesbian Christians are to the larger church and to the world and especially in their romantic partnerships. In the process of describing the work and fruit of the Spirit in the lives of gay and lesbian people, the curriculum will connect the movement of God in gay and lesbian Christians lives with Scripture, offering an interpretation that demonstrates the consistent action of God.

Thus as you are invited into this conversation, we ask you to enter into the practice of holy listening.

Questions:

Have you ever experienced a conversation in which holy listening was taking place? What was your role in the conversation, the witness or the skeptic?

Many people believe that God never takes action that does not fit with their own interpretation of Scripture. Yet, Saint Peter, even though resistant at first, allows his vision to authorize him to take action that his current understanding of Scripture would not have permitted. If you were in Saint Peter's situation just after he had his vision, what would you have done?

Have you ever had a spiritual experience that you allowed to challenge your understanding of Scripture or Tradition?

CHAPTER TWO

Spiritual Authority: *The Wisdom of God*

There is a Balm in Gilead²

Refrain:

There is a balm in Gilead,
to make the wounded whole,
there is a balm in Gilead,
to heal the sin-sick soul.
There is a balm in Gilead,
to make the wounded whole,
there is a balm in Gilead,
to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my work's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again. *Refrain*

If you cannot preach like Peter,
if you cannot pray like Paul,
you can tell the love of Jesus,
and say, "He died for all." *Refrain*

2 The Hymnal 1982 According to the use of the Episcopal Church (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated 1985) (found at <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/t/t429.html>) (accessed 3/24/08).



Cross and Crown: This symbol represents Christianity's understanding of the intrinsic connection between perseverance through suffering and the attainment of honor and moral power. It is a visual depiction of Philippians 2:5-13.

Human beings are spiritual creatures. We desire not only to have a functional existence but to feel that our existence has a meaning that transcends our present circumstances. As Christians, we seek to actively discover that meaning and how to live into it: that is finding our calling. In Christian theology, it is common to look to one's personal attributes, and the historic contributions that one's identity group that share one's personal attributes, in order to perceive what larger purpose God could have in mind for one's life in a particular socio-historical context. For example, as Black people we can look at our history in America and perceive part of how our identity as Black American Christians has been and could continue to be part of God's plan.

We have been through the fire and the flood as a people and we have a special perspective on the meaning of being delivered by God. Out of the crucible of our experiences we have created some of the most impassioned and enrapturing musical art in celebration of our God. Our cultural perspective is one of endurance in faith and a confidence in the love of God when all has gone dark. In America, God has entrusted our people to hold the fire of the prophets. More than any other ethnic group in this nation, God has given us, as a group, a greater appreciation for the justice of God and a willingness to declare it. God has given us to America as its conscience.

For gay and lesbian Christians, this way of discerning their calling, as individuals or as a group, is very difficult because it forces them to ask themselves, "What could God be telling me by giving me a same-gender sexual orientation?"³ This question is difficult because many gay and lesbian people and their spiritual communities have not adequately processed what that question presupposes: that God has a life affirming divine purpose for a same-gender sexual orientation in a Christian's life. Because God has a purpose for all that God loves, that sense that creating an entire class of people with a same-gender sexual orientation may not have a divine purpose implies that God may not love gay and lesbian people as gay and lesbian people. Without a positive foundation, this questioning of God's divine plan for gay and lesbian people eventually results in what Rev. Deborah Johnson describes as a lack of moral or spiritual authority.

³ Even though many churches have not gotten to the point of directly engaging this question, some Christian communities are doing so. The Society of Saint John the Evangelist, an order of Episcopalian monks in Cambridge, Massachusetts, recently offered a spiritual retreat for gay men to investigate this question.

Rev. Deborah L. Johnson:

There is a moral authority that we have dared to stand on as an African American people. There is an authority that we have dared to stand on as women. But when it comes to our sexual orientation that we are still a little mealy mouthed. We're still a little mealy mouthed. Because there is something deep within our psyche because of the way that we continue to be treated that is making too many of us question whether or not God really does in fact, love us equally. That creates a profound sense of nobodiness.

The nobodiness that Rev. Johnson is describing is the result of some people attempting to change the purpose of the Church from an ever-perfecting Beloved Community, in which people are honored in their authenticity, to a dominion of social power where people are accepted on the condition of wearing a mask. Such a degradation of the Church results in a poisoning of the well of life for everyone, because if one group can be ejected for being who they are then this event can happen to anyone, making everyone's experience of Christian love arbitrary, conditionally capricious, precarious and in the end utterly insincere. Furthermore, it creates the seeds of a chain reaction where those who feel excluded seek to mend their wounds by themselves asserting the power of exclusion of an even more vulnerable group, thereby giving themselves the illusion of worldly social power. At its heart, this curriculum is an offering in the service of ending this cycle and is an articulation of a practical path toward Church as Beloved Community in regards to the lives of gay and lesbian Christians and Black American Christians in the Twenty-first century.

This chapter begins with how the Christian Community can address the underlying question many have been asking about God's grand design and its relationship to the lives of gay and lesbian people. What are gay and lesbian people called to be? In what way does God love gay and lesbian people and *love others through* gay and lesbian people *in* their same-gender sexual orientation that God has given them? To begin this journey we, as Christians, will start with the Bible; we begin with Genesis.

The Genesis Accounts of the Creation and Fall of Humanity as a Social History of the Entry of Violence into Human Culture:

According to Genesis, God Created humanity as a community to reflect the nature of God. As Christians, we understand God's nature to be that of Trinity: an egalitarian Communion of Love among three Divine Persons. God created humanity as a community of equal partners. Adam passionately acknowledges this reality when he calls Eve "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." In Paradise Adam and Eve experienced their relationship as one of reciprocal celebration and affirmative desire to fulfill each other's needs and desires. The Scripture symbolizes this relational dynamic as their unashamed nakedness. In other words they did not have the instinct or need to protect themselves physically or emotionally from each other.

This reciprocal acceptance of their mutual vulnerability was lost in the Fall from Paradise. Although this Fall has affected all human relationships, the Genesis account makes clear that it is in the intimate relationships between men and women that the impact of the Fall is most

pervasive. In the pronouncement of consequences, God tells Eve, who represents women, “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16). The meaning of this verse turns on the interpretation of the word “desire.” The desire here is not an erotic or sexual desire but rather the desire to rule over.⁴ Thus, the correct understanding of the verse is a prophecy of gender based conflict where men and women attempt to manipulate and control each other in order to get what they want and need from each other. The prophecy is warning that humanity will divide into two groups: men and women. Additionally, that division will be the ground upon which the imperial desire to manipulate, dominate and control the other will be primarily played out. Moreover, in that conflict men will generally prevail over women in this struggle. We typically call this outcome patriarchy. The text indicates that Adam and Eve had already become intuitively aware of their new relationship as competitors rather than partners when they realized they needed to cover their nakedness. That is they understood they needed to protect themselves from each other.

In other words, the story is telling us that our sense of duality and otherness in regards to our fellow human beings was not always present in human social consciousness. Rather, our sense of duality—the idea of an us and a them—and our sense of otherness—our reoccurring assumption that *they* are inherently unknowable, dangerous, and thus need to be managed, conquered and controlled—is actually alien to our humanity as created by God. What the story specifically indicates is that this duality was originally expressed as a denial of the unity of what we now call masculine and feminine personality traits in human nature. In other words, the story is in part about the creation of gender, the social constructions around what it means to have a male or female body. Those social constructions created a new sense of a subject-object relationship between Adam and Eve who had previously perceived themselves as two expressions of the same unitary nature. Now they no longer perceived each other accurately, rather they primarily perceived each other as man and woman, as opposites in a dualistic structure, that is, one was now *not* the other. Thus, this sense of duality entered human social consciousness as a sense of gendered polarity, that is, one’s authentic humanity was always defined by one’s gender, which was itself defined as always polar opposite that of the other gender.

This sense of gendered polarity, the story makes clear, was primarily constituted by the mutual desire to overpower the other in this new social structure. As it is written, “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16). The result was that gender polarity quickly produced the perception of a hostile other based on the other person’s gender identity. In that struggle, God in the story predicts that the male side of this gender polarity will generally prevail in defining the terms on which the two will relate.

Because gendered otherness was constructed as a polarity and was primarily shaped by the desire to over power the other, eventually the social meaning of having a male or female body began to have implications for how one expected to be treated in society. The social norms and culturally scripts of how one can expect others to respond to one’s behavior and articulated desires

4 This construction of “desire and rule” appears again in the next chapter of Genesis in the story of Cain and Abel. There God tells Cain, “sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” The Hebrew words for “desire” and for “rule”/“master” in Genesis 3:16 and 4:6 are the same respectively. *The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew, Greek, English*, Sr. General Editor and Translator Jay P. Green, (Peabody, Mass.: Henderson Publishers, 1986); *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary* (Iowa Falls, Iowa: Riverside Book and Bible House) (word numbers 8669 and 4910 for “desire” and “rule” respectively).

are determined by *gender complementarity*, the expression of gender polarity through the lens of a patriarchal model of male dominance and female submission.

This drive to manage our relationships primarily through our ability to manipulate and control others in order to have access to their resources and to determine their fate is what we call the imperial desire. This imperial desire is in contrast to the yearning to build and maintain the Beloved Community: the desire to engage in reciprocal celebration of the other and affirmatively seek to fulfill each other's needs. This Beloved Community embodies Jesus' teaching that we love our neighbors as our selves. This community is what Adam and Eve shared before the Fall and it is the kind of community Jesus calls us into now.

The Genesis account indicates that imperial desire entered the world through the dynamics of an intimate relationship. This insight is very significant. What it means is that it is not war between nations and tribes or economic oppression created by large corporations that is the fundamental root of evil in this world. Rather it is within our interpersonal relationships and particularly our domestic and intimate interactions that we often learn that it is permissible and even desirable to use violence and coercion to get what we think we need. The imperialism that leads nations to go to war to gain resources or territory is substantially similar to the relational imperialism that leads people to resolve domestic conflicts by resorting to violence. Indeed, the next act of explicit violence in Genesis is within a human family: the murder of a human being by his brother. It starts with individuals, not nations and tribes; it is in the home and other intimate communities that function similar to family systems (such as our churches) where we learn that it is somehow permissible to mistreat someone in order to get them to do what we want. We see our parents do it. We learn it ourselves with our parents and siblings. We take the lessons with us when we start our own relationships with others. In this context, the message of the Gospel of Jesus carries a particular resonance: If we can lay down our imperial ways in our intimate relationships and in Christ seek to be made new, with a heart for building the Beloved Community within our homes, we can very well change the world.

