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Discourse, Reconciliation, and Fissure: A History of Gay and Ex-Gay Theology in
American Christianity from 1968-2015

By

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Introduction

Homosexual and Transgender rights advocates in the United States find their chief opponents in the American New Right. The most ardent zealots against marriage equality, anti-discrimination statutes, and queer literature are self-avowed evangelical conservative Christians. The American church has not always been this galvanized against homosexuals as a class; in fact, there are documented examples of lesbian and gay members of United States churches going back at least a century. Young Women's Christian Association member and polyamorous lesbian Winnifred Wygal in the 1920s recognized her same-sex attraction in diary entries and she believed physical contact between two women in a romantic or intimate context was possible without sin.¹ Reverend Clarence H. Cobbs in the 1950s until the 1970s pastored the First Church of Deliverance in Bronzeville, his homosexuality an open secret to both his church and the *Chicago Defender*.² In the liberal Unitarian church in 1969, Reverend James Stoll was the first minister who publicly came out as a homosexual.³ Yet despite these few examples existing in the 20th century, mainline protestant organizations ensured that these types of gay Christians would remain the exception to the rule of heterosexual dogma.

It is easy to assume that liberal/progressive Christianity that accepts gay Christians into their parish or congregation is not historically relevant in the history of the culture wars,

¹ Kathi Kern, "Winnifred Wygal's Flock," in *Devotions and Desires: Histories of Sexuality and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States* ed. Gillian Frank et al (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 25.

² St. Sukie De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012) 157-159.

³ Mark Oppenheimer, "'The Inherent Worth and Dignity': Gay Unitarians and the Birth of Sexual Tolerance in Liberal Religion," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 1 (1996): 95.

especially in the context of the Christian Right’s influence with the GOP. The Christian Left does not have the same amount of influence in the Democratic party as the Christian Right. The divide in American Christian denominations today is similar to the Baptist split in theological division as denominations in the 21st century are forced to either decentralize and give local churches more autonomy in their doctrine or risk fissure. Same-sex attraction and marriage are at the center of this divide and the debate around them has been the water in the cracks eroding doctrinal unity in nearly every denomination—including Lutheran,⁴ Methodist,⁵ Presbyterian,⁶ Catholic,⁷ and many others.

Theological discord is nothing new within Christianity with its long history of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, but American Christian sects have a unique tendency to fissure and split in the face of conflict. One of the more glaring times of theological discord was on the issue of slavery and abolition in the pulpit. One of the largest denominations of Protestantism in the west was Baptism, which split into Northern and Southern sections. According to theologian Leon McBeth in 1987, the denomination split first in 1845 first out of a desire to decentralize, but later became far more polarized as the stresses of the Civil War and Reconstruction molded Baptism into regional isolation with churches in the North and South

⁴ “Same-Sex Issues Split Lutheran Congregation,” *NPR*, 2017, <https://www.wglt.org/show/wglt-sound-ideas/2017-12-18/same-sex-issues-split-lutheran-congregation>.

⁵ Yonat Shimron, “After Schism, United Methodists Vote to Restructure Denomination,” *Christianity Today* 2024 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/04/united-methodist-general-conference-umc-restructure-lgbt/>.

⁶ Mark A. Kellner, “Gay men not qualified for ministry, Presbyterian Church in America votes,” *The Washington Times*, 2021 <https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/jul/2/gay-men-not-qualified-ministry-presbyterian-church/>.

⁷ Gina Christian, “Chicago Catholic priest apologizes for same-sex blessing ‘words and visuals’,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 14, 2024, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/chicago-catholic-priest-apologizes-same-sex-blessing-words-and-visuals>.

differing greatly in theological outlook.⁸ We are seeing a similar move in mainline protestant denominations in the United States today because of the seemingly irreconcilable issue of same-sex marriage.