How does this interpretation of Genesis shed new light on how you view the origin of evil in the world? How have your relationships from your family of origin taught you to perceive and relate to other people? Do you feel free to give your care and affection to others? Or do you feel you must control or protect yourself from others? Or perhaps a mixture of both?

By placing our intimate relationships at the center of the struggle against relational evil, that is, the way we inflict evil in the context of our relationships, the Genesis account is informing us that the moral and spiritual conversations surrounding relational and sexual ethics are actually at the core of the struggle against relational evil. Indeed it is through this conversation that a practical path to building the Beloved Community can be revealed.

When we look at the current world of relational ethics in intimate relationships we see that they are profoundly corrupted by imperial desire. Moreover, for the vast majority of people, that imperial desire finds expression in their intimate relationships when they are built on the sandy foundations of gender complementarity, the set of social and cultural norms that script the lives of

men and women in heterosexual relationships into a patriarchal model of dominance and submission. Anything that helps to confront and transform the imperial model of gender complementarity brings us a step closer to building up the Beloved Community that community constituted by people whose relationships are mutually celebratory and affirming of each other's authentic self-expression as reflections of God's love in the world.

As a group, gay and lesbian people are most distinguished by the fact that they want to partner with people of the same gender in romantic relationships. That minority sexual orientation places gay and lesbian people in a special relationship to gender complementarity: that is, their minority sexual orientation places them in a critical relationship with gender-complementarity. Although gay and lesbian people grow up in an environment where they are socialized into gender complementarity, their self-understanding as gay or lesbian serves as a rebooting process, reconnecting them to their inherent humanity. Because our core humanity is a unity of both masculine and feminine traits, this reconnecting with their core humanity, which one's awakening to one's true sexual orientation requires, gives them a distinct opportunity to become much more self-aware of gender complementarity as a social construction, a mask of performance that suppresses our full humanity. This awareness invites gays and lesbians to make a *conscious* decision as to how they will live authentically in society dominated by the ideology of gender complementarity. In many instances, gays and lesbians are aware that to be authentic means living in ways that contravene, if not entirely reject, the paradigm of gender-complementarity as a legitimate social organizing principal. As a result, even though gays and lesbians are always in relationship to gender-complementarity that relationship is usually a critical and wary one as they many times possess a special awareness of its cruelty and inauthenticity.

Now let us connect this gay and lesbian relationship to gender complementarity to the lessons of the Genesis narrative: (1) The Genesis account reveals that imperial desire in intimate relationships is the central front in the struggle against relational evil, and (2) that imperial desire is most fundamentally expressed in intimate relationship through the imposition of gender complementarity. Therefore, the critical relationship of gays and lesbians to gender complementarity puts the lives of gays and lesbian at the center of the struggle to liberate humanity from the bane of imperial desire.

In our contextual analysis of biblical texts—**it's the bible that is telling us that sexuality and intimate relationships are on the front line that extends into the greater society.** As the lives of gay and lesbian people are explicitly marked by their relationship to sexuality and intimate relationships, it is through the lives of gays and lesbians that God can to speak, to prophesy against this great evil: relational imperialism expressed and codified by gender complementarity.

Have you ever thought of the same-gender sexual orientation and life experiences of those in same-gender relationships as a moral asset? If so, in what way?

Ironically, the very place from which God seeks to speak through gay and lesbian people's lives, that is their capacity to form relationships with a person of the same gender, is exactly the reason that majority culture and society, influenced by gender complementarity, attempts to marginalize and persecute gay and lesbian people.

But we should not be surprised by this phenomenon, for this is the path of the Wisdom of God, it is the path of Jesus: speaking powerfully from the margins of social discourse.

Jesus at the border of society

In the Book of Proverbs chapter eight, the writer offers a hymn in praise of Holy Wisdom. This sacred song is eventually interpreted by early Christians to be a prophesy concerning the nature and character of Jesus. We will explore an excerpt from the chapter:

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out. ... Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord.

(Proverbs 8:1-3, 34-35).

Notice where Wisdom stands. She stands in the in-between space, the place just outside of town, “beside the gates in front of the gate,” the place just outside the house, “at the entrance of the portals.” She is not within the walls of the town or inside the house but rather outside those structures which represent the places of social acceptance and empowerment. She is on the border, the margin, the edge, where what is considered “in” meets that which is considered “outside.” The significance of this observation is that it is at the places of marginalization that God seeks to speak to the society and the systems of worldly power. It follows then, since we are made in the image of God that **the place where our lives are on the margins are exactly the places where we are meant to shine the brightest as the image of God.**

The holy wisdom that comes from marginalization is rooted in the clarity of perspective it offers. On the margins, one can perceive the promise and potential of being fully recognized as part of the human community in large part because one is being denied the actualization of that promise and potential. This understanding of holy wisdom is rooted in the phrase itself as “holy” means “set apart.” In the way we are defining it here, holy wisdom is the kind of profound understanding and awareness that occurs when one is set apart.

As Black people, we understand the holy wisdom of being a people set apart, set outside, the legal and cultural structures that American society used to recognize a person a fully human. This perspective “beside the gates in front of the town” of America allowed our people to produce artists, playwrights, singers, preachers, professors and a whole range of ordinary folks that articulated for white America, the promise and potential of this republic with a clarity that was not as readily accessible for white Americans. It is in this proclamation of America’s promise and potential Black people in the United States have shone forth as an illuminating image of God.

This image of God as Holy Wisdom was seen by early Christians an archetype of Jesus Christ. When we look at his life we see that he also was known for being present with those who were

on the margins of economic, social and religious society. If one was looking for the Word of God in First Century Palestine, one would have had to go to the margins of social and political life to find it, because that is where Jesus was.

As early Christians contemplated the ironic nature of the Wisdom of God and noted how it was the poor and socially disenfranchised that were coming to the message of Jesus, they realized that they also were reflecting the Wisdom of God. As Saint Paul says,

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God

(1 Corinthians 1:25-28, 30).

Like others on the margins of society, gays and lesbians are evidence of the Wisdom of God. Indeed, as Christians we are part of the Body of Christ, we are, through Christ, the Wisdom of God. That Wisdom is revealed most brightly in our lives at the very points of our existence that we are marginalized by society. Wisdom stands just outside of the town, just outside of normative society and that is where gay and lesbian people are: on the margin, at the gate, on the border.

One of the Wisdom of God's more powerful answers to gender-specific interpersonal imperialism, the world's primeval form of relational evil, is the inherent possibility of organic egalitarianism in same-gender intimate relationships. In other words, God's prophesy to humanity, taken in the thrall of imperial desire, is the very lives of gay and lesbian people.

On this truth, gay and lesbians claim their spiritual authority: they have heard the call of God to be Wisdom in the world. Gay and lesbians people are not simply fighting for their parochial tribal interests, no, they are at the center of fray for a just and beloved community.

In gay and lesbian relationships, the social strictures and cultural customs of gender complementarity do not apply. Unlike opposite-gender relationships, which are even at their best burdened by centuries of social and cultural conditioning of how one is to act toward the other of the opposite sex, same-gender relationships offer an authentic possibility of interacting with one's partner in the awareness of one self-affirmation of one's core humanity rather than wearing the mask of those social and cultural scripts. Instead of gender-complementarity there is an experience of *organic egalitarianism: the dynamic of two people seeking to live authentically in community with each other.*

The Holy Wisdom of God has offered the relational experience and self-awareness of gay and lesbian people to show the wider community of persons in heterosexual relationships what it

means to relate to each other as equals persons. In this way God demonstrates the wisdom of creating gay and lesbian people as we are part of God's hand of grace in the world: God has sent us to help heal the world of the most basic form of evil—imperialism in intimate relationships expressed as gender complementarity.

The global problem of imperialism in intimate relationships is a spiritual problem. It manifests itself in violence and the denial of basic rights. When people live and adapt their character to being in a subservient position, they find it hard to be fully loved and honored in their personal relationships with God and fail to connect to a sense of being authentic images of God. This dynamic also occurs the other way around, people who consistently choose to mistreat and abuse other people find it difficult to fully offer love and honor in their personal relationship with God and find themselves alienated from a real feeling of being one of God's children. God believes in free will: the right to determine one's own action and self-development. Free will is a gift. Relational imperialism steals that gift away. God is offering gay and lesbian people to the world as a gift to help people recover that gift.

Knowledge of this divine example, which gay and lesbian people are called to provide, gives us a moral imperative to work to reveal it and make it increasingly palpable and real. Furthermore, it gives gay and lesbian people a relevance outside of their own tribal interests. When they struggle for their social, political and spiritual rights, they are not simply struggling for their own ends but rather the right to model God's path to a better quality of interpersonal and spiritual life for everyone.

How do you relate to Jesus as the Holy Wisdom of God? In what ways in your life have you experienced being marginalized as a gateway to wisdom? In what ways have being marginalized in your life brought you closer to being like Jesus?

In what ways are you open to listening to the Holy Wisdom of God found in the life of another person?

Here we come to the end of this chapter seeing clearly that God has a special calling for gay and lesbian people to demonstrate organic egalitarianism in our intimate relationships. We perceive in our study of Scripture that where people are trying to silence us is actually the place where God calling us to speak the loudest. The place where our lives are on the margins is exactly where we are meant to shine the brightest as reflections of the Wisdom of the image of God. **This calling is the foundation of gay and lesbian spiritual authority.**

CHAPTER THREE

Wisdom's Reply: *Our Gifts to the Church and to the Community*

**When I Get to Heaven Gonna Sing and Shout,
Be Nobody There to Put Me Out**

My God done just what He said
He healed the sick and He raised the dead.
When I get to heaven gonna sing and shout
Ain't nobody there gonna put me out



IC XC NIKA: The Greek abbreviation for Jesus and Christ over the Greek word for victory. The words placed in the quadrants of a cross symbolize Jesus' victory over death and worldly power represented by the cross.

In the last chapter we discussed how our calling to reflect God's image is correlated to the place in our lives we experience being marginalized from society. In the case of gays and lesbians, God is calling them to model a healing practice intimate relationship. That healing practice is that of organic egalitarianism. This practice is in contrast to the system of gender complementarity, which is itself an expression of the original curse of relational imperialism.

Now we will delve deeper into this practice of organic egalitarianism. What is the substance of this practice and why does it more naturally arise in the context of same-gender relationships? In short we are investigating the causal link between the sexual orientation of gays and lesbians and their capacity to live out their calling to be a blessing to others. To explore this aspect of gay and lesbian people's spiritual contribution to the human community, let's first begin with two same-gender relationships in the Bible and expand from there.