After decades of debate and the rise and fall of numerous organizations, churches have crystalized into four different disparate theological positions, each finding their origins in the culture war fights of the 1970s. These four are the following: Side A, otherwise known as the affirming model, started by gay and lesbian Christians in the late 1960s who were often expelled from their home denominations and struggled for reform in the larger American Christian tradition. The second is Side X, otherwise known as the ex-gay model, started by traditionalist Christian psychologists and ministers in the 1970s as they decided to push back against the gay liberation movement's scientific claims of homosexual immutability. The third and fourth positions, side B⁹ and Side Y,¹⁰ were theological stances born of the same sin claims made by Side X but moderated themselves on how their individual denominations dealt with same-sex attracted Christians without subscribing to the supposed permissiveness of the affirming model.

This project sets out to see why the specific fissure in American Christianity exists around same-sex attraction despite societal change with the depathologization of homosexuality, and internal pressure from reformers to change church doctrine on homosexuality. This thesis will start in the historiography of sex and Christianity and work from there to explore the ideas that underpin churches' and faith leaders' reaction to the creeping acceptance of homosexual behavior and relationships in secular society.

⁸ Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Broadman Press, 1987), 433.

⁹ Defined Against Side A: gay Christians must be celibate.

¹⁰ Homosexuality is just yet another sin that must be avoided, like alcoholism or gambling.

Historiography

The history of sexuality is typically intertwined with the history of global Christianity because of the Church's repeated interventions into it. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* deals with the *Repressive Hypothesis* which centered the church as one of the primary repressive institutions that ironically forced sexuality into public discourse.¹¹ Other historians of Christian sexuality seem to hold onto the Repressive Hypothesis in one form or another. Historians like Kristin Kobes Du Mez affirm and focus on the ways in which modern-day evangelicals use sexual repression through purity culture to achieve their goals at enforcing cultures of patriarchy and female submission.¹²

Shortly after Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, gay medievalist John Boswell published *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* which was the first major work of explicit gay history of the Christian church. Boswell's work is often ignored by mainstream social history, which has taken a social constructionist bent after the titans of Foucault and David Halperin dominated the field.¹³ Boswell fell out of favor with the social constructionists because he applied the label of homosexuality to long dead individuals in the Middle Ages who would have had no concept of the present-day category. In a way, Boswell was doing what Jack Chick¹⁴ and the other evangelicals were trying to do as Christian historians (however amateur they were):

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An introduction* (Editions Gallimard, 1976), 36.

¹² Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 171.

¹³ David M. Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Jack Chick, *Doom Town* (Chick Publications, 1999). A tract on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, draws direct parallels of the gay liberation movement to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

draw a genealogy of homosexual behavior to something in the church or in the Bible—which bucked against rising dominant queer theory.

Essentialism as a framework for history cuts both ways in Christian history and gay and lesbian studies. For fundamentalist Christian history, homosexuality had a genealogy going back to the Fall of Man,¹⁵ and the preferred criminal term for some, sodomy, had its linguistic origins in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The difference in the two essentialist groups, is that fundamentalist essentialists drew parallels of modern homosexuality to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah¹⁶ while gay essentialists drew parallels of modern homosexual relationships to the instances of friendships in abbeys.¹⁷

Social constructionist David Halperin provided a helpful table of categorization in understanding the ways of labeling homosexual classifications by identifying five categories: homosexuality, effeminacy, sodomy, friendship, and inversion.¹⁸ The essentialists on the left, including Boswell and others in the older gay and lesbian studies department,¹⁹ use a realist methodology to label and understand the ceremonies of the early and medieval church. In Halperin’s words, “The implication appears to be that the modern concept refers to an objective phenomenon that exists apart from us, outside of history and culture. . .”²⁰ Boswell’s work in the medieval archive led him to believe that many same-sex friendship ceremonies resembled the

¹⁵ Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian* (Bethany House, 2010), 21.

¹⁶ Alan Sears et al, *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today* (B&H 2003), 15. This book starts with an 1800s quote on how the crime of sodomy destroys nations.

¹⁷ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹⁸ Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, 135.

¹⁹ Rictor Norton, *Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

²⁰ Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, 58.

heterosexual marriage ceremonies whose aesthetics match what we consider to be marriage today.²¹ Boswell's work came at a time of emerging (and suppressed) homosexual identities in the Christian church and allowed gays and lesbians to find "a narrative of Christian history that included them as more than objects of violent contempt."²² Boswell's work as a historian leaned far more into his role as an activist and his dip into essentialism remains as a polemic against the linguistic bind that ties the story of Sodom to homosexuals in the present day.