Same-gender relationships in Scripture:

What the Bible teaches about morally good relationships:

When he was asked what was the greatest commandment Jesus gave this answer,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Matthew 22:37-40 (internal quotations omitted). It did not take long for early Christians to link the two loves, one of God and the other of one's neighbor, as a package where one was not possible without the other. In the New Testament, letter of First John, the writer explains,

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

1 John 4:20-21. This teaching should be therefore the bedrock of all Christian ethics, and particularly any ethics that concern intimate human relationships. Indeed, we see in the Bible that the writer to the Ephesians explicitly applies this ethic of loving the Other as one love's one's self to the marriage relationship. (See Ephesians 5:25, 28-29) Perceiving that the Christian conviction that the ethical standard for all relationships as well as intimate one is to love the other as one's self, let us look at the examples of relationships in which the Scripture describes the persons in the relationship as meeting that standard.

There are only two post-Fall from Paradise Biblical love relationships of which the Bible explicitly or implicitly states that this ethic of loving the other as themselves was actually realized. Those two love relationships are Jonathan and David and Ruth and Naomi, both same gender relationships.

Jonathan and David:

The story begins where the events of David and Goliath ends. David is having a conversation with Saul the current king of Israel. As he watches from across the room, the Scripture says this about Jonathan, the crown prince:

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

(1 Samuel 18:1-4). This passage portrays the beginning of the relationship between Jonathan and David. Because the dynamic in which many personal relationships are established is many times the dynamic that will continue to exist in that relationship, this passage also gives us a view into the underlying character of Jonathan and David's relationship. . Fortunately, for these two, the beginning of their relationship was love.

The Scripture indicates that Jonathan is moved by attraction in his feeling for David. Jonathan was a warrior and had seen David's courage in fighting Goliath and courage rooted in David's faith in the God of Israel. Jonathan could deeply relate to David's perspective as he had also directly relied on God in his victories over Israel's enemies. (See 1 Samuel 14:1-23.) Sharing both a warrior's heart and a heart for God, Jonathan and David's emotional and spiritual attraction to each other was natural. It is in this context that Jonathan is said to be motivated by the kind of love that God desires in our relationships, for Jonathan is said to love David as his own soul. Or as it says in another place, "Jonathan loved David as he loved his own life." (1 Samuel 20:17.) The beauty of this passage is that it demonstrates what kind of love relationship two spiritual men can create, who are romantically drawn two each other: an organic egalitarianism.

First, there is a binding (or as the King James Version says, “knitting”) of souls, “The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David.” Then there is the development of a life in closer proximity, it says that David does not return home but stays with Saul who is Jonathan’s father and who likely lives in the same royal house as his father. In the living in close proximity and growing in familiarity with each other, they create a covenant with each other. Knowing that marriage in Hebrew culture was a covenant helps to clarify what they are actually doing. Because of their love for each other, they make a promise, before the God they both believe in, to be safe for each other and be each other’s ally, emotionally and spiritually. What happens next demonstrates the necessity of this covenant.

Dramatically, Jonathan, who is older, wealthier and the crown prince, strips off all of the markers of his rank, authority and privilege and even his protective armor and weapons and gave them to David, a poor peasant. We know Jonathan’s love was real because he used his greater social power not to compel David to be vulnerable to him but rather to ground his taking the initiative to invite David to be vulnerable, an environment in which David could act on his love authentically. In short, Jonathan’s initiative to create this environment was a mark and sign of his own power. Through this act, he is saying to David that between them there is no hierarchy, and that they shall speak to each other as if they were social equals. Nothing between them will be decided based on the fact that Jonathan was the prince and David was a peasant or that Jonathan was older and David was younger. Instead, Jonathan by giving even his weapons and shield is saying that he is just as vulnerable to David as David is to him and he voluntarily desires it to be that way. Importantly for marriage relationships, Jonathan and David’s vulnerability is not simply articulated with words but is enacted with their bodies. This incarnation or embodiment of their emotional and spiritual alliance is what Christian sexuality is at its core.

This self-stripping of Jonathan also recalls the mutually vulnerable nakedness of Adam and Eve in the garden. Jonathan took the first step to be naked, to give up whatever presumed privileges he may have had in order that he would be in a relationship where he and David could love each other as equals. Jonathan, like Adam and Eve, was naked and unashamed. We know from how the story ends that David took him up on his offer. When Jonathan died on battle, David had this to say about his relationship with Jonathan:

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

2 Samuel 1:26. The story of Jonathan and David is the greatest biblical example of what a true and holy committed love relationship should be regardless of whether one’s relationship is a friendship or a marriage. It is by looking at this story describing love between two men that one can come to a Biblical knowledge of what marriage in a Christian sense is all about. There is no heterosexual relationship in the Bible that even comes close to reflecting the relational dynamic Jonathan and David created between themselves. This fact is consistent with what we have identified as the special gift of gay and lesbian people who through recognizing the relational life available outside the social scripts of gender complementarity gay and lesbian people can model what loving another as your self can look like.

Ruth and Naomi:

This story begins with an Israelite man named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons moving to the nation of Moab in order to avoid a famine in Israel. Eventually, the two sons marry each marry a Moabite woman, one named Orpah and the other named Ruth. Subsequently, the Israelite man and his sons die, leaving Naomi, Orpah and Ruth. Naomi decides to return to Israel which is apparently more prosperous. On the way there, Naomi attempted to dissuade her daughter-in-laws from following after her. Orpah eventually turned back but Ruth persisted. Ruth's ensuing declaration is such a model for the best of what we hope for in a Christian love relationship that it is routinely incorporated into heterosexual wedding vows, this declaration of one woman to another.. Hear it for yourself,

And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her. And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. And Ruth said,

*Entreat me not to leave thee,
or to return from following after thee:
For whither thou goest, I will go;
And where thou lodgest, I will lodge:
Thy people shall be my people,
And thy God my God:
Where thou diest, will I die,
And there will I be buried:
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If ought but death part thee and me.*

(Ruth 1:14-18)(KJV). This declaration begins with the Bible saying, "But Ruth clung" to Naomi. This word "clave" used to describe Ruth's relationship with Naomi is the same word in Hebrew that reveals Adam's relationship with Eve as "clinging" to her found in Genesis 2:24. That verse says, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." Notice that in Genesis, the clinging and becoming one flesh are two different acts. It is the clinging that occurs first, like in the story of David and Jonathan, the binding of the souls. It is in response to that clinging that "they become one flesh." This is significant because the text in the story of Ruth does not on its face state that Ruth and Naomi had an explicitly sexual relationship the way the text in the story of Jonathan and David makes clear. However, the nature of Ruth and Naomi's relationship whether or not it was sexually expressed had the underlying relational behavior of a romantic friendship of the kind that would make becoming one flesh with each other an appropriate expression of their relationship.

Ruth's declaration then tells us what "clinging" looks like. It is taking up a joint life journey ("Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge."); entering into joint community ("Your people shall be my people"); embracing of a common set of values and life purpose ("your God my God"); and committing to a shared destiny and fate ("Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried"). It is implicit in Ruth's declaration that she loves Naomi as herself. Indeed, she is pulling

into herself so much of what contextualizes Naomi existence. This willingness to commit herself to a joint life with Naomi is totally volitional and not expected of her because Naomi is a woman and she is a woman. No, it is her free choice, and we are able to see that it is a free choice precisely because they are both women. Again, it is in the context of a same-gender relationship that a clear picture of what is expected in a Christian love relationship looks like comes into focus.

As we finish looking at these two love relationships in the Bible we see the value of mutual vulnerability and reciprocal commitment to another person for a shared life journey. Now we will peer more deeply into the meaning of organic egalitarianism.

Organic egalitarianism:

The primary spiritual value of organic egalitarianism is the practice of authentic living in community. Organic egalitarianism is the rejection of social hierarchy and coercive management of relationships by cultural customs rooted in the social scripts of gender complementarity. Instead it is an affirmation of co-creation as the primary way of determining the shape of a love relationship and the roles and responsibilities each person will have in that relationship.

Organic egalitarianism in marriage does not mean that every role and responsibility is shared and every function is equally divided. Rather it is a dynamic in which those roles, responsibilities, and functions and each person's relationship to them is decided based on the desire of both people to support the authenticity and personal spiritual growth. Thus, under organic egalitarianism the process of decision making in the relationship values communication, a genuine mutual inquiry into each others desires, and an assessment of what is best for each person and the partnership. As a result the couple divvies up the roles, responsibilities and functions in their relationship *according to what authentically matches each person's personality and desires*. In contrast, gender complementarity demands that the couple primarily look to the gender scripts each person is supposed to wear as a performance and assigns roles, responsibilities and functions in the relationship that conform the people to those scripts which in many cases are *completely unrelated to each person's authentic personality and desires*.

For example, in a gender complementarian model, decisions in a relationship regarding where the family lives, who does which domestic chores, who is responsible for rearing children, and whose career is prioritized, are all determined by social scripts. In this system, who has the authority to make these decisions and who will perform which functions in the relationship is dictated by whether one is a man or a woman. This determination occurs even in situations where in the relationship the person of the other gender has a stronger desire to perform that role or is more competent in carrying it out in the relationship. For example, in heterosexual relationship in which the male partner discovers as profound desire to take a more active role in the rearing of children to the point of perhaps working part time or even staying home may discover serious tension in his relationship with his wife as she may feel he is being "man enough" in their relationship. In addition he may experience significant ridicule or contempt from male friends as well. The same reaction can be experienced by a female partner in a marriage if for example she is more able to draw a higher income and wants to invest in her career. Her husband may feel she is taking on a role that he is supposed to have as the primary provider of the family. Her female

friends may also advise her that she needs to focus on being supportive of her husband's masculinity even if it means being inauthentic to her calling in a particular career. The tensions couples face when situations like this arise occur because these desires violate the rules, the scripts of gender complementarity.

In contrast, in same-gender relationships neither person goes into the relationship with the expectation that they will perform one function or another simply because of their gender, because both persons share that trait and thus it cannot be used as a basis of differentiation. The result is that same-gender couples must co-create how their relationship will function and how it will produce spiritual fruit for the community at large. Thus, gay and lesbian people do not simply passively fall into a pre-arranged division of roles, responsibilities and functions in a relationship. Instead they have to talk about what they want their relationship to look like and affirmatively determine who and what they will be for each other.

Co-creation requires several practices which are core to well functioning relationships:

1. To co-create both partners must know what they want. The practice of co-creation promotes the development of each partner's self knowledge. Self knowledge in turn promotes authenticity.
2. To co-create one must be able to effectively communicate and hear the other. The practice of co-creation promotes the development of self expression and development of empathy.
3. To co-create in the context of a love relationship both parties must desire a positive outcome for the other which means promoting a relationship that supports an authentic self-expression for both persons. Co-creation requires actively building a foundation of trust within the relationship so that one can reveal one's needs in the relationship and have a reasonable belief that the other person will respond lovingly to the need to be authentic. That is co-creation supports a relational ethic of reciprocity in support for personal and spiritual development.

Although heterosexuals are capable of co-creation of the dynamics, function and spiritual goals in their relationships, the relational areas within each of those relationships that are typically viewed as open to a co-creative dialogue are demonstratively smaller than in gay and lesbian relationships. Heterosexuals typically have this more restrictive view of what in their relationship can be determined by their own joint creativity because heterosexuals many times consciously and unconsciously rely on gender based social scripts and cultural customs that are exterior to their relationship to determine the basic framework of their relationship. The more a couple views each other through the lens of these exterior frameworks they are less able to perceive each other and the dynamics of their relationship as a result of affirmative choices they themselves have made. This understanding of relational dynamics being the product of the choices is necessary if the couple is to actively co-create their relationship according to a framework that is interior to the relationship, one that they develop themselves through effective and mutually empathic communication.

In contrast, gay and lesbian couples experience more active participation in the shaping of their own relationships. This active participation is necessary because gender complementary scripts assume a heterosexual couple and thus do not give gays and lesbians a ready-made script. Without that script, gays and lesbians must rely on effective and mutually empathic communication in order for the couple to establish expectations of behavior in the relationship. This experience allows a more authentic dynamic in the relationship to flourish, where people are attempting to express themselves rather than attempting to live out an externally constructed gender based social script.

The organic egalitarian principle of co-creation (which promotes authenticity, self-expression, empathy, and reciprocity) points to the sacramental nature of marriage. All who would perceive the wisdom of God in the lived relationships of gay and lesbian people are able to see that abandoning gender complementarity in favor of organic egalitarianism provides a path to the kind of relationship where we can once again be naked and unashamed. It is a path of redemption of the created order. It is a path that demonstrates that God is in the process of changing how we relate to each other in our domestic life

With what we have discussed held in our minds, consider the following passage from a prominent medieval English monastic Saint Aelred Rievaulx.

It is in fact a great consolation in this life to have someone to whom you can be united in the intimate embrace of the most sacred love; in whom your spirit can rest; to whom you can pour out your soul; in whose delightful company, as in a sweet consoling song, you can take comfort in the midst of sadness; in whose most welcome friendly bosom you can find peace in so many worldly setbacks; to whose loving heart you can open as freely as you would to yourself your innermost thoughts; through whose spiritual kisses—as by some medicine—you are cured of the sickness of care and worry; who weeps with you in sorrow, rejoices with you in joy, and wonders with you in doubt; whom you draw by the fetters of love into that inner room of your soul, so that though the body is absent, the spirit is there, and you can confer all alone, the more secretly, the more delightfully; with whom you can rest, just the two of you, in the sleep of peace away from the noise of the world, in the embrace of love, in the kiss of unity, with the sweetness of the Holy Spirit flowing over you; to whom you so join and unite yourself that you mix soul with soul, and the two become one.⁵

After reading this, does it surprise you that the speaker of this text is describing the relationship between two spiritually-inclined male friends?⁶ Do you think the image the Saint paints of a fully reciprocal relationship is easier to imagine as a same-gender or opposite gender relationship? If so why?

If it was easier for you to imagine this image of reciprocal erotic friendship as a relationship between two people of the same gender, you may be connecting to what is now a proven empirical

5 Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, *De Speculo Caritatis* 3:109-10 found in *Aelredi Rievallensis Opera Omnia* (I) edited by A Hoste and H Talbot in *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevali* (Turnhout: Brepols 1971), translated in John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1980) page 225-26; see also, Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, trans. by Elizabeth Connor (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications 1990) Book III, Chap 39, Section 109-10; pages 298-99.

6 Saint Aelred is writing to the community of monk that he leads. Thus, when he advocates his audience to follow this example or to adopt this kind of "friendship" he is talking to men and how they relate to other men who also are spiritual.

reality about the difference between gay and lesbian experiences of long term romantic relationships and heterosexual experiences of long term relationships.

Many are aware that organic egalitarianism in gay and lesbian relationships creates dynamics that increase the likelihood of a couple experiencing what Saint Aelred describes above. Some of the dynamics people are recognizing are as follows:

- Organic egalitarianism can create a relational freedom that comes from being intimately involved in an unscripted space.
- When coupled with an intimate, innate knowledge of the physical, psychological, emotional and sexual terrain, organic egalitarianism can increase the mutuality, beauty, and quality of sexuality in the relationship.
- Because studies show people are most satisfied with an intimate partner who scores high in both male and female personality traits, organic egalitarianism can increase levels of relational fulfillment by freeing each person in the relationship to express themselves more authentically.

Several recent psychological studies reveals that organic egalitarianism is a real phenomenon and is in fact much more common among gay and lesbian relationships than heterosexual ones. In a January 10, 2008 article entitled "What Straights Can Learn From Gays about Relationships and Parenting," executive director at Alliant University's Rockway Institute, Robert-Jay Green, Ph.D, summarized the conclusions of several recent psychological studies completed in the recent past.⁷ Below are some relevant findings quoted from the article:

- *By virtue of being composed of two partners of the same gender – gays and lesbians have a head start in escaping the traditional gender role divisions that make for power imbalances and dissatisfaction in many heterosexual relationships*
- *Lesbian couples were found to be emotionally closer than gay male couples who, in turn, were found to be emotionally closer than heterosexual married couples*
- *Same-sex couples were better at resolving disagreements because they approached problems from a position of peer equality, using softer starts in the initiation of conflict discussions and more humor during the discussion to avoid escalation of hostilities. With married heterosexual couples, the researchers observed, there was much more of a power struggle with someone being invalidated.*
- **On Parenting:** *Researchers concluded that the freedom to defy traditional gender-linked parenting roles helped gay men and lesbians take [sic] just as good care of their children yet preserve greater feelings of fairness in their couple relationships compared to heterosexuals.*
 - *Lesbian partners tend to share parenting and household responsibilities more equally and to be more satisfied with this division of labor. By contrast, in heterosexual dual-career families, moth-*

⁷ Found at http://www.alliant.edu/wps/wcm/connect/website/Home/Research+and+Public+Services_/Research+Institutes/Rockway+Institute/For+the+Media/Commentaries/What+Straights+Can+Learn+1-08. (accessed 3/31/08). Alliant University is the largest nonprofit training institution for doctoral clinical psychologists in the nation.

ers often did much more childcare and housework compared to fathers, regardless of equal hours spent at work. This imbalance often breeds resentment over time.

- *Gay fathers are also less likely to limit their parenting role to being only a provider. Thus, gay fathers are more likely to be more nurturing than straight fathers.*

The desirability of gay and lesbian sexuality can create positive opportunities for heterosexual couples to learn how to see a greater potential for authentic living within their own relationships.

Questions:

Considering Jonathan and David's relationship, what parts of the story resonated with you? Are there elements of how they related to each other that you would like to see in your own relational dynamics with others?

How did you relate to Jonathan's expression of vulnerability to David? What would it look like to adopt this kind of emotional and spiritual vulnerability in your own life?

Considering Ruth and Naomi's relationship, did you find any elements of their relationship helpful to you in developing your own spiritual ideals for a Christian relationship?

If you are currently in a heterosexual relationship, in what ways are gender complementarian social scripts preventing you both from experiencing more authentic self-expression in your relationship?

Can you name some ways in our own life that you attempt to live out what you believe is the social script for your gender despite the fact that it does not feel like an authentic expression of who you are?

As we end this chapter, we see some of the ways gay and lesbian sexuality are both desirable and part of God's plan to heal the human community of the evil of interpersonal imperialism. Next, we move into the question of how gay and lesbian people live into the calling for which their sexual orientation equips them.

CHAPTER FOUR

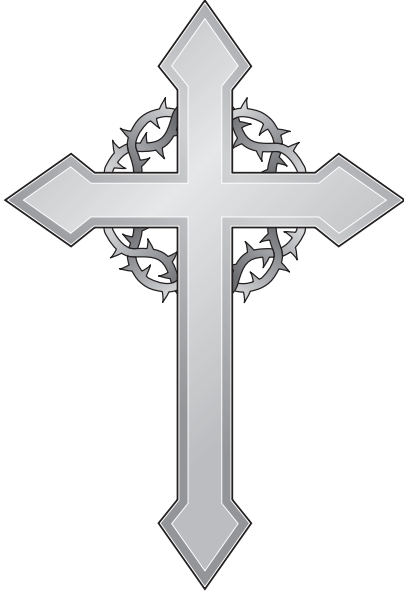
The Gospel of Jesus Shatters the Closet: *Learning to Carry the Cross*

I Been 'Buked and I been Scorned⁸

I've been 'buked an' I've been scorned,
I've been 'buked an' I've been scorned, children;
I've been 'buked an' I've been scorned
I've been talked about, sho's you' born.

Dere is trouble all over dis worl',
Dere is trouble all over dis worl', children;
Dere is trouble all over dis worl',
Dere is trouble all over dis worl'.

Ain't gwine to lay my 'ligion down,
Ain't gwine to lay my 'ligion down, children;
ain't gwine to lay my 'ligion down,
ain't gwine to lay my 'ligion down.



Cross with Crown of Thorns: This symbol represents Jesus' victory over the curse of original sin. The crown of thorns harkens back to Genesis and the curse on the ground: that it naturally raise up thorns instead of useful plants. Jesus bears those thorns during his passion signaling the redemption of humanity and creation from the curse.

In order for gay and lesbian people to live into their calling or offering the world a model of relationship that promotes the ethics of organic egalitarianism, people must be aware of the existence of gay and lesbian relationships. In other words, gay and lesbian people need to be out of the closet in order for God's Wisdom in their lives to be revealed.

Rev. Michael Eric Dyson said that the gospel of Jesus shatters the closet. That is profound. If, as someone has said, the closet is a "vertical coffin" then the gospel of Jesus, through grace, redeems all people from the death rattle of living a lie, living beneath our dignity, and living without the hope of an abundant life, a life where God is revealed through us. Instead, it gives us a life worth living, a life we can share with others. Gay and lesbian people have been 'buked and scorned but that is not the end of the story. As it is written, "The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him." (2 Timothy 2:11-12). By being willing to sacrifice in order to be free, gay and lesbian people are presenting the wider Christian community a great example of what following Christ should look like.

When we think about it, we can see that there are a lot of connections and similarities between sexual orientation and what we call spiritual orientation, that is, our religious convictions. Both arise from within our being, we internally discover that we have a particular sexual orientation just as over time we come to discover that we are fundamentally attracted to one spiritual narrative or another. Like sexual orientation, spiritual orientation can override what other people tried to make us become, for example, someone who grows up Hindu or Muslim may realize that they are drawn to Christianity regardless of the fact they were not raised Christian, just as most of the time parents assume their children are heterosexual and raise them to be so even if that is not their true sexual orientation. Also like sexual orientation, spiritual orientation is only revealed through actions and self declaration. By noticing, for example, who a man typically seeks out for a romantic relationship, one can become aware of that man's sexual orientation. The same is true about spiritual orientation, when a woman goes to church, prays in the name of Jesus, or reads the Bible for devotional purposes; one is able to deduce that she may be a Christian. Because both sexual orientation and spiritual orientation are internal dispositions that can only be truly revealed by a person's actions over time, one can hide that internal disposition by purposely avoiding

those actions that would reveal that internal state.

The similarity between spiritual orientation and sexual orientation offers the possibility that there are spiritual lessons that can be gleaned from the lives of gay and lesbian people and how they interact with the world. In particular, the gay and lesbian experience of “coming out,” that is, making a declaration to others what their sexual orientation is and how they have experienced it, can be a instructional model for Christian evangelism in a post modern context. Let’s take a deeper look in to what gay and lesbian people do when they come out and see what spiritual lessons apply to us as Christians.

Coming out is a process that most people in our society have experienced, have experienced being the person that someone has come out to or seen it depicted in movies, television shows, theatre, and books. In this process, the gay or lesbian person tells a person close to them, usually a friend or a family member, and if a family member most likely their parents, shares a story of who they are as a gay or lesbian person. Depending on how long the other person has known the person coming out and how close they are, the person coming out may tell their experience of their sexual orientation; they may share their dreams, hopes and fears about what they think their life will be like as a gay or lesbian person; and they may explain how they came to know that they are gay or lesbian. Coming out is then primarily a narrative of self disclosure. It is not an attempt to make other people gay or lesbian; rather it is simply an effort to be open with one’s life so that one can be known as one truly is. As we have discussed earlier, coming out can be difficult and dangerous. Friends, family members, and strangers can respond with hatred and hostility. But we also know that many times coming out leads to stronger relationships in which both parties actually know who each other are and can affirm each other in truth. Coming out is a risk, but it carries with that the hope of greater understanding and mutual affirmation. In fact, social science tells us that the greatest factor that influences whether someone has a positive or negative opinion of gay and lesbian people is whether they actually know a gay or lesbian person. Coming out, therefore, provides a narrative bridge for people to come to the truth.

When we think of Christian evangelism many of us think of it as offering Christianity to another person as if Christianity was outside of them, something external. Many of us then conclude that evangelism means convincing people that they need to “convert” in order to “become” Christian. This understanding assumes that faith in Jesus is something that enters a person’s life from the outside. However, if we took seriously the parallels between spiritual and sexual orientation we would realize that just as gay and lesbian people do not “become” gay or lesbian, but simply come to understand that that is who they already were; so too the journey of faith in Jesus does not begin at the moment that we become aware of it, rather the Holy Spirit has been active in our lives long before we were aware of Jesus. Like sexual orientation, our spiritual orientation was always who we were, it is we who simply discovered it.

Just as people who personally know someone who is gay or lesbian are more likely to have a positive opinion of gay and lesbian people, most people who come to an positive awareness of what a Christian spiritual orientation is did so because they experienced someone share their own story of faith in Jesus with them.

Many of us, who want to make Jesus more available to others, have found that I can be difficult to share our faith journey with Jesus with others. Indeed, people are increasingly resistant to hearing from us because they feel they are being attacked or being asked to change who they are. They already have their beliefs and they are fine with them. On some level their feelings are accurate because many of us approach sharing our faith as an attempt to convert other people to our point of view. It is here that the lessons of gays and lesbians coming out teaches us a new a probably more effective way of thinking about how to witness for Christ.

As stated above, when gay and lesbian people come out, their motivation is no to change the sexual orientation of the person they are speaking with, to “convert” them to being gay or lesbian; rather they are trying to tell the truth of who they are, they are trying to tell their own story. Coming out for gays and lesbians is at statement of self-affirmation in society, a claim that they are happy with their life and who they are. Christians can learn from coming out as we share our story of walking with Jesus: the dreams and the hopes, the fears and the doubts, the valleys and the mountain tops. When we see that being a witness to life with Jesus is simply about telling our story, how we got there and where we hope to go, we become less threatening to others and create greater positive understanding. We are less threatening because people will be able to feel we are not trying to change them but rather are trying to simply tell our story. We will create more positive understanding because people will see us as being authentic and real, rather than telling an edited version of our faith lives that is really about selling its value to get them to adopt it. Furthermore, we trust the Holy Spirit with our stories; we trust that the Spirit will weave our story into the work that others are experiencing within themselves.

Coming out is something both gay and lesbian people and Christians can do to be authentic in their relationships with others. In fact it is the only way authentic and mutually affirming relationships are possible as people must know about who we are, those things that are woven through every facet of our being, the profundity of our walk with Jesus and how we experience and give love. The result is that when we do not come out we live in inauthentic relationship with others, we do not tell our stories which prevent people from loving us as we really are. Furthermore, by staying in the closet we fail to reveal the Holy Wisdom of God present in our lives, we put the Light of God under a bushel.

Discuss: How do you share your faith?

Question: In what ways can the gay and lesbian model of coming out help you in how you tell people about who you are, including your faith?

One can be in the closet as a gay or lesbian person or as a Christian. Those closets are fundamentally based on inauthenticity and fear because the internal disposition wants to be expressed in the world. Those closets therefore are fundamentally constructed out of lies.

Rev. Johnson:

People talk about coming out coming out, like were doing something to come out. The only thing that coming out is, is to stop lying. Because if we didn't have to lie about who

we were, it would be so self evident we wouldn't have to come out.

In our modern times, especially in Western culture, there is little worry that we would be called upon to suffer for our faith. Few people expect in their life time that they will be asked directly if they believe in Jesus, and if so they will be tortured or killed. For gay and lesbian people, this possibility however does exist. It exists not only in clearly violent ways but in small ways as well. For example, not saying where one went on Saturday night or who one's friends are for fear that other may understand more about one's life and take negative actions against one for being gay. This kind of avoidance is similar to not telling people that we go to church or that God is important in our lives, especially when a conversation is on a topic that makes such a comment relevant.

Rev. Michael Eric Dyson:

You offer the Black church a progressive and prophetic and redemptive remnant of people who can tell the truth about who you are because so many of us in closets too: epistemological knowledge based (closets), there are ethical and moral closets, cultural and racial closets: We just provide a metaphor for the desire of blackness to escape the restrictions imposed on it by a society that refuses to acknowledge our humanity. Whenever we are incapable of telling the truth about who we are we are in a closet. And the beauty of the gospel of Jesus is that it invites us to shatter those closets. It invites us to get rid of them because they are not critical to the maintenance and preservation of who we are as a human species. The dominant culture both within Black America and more broadly in mainstream has taken advantage of maintaining and preserving that definition so it can feel free and superior.

Thus, the issue of being "out" is not simply a gay and lesbian issue: it is an issue for the wider Christian community. Indeed, many people are in multiple closets depending on the group of people they are with. When gay and lesbian people come out of the closet, they provide and example of courage for everyone else around them. For if Christian gay and lesbian people can come out when they face the threat of actual violence, then surely other Christians can come out as seekers of justice and advocates for the disenfranchised in the name of Jesus when no such threat exists for them. In other words, the gay and lesbian struggle to come out is a powerful metaphor for taking up the Cross of Christ. In this post-modern world, God instructs us on how to carry the cross, how to be open with our spiritual orientation as Christians, by point us to the courageous example of gay and lesbian people in our midsts.

Consider the connection between walking down the aisle to the altar in public confession of faith and coming out. In both instances, it is not the public confession where it is safe (in church or among one's gay and lesbian friends and family) that truly matter rather it is when not safe: the place where the cross of social scorn and rejection is real.

I Have Decided, to Follow Jesus⁹

I have decided, to follow Jesus,
 I have decided, to follow Jesus,
 I have decided, to follow Jesus,
 No turning back, no turning back.

Though no one join me, still I will follow,
 Though no one join me, still I will follow,
 Though no one join me, still I will follow,
 No turning back, no turning back!

The world behind me, the cross before me,
 The world behind me, the cross before me,
 The world behind me, the cross before me,
 No turning back, no turning back!

Let's take a look at how our various closets affect us as Black Christians.

Rev. Dyson:

One of the reasons we maintain and preserve the notion of the closet we want to feel like at least we above something. See what I'm saying? So gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people becoming Black in America analogous to poor white people hating Negroes because 'at least we ain't Black. We might be po', but at least we ain't niggers'. And Black people saying 'at least I ain't gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, might be trying to fight against it, at least I ain't in public, that way'. So symbolically we have made this so-called minority tradition within our community the receptacle for all of the angst and anxiety we experience racially.

...

[But] part of hating gay people is hating ourselves as Black people, because lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have been so central of identifying us as we are, quoting James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, Audre Lourde, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, this is central to who we are as a people!

In other words, other Black people are using discrimination against gay and lesbian people in order to distract themselves from their own suffering from the structures of racism: both externally created and internally nurtured. It is for this reason that gay and lesbian people need to come out and resist homophobia and heterosexism by standing on their spiritual authority in Christ, the Wisdom of God. When this happens, Black people who are using their discrimination against gay and lesbian people as an escape from their own pain of being discriminated against will be forced to address their own suffering in a more vigorous fashion, thus speeding the end of that discrimination. Thus, gay and lesbian people's willingness to courageously come out is necessary to complete the Civil Rights Movement. Only when our community stops using internal discrimination as an escape will it be able to fully throw off the yoke of discrimination from the

9 *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African-American Hymnal*, (New York: Church Publishing 1993) 136.

majority culture, and invest internally within the Black community to fully avail ourselves of the progress we have made thus far.

Question: What is a closet that you are in or have experienced?

Discuss: What are the damaging effects of being in a closet, not tell the truth about your life?

Rev. Dyson:

The closet punishes everybody: The closet is a metaphor for the secrecy that is anti-theological to the movement and the liberation of the spirit. We internalize the virus of self hatred—purchase love at the expense of our own self recognition.

Question: What are the spiritual benefits of living outside of the closet?

Rev. Dyson:

We absorb and internalize the virus of self hatred as the basis of acceptance in a community that we think loves us. So we purchase love at the expense of our own self recognition. I ain't telling you all nothing, I'm just reminding you what you already know is the truth and so that's metaphorical what Black folk have had to do in the dominant white society all along. This is why it's amazing to me that heterosexual Black people just don't get it. "How dare you compare us to them?" "Who is us and who is them?" Right? And in broad philosophical, technical language its Manichaeism, "us" versus "them," as if there is some essential division between us and them. Who is us and them?

Discuss: Can you give examples of the virus of self-hatred?

In what ways does the closet punish everybody?

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel¹⁰

Refrain:

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
An' why not-a every man.

The win' blows eas' an' de win' blows wes'
It blows like a judg-a-ment day;
An' every po' soul dat never did pray 'll
Be glad to pray dat day. *Refrain.*

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den
An' Jonah from de belly of de whale;
An' de Hebrew children from the fiery furnace
An' why not every man. *Refrain.*

I set my foot on de Gospel ship
An' de ship begin to sail
It landed me over on Canaan's shore
An' I'll never come back no more. *Refrain.*

Gay and lesbian people dare to believe that God loves them despite the cruel realities that life can present. We have been like Daniel in the lion's den and delivered by grace. This grace

¹⁰ Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African-American Hymnal, (New York: Church Publishing 1993) 182.

is revealed when gay and lesbian people claim that love by coming out. By coming out of our various closets we lay hold of the promise of God to a life of meaning and purpose, as God says through the prophet Jeremiah, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (29:11)

On a basic level, the practice of coming out is the logical extension of God’s Wisdom flowing through gay people’s lives. Our study thus far has shown that God is in a holy conflict against interpersonal imperialism because it is a corruption of God’s original design for human relationships where people authentically reveal themselves and their communities respond by loving and affirming who they really are. When gay and lesbian people come out they are inviting their communities to be what God has called them to be: places where people are healed; places where people are honored and loved for who they really are; places where people are authentically encouraged in their ministry to others. **There is a deep need for people to feel affirmed and be affirmed.**

Rev. Dyson:

[T]here is so much funkiness within these mainstream religious traditions that we seek out those places and spaces of affirmation, your critical affirmation is but a metaphor for the need of all human beings to be affirmed.

Gay and lesbian people who courageously stand in their authenticity are legitimately able to claim a higher moral ground than those who oppose their God-given rights to life, liberty, and love. The defenders of rights are on a higher spiritual plane than those who would limit, curtail, or end the basic rights of humans. World wide, and throughout history, the human spirit strives towards justice, fair play and freedom. Gay and lesbian people are no different. As black people, our weary years and silent tears have immersed our in the expanse of and renewal through struggle that suffering brings. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wanted us to be willing to suffer the blows of the billy club and the jaw of the German Shepherd, the cold barrenness of a jail cell and the loneliness of the internal struggle as one way of spiritual redemption. Black people had to be willing to suffer or we would drown in the undertow of our own fears.

To come through the struggle to the other side tends to make you stronger, wiser, more insightful. Very often it brings enlightenment. Their struggle is to “Snatch our humanity from the fires of human cruelty” as James Baldwin said. To struggle and overcome includes the willingness to suffer. And it is in the overcoming that we perceive the truth of the Scripture’s affirmation “if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” (Romans 8:15-17). **For it is only when we come out and take the risk of rejection that we are in the place where we can be blessed by affirmation.**

Discuss: What are the places in your life where you would like to be more authentic with others?

Discuss: In what areas of your life are you accepting isolation rather than taking the risk to come out so that affirmation and community with others had a chance to occur?

A PRAYER: "Oh, Fix Me"

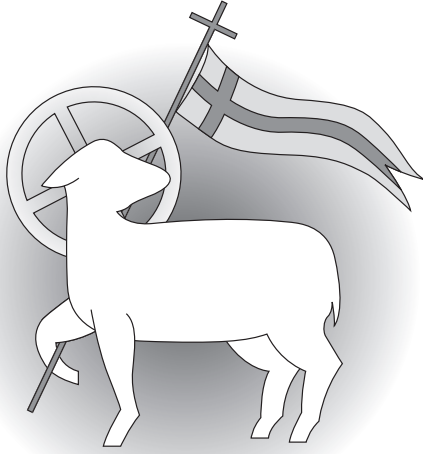
Dear Lord Jesus,

You who came to your own and your own receive you not, release me from my own internal rejection of the Wisdom you have formed in me. Free me from the shackles of fear that make me hesitant to run towards freedom that stop me from stepping out of the closets of my life into the light of day, the light of your love and the embrace of those you have been sent to be your hand and feet in my life. Fix my broken heart, O Lord, where love's absence itself has hurt me and hate has seared me so deeply. Help me manifest my fullest love for humanity, with love towards my neighbor and my enemy. O Lord, as I turn to you make real the power of your resurrection in my life, may those places that are old be made new by your Spirit, may those places that are dead be made alive by your power.

CHAPTER FIVE

Biblical Literalism: *Theft of the Gift*

**“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
a long way from home”**



Lamb of God: This image symbolizes Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The fact that he is standing reflects victory or triumph over death (represented by the cross).

Question: Can the combination of biblical and sexual illiteracy be problematic?

In the last chapter we investigated the dynamics of the closet. We found that the closet is maintained by the fear: the fear of the person within the closet of reprisal for simply telling the truth and the fear of the community of facing its real sources of pain and suffering instead of escaping through discrimination against a smaller minority. In this chapter, we will look at how some in the Black Christian community misuse the Bible to attack gay and lesbian people. Disturbingly, we have a precedent for their pattern of interpretation: white southern slave owners in their arguments against Christian abolitionists.

It almost never fails that when people choose to live out their lives in authenticity that there is almost immediately resistance. The resistance many times appears as if rooted in confidence and a sense of stability from those who offer it. However, upon closer inspection many discover that the people who most ardently resist authenticity in others are at the core simply annoyed that others have stopped playing the game, the game of wearing a mask to be accepted, of pretending to be something. Indeed, many times people who resist authenticity in others do not even care about what ever aspect of one's life one has revealed but are simply reacting to the idea that one intends to live in freedom. This reaction is borne of the simply question, "If you can live in freedom then maybe I should to but I am afraid to go there, and so I am mad you have revealed my refusal as my choice, my cowardice, so I shall punish you!"

Rev. Dyson:

We need the affirmation you bring, we need the spirit you bring we need the knowledge you bring, we need the persistence and perseverance you bring, we need the love regardless of that you bring, even though we just trampling all over your souls ya'll keep on rising from within. That's a witness that warms my spirit that reminds me of why I'm doing this in the first place.

But you see Black people, one of the reasons I think were so homophobic is because our symbolic queering from the beginning we just so hypersensitive of anybody else who challenges our ability to meet, mingle and merge with the mainstream, so you

come along; "you're gay? Oh my god! You, you, you're horrible! You a lesbian, bisexual, what the hell, white folk have just accepted us and you come along with your fagoliousness.

No. No. You know. Unapologetically gay and queer and loving Jesus. You killing us! You out preachin' us, out singing us, out giving us, out tithing us, out loving us, out gospeling us, out embodying us, out Christianizing us. Slow down!

And so we are scared and envious at the same time. We don't know what to do! Oh and that's the beauty! Ya'll keep bringing that thunder! You keep bringing that love!

This reaction surfaces frequently among communities who feel bound to structures that *they, themselves*, find unreasonable. As a result members of conservative religious institutions can be the most susceptible to this problem. When someone comes out as gay or lesbian, they are saying that they choose to be free. When someone who has wasted several years holding on to a failed or even abusive marriage because they think the Bible tells them not to get a divorce; or the woman who has accepted that she cannot become a pastor because she thinks that is what the Bible says; or any other unreasonable belief that creates obvious hardship, such a person can be horrified by the implication that they could be free from their own suffering under particular interpretations of Scripture. The phrase that conservative religious leaders use to refer to that anxiety is "we need to affirm biblical authority." In the context of gay and lesbians, many conservatives claim that they do not specifically hate gays and lesbians but that they need to "affirm biblical authority" that is they need to keep gays and lesbians oppressed so that other people will accept their oppression.

Although accepting the Bible as the foundational authority in matters of faith and ethics is core to a functioning Christian faith, our *final* authority as Christians is Jesus himself. In Christianity, Jesus is not simply a prophet, he is God in incarnate, Emmanuel, God with us. Thus, everything in the Bible must be seen through the lens of our knowledge and experience of Jesus. Reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus can be difficult, for some, as Jesus expressed himself mostly in narratives which can be interpreted in different ways and are richer in content than one or two line statements. In contrast, other parts of the Bible especially the New Testament Epistles and the Books of Moses in the Hebrew Scriptures tend to have more statute-like prescriptive statements that can appear more clear and less ambiguous than Jesus' stories. As a result there is a temptation to interpret Jesus through the lens of what some of the prophets say rather than interpreting the prophets through the lens of what God, the Emmanuel, declares.

As Christians we access that lens of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Of the Spirit it is written, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17). The freedom that the Spirit offers is the freedom to live fully into our calling, into our destiny as ambassadors of Christ, as reflections of God's Wisdom. As Black people this understanding of the Spirit of God as liberator is deep in our bones. Satan enslaves, Christ liberates. If we truly believe in the resurrection, then Christ is acting now to set us free to live in Christ to over turn darkness and evil in the world and to be agents of healing and love. Christ acts now through the Holy Spirit. And we know we hear the Spirit when we are pointed back to Christ, as

Jesus said, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." The Holy Spirit always turns our face to the words of Jesus.

So what did Jesus have to say about interpreting the statutes of God when they seemed to conflict with what is good for humanity? The answer to this question can be found in Jesus' challenge to the enforcement of Sabbath laws. Let's look at two stories in the Gospel of Mark and see what Jesus has to say.

The first story proceeds as follows:

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

(Mark 2:23-28). Let's examine closely what Jesus has done here. The situation is that the Disciples are hungry and are doing a moderate amount of work in order to eat. Technically they are "harvesting grain." Because it is against the Law of Moses, which Jesus himself accepted came from God, to do work on the Sabbath, the Pharisees accuse Jesus and the Disciples as braking God's law. Jesus responds by: (1) going to a narrative portion of Scripture and (2) providing a general principle of interpretation.

The story he cites is one where David who is not a priest is permitted to eat sacred bread which would be unlawful for him and his companions to have. Jesus clearly believes that it was morally just to allow David to have the bread even if it was unlawful under the Law of Moses. Out of this example, Jesus articulates the principle that "the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." Notice that when Jesus declares his authority over the Sabbath, he does so not as God or the new Lawgiver, but as a human being. It is Jesus' humanity, which we all share, that is to be *served* by the Sabbath, which in this text is a metaphor for the Law as a whole. The lesson Jesus teaches here is that when human need is opposed by Law that it is the Law that must give, for the law is the servant of humanity not the other way around.

Having successfully parried the Pharisees' attack, Jesus goes on the offensive. On the heels of the story above comes this one:

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness

of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

(Mark 3:1-6). Here Jesus purposely creates a conflict between the Sabbath law and what is reasonable and just. Then he asks "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath?" In Matthew's Gospel the writer records that Jesus also asked this question, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." (Matthew 12:11-12). Here we see a development upon the foundation Jesus laid in the previous story. Now, the Law must not only be understood as the servant of humanity but further, one has an obligation to contravene it if that is what is necessary to make people whole. Something else evolved as well between the two passages. In the last passage, Jesus appealed to a Scriptural passage, in this story, Jesus appealed to the compassionate side of human nature. Notice that in Matthew, Jesus frames the question with "Suppose one of you has only *one sheep* and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath." This *one* sheep in this context is more of a pet than livestock. He expects that the listener's own love for one's special animal would compel them to break the Sabbath. If Jesus' own listeners know that the love of an animal overrides the law, so much more does God feel about people who can be healed and permitted to live fuller lives but for the Law. This is Jesus' interpretation of biblical authority. As Christians who live by the Spirit of Christ we must follow Jesus' example.

As stated earlier Black people in America share a special affinity with Jesus' understanding of the relationship between law and human flourishing. We are the children of the Holy Spirit, the Lord who brings freedom. One of the gifts of gay and lesbian people to the Church today is a reminder to all of us to hold fast to the life of the Spirit, as it is written, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1). In a very real and basic sense, the movement to eject gay and lesbian people from the life of the Christian community is actually a call to accept again the yoke of a type of biblical interpretation that held our people in slavery for four hundred years.

Rev. Dyson:

Black people say "no, there's a different thing, it's a spirit thing inside us". I don't care what you reading, how are Black people goin' to be literal about the bible when literacy was out ruled and outlawed for 150 years. How we goin' be literal?! You couldn't even read! What you literal about?

So now that same word that is the predicate that is the basis for us being enslaved we warred against it, we found other scriptures and we found other examples in communities and we found the witness of our spirit, we just knew that wasn't right. Because we believe that God is love, love the Lord God with all thy heart mind and soul and love thy neighbor as yourself and if you ain't doing that Jesus said everything else ain't nuthin', it don't matter, it don't count it don't register, so that same biblical text that has been used to oppress us that same text that has been used to reinforce our oppression. That same biblical orientation used by white brothers and sisters who want to come along

now with their right wing evangelical co-pietists and tell Negroes why Jesus hates the gay people don't give a darn about you as a Negro anyway!

In order to understand what Rev. Dyson is saying we need to do some history. We have to go back to the days of slavery and the arguments over abolition. When we compare who claimed to be Christian argued over the morality of slavery we see parallels to the arguments over the worth of gay and lesbian people's lives in the present.

Abolitionists began with the two great pillars of the Bible on which everything else rests: the Gospel Narratives and its theological prequel, the story of the Exodus. Starting with Jesus, they asked themselves in what way does keeping people in slavery simply because they are Black demonstrate loving others as we wish to be loved. They felt that question had a self-evident answer that slavery was unloving. Next, they looked at the Exodus story which was God great demonstration of God's character and power and saw a God who longs to liberate. From this foundation they began making the case against slavery. That foundation was the broad underpinnings of Christianity's core values: love and liberation.

In response, southern white slave owners attempted to use the Bible, which was written by people on the margins for people on the margins, against itself. They deployed what is called in law a strict constructionist interpretation of the Bible. It works like this: In a conflict between a broad general principle and a narrow practical rule, the broad principle is always interpreted in the context of the narrow practical rule, thus limiting the scope of the broad principle; in addition, it excludes from textual analysis information from other sources of moral authority such as philosophy, science, or lived experience.

The practical result is that an over-arching narrative of liberation, like the Exodus narrative, which seems to indicate God's hostility to enslavement; or the command to love others as one's self; or broad liberating maxims like Galatians 3:28 "(There is no longer slave or free, ... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.)" were read in the context of clear statute-like precepts in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures of how to maintain slavery as part of society. Thus, similar again to the philosophy of strict constructionism in law, the proto-fundamentalist interpretive system was prejudiced against the broad liberating moral arcs of the Biblical narratives and in favor of the various "clear" statements that truncated those arcs of justice.

It is not hard to see how reading the Bible in this framework could be useful to slave owners. A short catalog of biblical texts that can be read to allow Christians to own slaves follows: Leviticus 25:44-46 (Israel, recently freed from Egypt, given the right to buy, own and pass down through inheritance foreigners as chattel slaves, that is as personal possessions; these foreigners are not eligible for release in the year of jubilee, a event that occurs every fifty years, when all Israelite slaves are set free and all land reverts to its original owner); Ephesians 6:5-9 (slaves encouraged to work enthusiastically for their masters; masters discouraged from threatening slaves); Colossians 3:22-4:1 (slaves encouraged to be obedient in everything; masters urged to give slaves what is just and fair); 1 Timothy 6:1-4 (slaves encouraged to give honor to their masters; slaves of Christian masters commanded not to use their common faith as a reason to be disrespectful, on account of their brotherhood in Christ, but rather urged to work more wholeheartedly for their masters;

those who teach a different doctrine condemned); Titus 2:9-10 (slaves encouraged to be obedient); Philemon (a slave runs away and the Apostle Paul sends him back to his master while encouraging the master to treat the slave as a brother; but Paul fails to require that the master set the slave free); 1 Peter 2:18-19 (slaves encouraged to obey their masters even when they are harsh). These texts are consistent in that every time they address an enslaved person they always command the slave to obey their master. The slave is never told that they are permitted to rebel or escape. When one does escape, the slave is sent back with the master maintaining the authority over the slave, including the authority to punish. Thus if one is obligated to prioritize the “clear” statements in the Bible that speak directly on the issue of slavery over and above the foundational narrative texts which reveal the heart of the Divine Lawgiver as the God of love and liberation, then those over-arching narratives of justice are truncated by these “clearer” texts. Again, although one can read the Bible, as a whole, as an abolitionist document, doing so in a fundamentalist interpretive framework is almost impossible.

Yet neither Jesus nor our abolitionist forbearers thought such an interpretation was valid. Yet this style of interpretation is exact what anti-gay and lesbian forces deploy when they attempt to turn the Bible against the Wisdom of God. The result is really the revealing of the moral bankruptcy of those who use this type of interpretation:

Rev. Dr. Peter J. Gomes, an African American, and minister of the Harvard University Memorial Church writes,

No credible case against homosexuality or homosexuals can be made from the Bible unless one chooses to read scripture in a way that simply sustains the existing prejudice against homosexuality and homosexuals. The combination of ignorance and prejudice under the guise of morality makes the religious community, and its abuse of scripture in this regard, itself morally culpable.¹¹

Like the abolitionists, the argument in favor of gay and lesbian people is rooted in the over-arching narrative of God’s liberation of humanity from original sin, the sin of relational imperialism. Like the abolitionists who pointed to the biblical narrative of the Exodus, God’s mighty act of delivering a people literally from slavery, we point to biblical narratives of same-gender relationships which are Scripture’s best models of following God’s greatest commandment in intimate relationships. Like abolitionists, we ask Jesus’ Sabbath question: how does crushing a people’s hope of living an abundant life simply because of who they are could possibly be a reflection of loving them as we would like to be loved.

In response, opponents of recognizing the full humanity of gay and lesbian people look to the logic of slave owners. They ignore the over-arching narratives; they ignore the biblical stories of same-gender love; they ignore Jesus’ Sabbath question. Instead they look to a handful of supposedly clear verses that they believe condemn gay and lesbian people, and they do so in the face

11 Gomes, Peter J: (1996) *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York, William Morrow).

of good scholarly research that undermines those claims. They take those verses and use them to undercut and truncate the grander arches of wisdom and justice found in the Bible that reflect God's love and grace of, in, and through the lives of gay and lesbian people. In the fires of their cruelty, these interpretive methods threaten to consume the very lives of gay and lesbian people.

Rev. Johnson:

I love my church. I grew up in the Church of God in Christ. I grew up in Bishop Samuel's Crouch's church.

And you couldn't get to be a bigger name in the Pentecostal movement.

I grew up in the Mother church.

We had a whole separate building called the Temple where we hosted all the convocations.

I saw them—I saw the traveling evangelists come and I listened, and I listened to rhetoric that was killing my soul. There are no words to say what it does to the soul of a person to tell them that they are an abomination in the eyes of God, that their very presence is satanic. At least as slaves we had a purpose in the universe. But they are telling us that there is not even a place for gay people, for lesbians, for bisexuals, for transgender people in Gods universe.

Do you know what that's like to be told you don't have a right to exist?. Let alone have equality under the law in the eyes of the church.

It kills the soul and it puts us at risk,

It puts us at risk of destructive behaviors

Jesus' Sabbath question rings in our ears: Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill? The Bible like the Sabbath is given to us to give life and to empower all people to live into their calling. If we listen to the words of the prophets the Holy Spirit has sent to us in our day we hear Jesus' Sabbath question beckoning us. Let us hear them:

Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

We struggled against apartheid in South Africa, supported by people the world over, because Black people were being blamed and made to suffer for something we could do nothing about; our very skins, wrote the prominent Church leader. "It is the same with sexual orientation. It is a given,

...

Yet, all over the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are persecuted, writes Archbishop Tutu. "We treat them as pariahs and push them outside our communities. We make them doubt that they too are children of God—and this must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy."¹²

¹² Bishop Tutu as quoted from "Archbishop Tutu Speaks Out on Homosexuality and WCC" Tuesday March 3rd, 1988 ACNS Posting <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/tutu.html>.

Dr. Cornel West, Theologian:

If I have one word for my fellow Christians, I would ask them to keep their eyes on the love of Jesus and to not to confuse the Blood at Calvary with the Kool-Aid of the homophobia in America, because Kool-Aid is thin and shallow and its linked to thrashing other people, but the Blood, as thick as it is, is open enough for everyone and by being open enough for everybody it means that we have to call into question our own particular prejudices that we inherit that have nothing to do with the loving gospel of Jesus. We have too many Black gay brothers and lesbian sisters who are suffering because of the petty prejudices that lead us to lose sight of their humanity and therefore our support and our embrace and our welcome.¹³

As we close the circle, we see again that the Spirit is the Lord of Freedom. God offers freedom to all people to live into their purpose to be the Wisdom of God in the world. For gay and lesbian people that means developing and acting on their inherent possibility to promote organic egalitarianism, to be God's answer of living in right relationship in our domestic life and overturning relational imperialism. The Spirit is the Lord of Freedom who empowers gay and lesbian people to demonstrate the courage of carrying the cross for the sake of an authentic life, to call the Church to a bolder life in the world, unashamed of the gospel of Jesus.

¹³ Except from DVD "All God's Children" Produced by Woman Vision, 1996 Dee Mosbacher, Sylvia Rhue, Frances Reid, www.womanvision.com.

CHAPTER SIX

Unapologetically Queer: *The Commission*

When We All Get to Heaven¹⁴

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,
Sing His mercy and His grace;
In the mansions bright and blessed,
He'll prepare for us a place.

Refrain:

When we all get to Heaven,
What a day of rejoicing that will be!
When we all see Jesus,
We'll sing and shout the victory.

While we walk the pilgrim pathway,
Clouds will overspread the sky;
But when traveling days are over,
Not a shadow, not a sigh. *Refrain.*

Let us then be true and faithful,
Trusting, serving every day;
Just one glimpse of Him in glory
Will the toils of life repay; *Refrain.*

Onward to the prize before us!
Soon His beauty we'll behold;
Soon the pearly gates will open;
We shall tread the streets of gold. *Refrain.*



PX with Alpha and Omega: This is the monogram for Christ in Greek. The X (Kai) is the “CH” sound and the “P” (Rho) is the “R” sound. Early Christians regularly placed this symbol on door posts or other entrances to a home as protection from evil. The alpha and omega symbols to the right and left of the PX is an optional addition. They are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and symbolize the infinite nature of Christ: he is the first and the last, encompassing all things.

*“We weren’t chosen in spite of being gay,
we were chosen because we are gay”*

— Bishop Yvette Flunder

Hear the Gospel of Jesus:

And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

(Matthew 28:18-20). This passage is called the Great Commission. It is Jesus’ instruction to carry on what he started while knowing that he continues to be with us. Jesus called the Disciples into building a community that was faithful to what he had taught. It was a community that was for all nations, a community of diversity. We find in the Book of Revelation that all of God’s people in heaven at the end of all things will have come from every nation and every language and are still, even in heaven, identifiable by their nationality and language. (Revelation 5:9; 7:9). The significance of this fact is that the Church of God, the Body of Christ is a body of diversity, and out of that diversity, its members will continue to speak even at the end of time. Thus, one of the core callings of the Church is to create a community in which a diverse group people with a diverse set of gifts and perspectives learn to be disciples of Jesus and obey his teachings: love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

Saint Paul expanded on this understanding of the Church’s mission in his letters to the Corinthians and the Ephesians. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and Ephesians chapter 4, Paul describes the church as a body with different members providing different functions, in the same way the different organs do in a human body. He then describes different gifts that people have in assisting the Church in teaching people how to love God and love their neighbor as themselves. It is because the point of the Church’s existence is to build a community of love that the ability to love is the greatest gift. (1 Corinthians 12:27 – 13:13). Each

group, like each organ in the human body, has a special gift that it brings to the Church as a whole. It can be a unique perspective, a special history of understanding God, or cultural gifts that interact with the story of Jesus in a particularly beautiful way.

As Black people in America, we understand this intuitively. At the opening of this curriculum we discussed how we as a people have special gifts rooted in our experience in America. We talked about our history of oppression and deliverance; we talked about our creation of a unique form of musical art; and we talked about our role as America's moral compass. In these ways we have and continue to assist the wider community in loving God and loving each other: passionately loving God and love each other with justice. The calling of the Church is to gather up the gifts of Black people, along with the gifts of every other ethnic group, every age group, all men and women with their different gender expressions, and gays and lesbians, and create a loving community in which all of these distinctive gifts these groups possess can be shared with each other. Through the sharing, the modeling, the "speaking the truth in love" to each other we will then "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (Ephesians 4: 15-16)

In order to successfully be the Church, all of its members must both know their own purpose and act on it, while also learning the truth that God wishes them to know from the other parts of the body.

In this study, we have seen that like Black people in America, gays and lesbians have special gifts they offer to the church. These gifts are rooted in who they are (people who desire intimate relationship with someone of the same gender) combined with our current cultural context (a society where relational imperialism is ubiquitous and expressed primarily and viscerally through the social system of gender complementarity). The primary gift that gay and lesbian people have to offer the Church is how to have and maintain a sacramental marriage relationship. The natural tendency of gay and lesbian people for organic egalitarianism in their intimate relationship assist the Church in its work of helping people follow Jesus by rejecting the evil of relational imperialism. Gays and lesbians provide a living workable model for other Christians to follow. This model may be especially helpful for the Black Church. Now more than ever, the Black Church must provide support and moral assistance to Black families that are being destroyed by the discrimination present in the Criminal Justice System's discriminatory practices and the resulting mismatch in education levels between Black men and women. As Rev Dyson says,

Maybe the hopefulness in our community is lgbt people getting married, forming permanent alliances, ya'll might be the redemption of the Black community.

That hopefulness is in providing a workable model for being in permanent intimate relationship with another person that is freer from gender constraints, especially at a time where gender roles of chief breadwinner and protector as markers of Black male identity in America have been under long-term stress for some time.

Second, gay and lesbian people, through the coming out journey, provide a powerful living metaphor of what it means to live a public witness for Christ. Like gay and lesbian people, Christians need to adopt the practice of coming out as Christians, as people loyal to the cause of Christ: allying themselves *publicly* with the disenfranchised and the marginalized. This act of coming out is the act of carrying the Cross for Christ, which is the only legitimate way to be a disciple of Jesus.

Third, gay and lesbian people, remind the people of God afresh the significance of proper Biblical interpretation, a lesson our forbearers as Black people and their white abolitionist allies had already learned in this nation over one-hundred and fifty years ago. Gay and lesbian people call us back to the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit who points us to the words of Jesus.

Fourth, gay and lesbian people offer a witness of perseverance in the face of evil from *within the Church*. They show the power of engagement and love in the even when arrogance and ignorance abound. Gay and lesbian people are the face of unconditional love to a scornful community.

Rev. Dyson:

We need the affirmation you bring, we need the spirit you bring we need the knowledge you bring, we need the persistence and perseverance you bring , we need the love regardless of what you bring, even though we just trampling all over your souls ya'll keep on rising from within. That's a witness that warms my spirit that reminds me of why I'm doing this in the first place.

...

[When we embrace our] brothers and sisters who have to live their faith on the edge, same way white brothers and sisters had to look up to us during the height of the civil rights movement or after slavery when we had to hold onto our faith every day, now some Black people part of the sexual mainstream, and so we feel it necessary to throw off on our gay and lesbian, transgender, bisexual brothers and sisters, and that even is a misnomer because we know up in the church its all up in there. We ban the gay people and the lesbians and the transgenders, and the bisexuals , ain't nobody going to have no offering, it ain't goin' to be no singing, and probably won't have no preachin'. So, you know, I'm just saying.

In order to fulfill the commission of Christ, gay and lesbian people and the wider Church must actively take the action necessary to live into the calling of the Church. First, gay and lesbian people must identify and own their gifts as the grace given to them according the measure of Christ's gift. (Ephesians 4:7). They must internalized that they are, and especially in their sexual orientation and gender expression, God's Wisdom for the world. Then they must express those gifts to others, they must model them, they must speak to others in the Church the lessons to be drawn from them, speaking the truth *in love*. Like Prince Jonathan, gay and lesbian people must turn to the Church with open arms and invite them into a real practice of the love of Jesus.

As Rev. Johnson states,

We have a lot to offer. Those of us who have managed to work through the reconciliation process deep within our souls need to take our rightful place in the larger, broader community of the Black church.

And where I think it's fine and wonderful that so many of us have started our own churches and our own denominations we need to do more of what were doing here today. Which is stand side by side with our brethren and our clergy and say we love you. Can you love us? Can we all love each other here, because that is what is demanded of us. Jesus said that is one of the greatest commandments, that you love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Like Jonathan they stand, vulnerable, but proud, aware of the depth and power of what they are offering: the Wisdom of God and a livable workable path for our redemption for the world primeval sin.

In response, the wider Church must affirmatively embrace the gift of gay and lesbian people into the body of Christ. In the language of the body, the Church has been having an auto-immune response; it is attacking itself, weakening its own organs. This must not only stop but be reversed. The larger body must wash gay and lesbian people with the oxygen rich blood of the love of Christ. The Church must respond by offering what only it can do, provide a space to honor, cherish, and then empower spiritually through public liturgy and communal support the lives and relationships of gay and lesbian people. Just as when the Church was able to proclaim, through public marriages of inter-racial couples, that it supported the spiritual gifts of racial minorities and the beauty of intercultural families; so also is the Church's public celebration of its gay and lesbian members and their marriages a powerful way of amplifying the Wisdom of God in the lives of gay and lesbian people.

This mutual and reciprocal recognition, affirmation and celebration of the grace of gay and lesbian people and those of everyone in the Church *is* at the core of the Church's calling. In this way we can continue to grow in our ability to make disciples of all nations: teaching them how to love God and love each other. This mutual and reciprocal recognition, affirmation and celebration of gay and lesbian people is not happening in a vacuum. Rather, it is happening alongside at least three other powerful movements of the Holy Spirit in our current age: the realignment of our Christian relational ethics and the theology of Jesus:

1. The teaching that women and men are equal—expressed by women celebrated as pastors. The Gift: This recovery allowed modern Christians to more fully access and receive the spiritual powers and qualities of women and the female principle within Christianity.
2. The teaching that all people and racial groups were equal. The Gift: This recovery allowed people to grasp the value and beauty of diversity. When we accept racial equality we have to admit that God loves diversity. If God made several races it means that God loves seeing diversity.

3. The teaching that we must care for and respect the Earth and its creatures. The Gift: Realizing that we need to earnestly find a sustainable way to continue our own existence in harmony with the planet and its ecosystems.

And concurrent with these three is:

4. The teaching that gay and lesbian people are gifted children of God and whose relationships are honored in the life of the Church. The Gifts of which have been enumerated in this curriculum.

As we close, we offer to you this challenge: We ask that you look to Christ and continue the work of making God's vision where there is "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28). We are commissioned to bring God's idealized future for humanity to the present. We are here to stand with God in reclaiming our humanity from the dominion of sin and death. Let us work for a world in which people know how to love God and love each other.

And now may God empower you as you are sent out to do the work you have been given to do, to love and serve God as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of God's Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always.¹⁵

¹⁵ Found in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1979) for the Episcopal Church USA.