Historians of Christian antiquity (Boswell, Foucault, MacCulloch, etc.) are just as important to the historiography of the history of sex and Christianity as Christian Right scholars because while the latter is more relevant to the retelling of the gay liberation movement, the former is far more important in showing why the gay liberation movement, in the framework of civil rights, only caused anti-gay doctrine to reshape and reform-why no matter what defeats the Christian Right suffers in the courts, it has been able to continue programs of conversion therapy, liturgy, and family that will always have a core assumption that homosexual relationships, no matter how legal, are a result of the fall of man and cannot be understood in any other context. Fundamentally, the fight the Christian Right has undertaken is a fight in the realm of realism—for the ideal heterosexual couple and now for the ideal cisgender individual—and no amount of scientific vindication or aphorisms like "love is love" and "gender is a social construct" would let the Christian Right doctrinal apparatus to allow any of the five historical understandings of homosexuality exist openly in its churches, and only reformation or expulsion could resolve the fundamental conflict between homosexuality and fundamentalist Christian doctrine. My intervention into the history of sex and Christianity is highlighting the danger John Boswell and

²¹ John Boswell, *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (Villard Books, 1994).

²² Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.

the dozens of other gay and lesbian Christians and organizations posed to the orthodoxy of American evangelicalism and how they fit into the secularizing United States from 1968 until 2015.

Kyle Harper took a different view of the repressive hypothesis in the context of the early church until the Justinian Era. He asserted that the changes to sexual morality that the church offered to the Greco-Roman culture it ruled over were offers of freedom in the face of the sexual Greco-Roman caste system. He argued against the work of *Greek Homosexuality* and against the myth that Christian regulation disturbed an era of pagan freedom.²³ He highlighted the slave culture and routine sexual abuse in institutions of pederasty and prostitution and noted how Christian literature capitalized on the juxtaposition of the free virgin—who could choose sexual chastity—vs the temple slave or the prostitute who was forced into sexual submission.²⁴ In *From Shame to Sin*, Harper asserted that the changes in sexual culture that the church wrought were not only discursive, but also political. One of the more important examples were the writings of Lactantius, which formed the framework of the original laws against *porneia* meant to slowly Christianize Rome.²⁵ Rome was not Christianized in a day, and it took centuries for the Byzantine state to universalize its moral sexual codes, culminating in the reign of Emperor Justinian, who expanded the prohibitions of pederasty to all same-sex eros.²⁶ His conclusion left the reader with a familiar sexual morality despite having ancient influences.²⁷ Harper's intervention into the literature on sexuality in the changing Roman Empire is important to the essentialist-social constructionist divide because he showed how essentialists on both sides of the

²³ Harper, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, 2.

²⁴ Harper, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, 20.

²⁵ Harper, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, 136.

²⁶ Harper, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, 157.

²⁷ Harper, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, 244.

historical debate romanticize or villainize Pauline asceticism—so while organizations like the Moral Majority operated in a modern context, they were operating with premodern frameworks.

The most recent addition to the history of homosexuality and Christianity is Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Lower than the Angels* which builds on the legacy of Boswell while accepting the limitations of Boswell's methodology. He was largely in agreement with Boswell on his analysis of the Pauline epistles, but classified Boswell's work as a historian as "Quixotic"²⁸ and illusory in its creation of a homosexual of the Middle Ages. He also recognized the anachronism of 20th century Bible translations that turned Hebrew and Greek words into the modern English term homosexual²⁹ while also exploring how the crime of sodomy and buggery against sodomites became crimes against homosexuals.³⁰ MacCulloch placed himself in a middle-ground between essentialism and social construction by criticizing both in the history of sex and Christianity—accusing Foucault of being monocausal in his explanation of the repressive theory of the church.³¹ The most important ideas of this book in the storied history of sex and Christianity is that there is a myriad of sexual theologies in Christianity that are not tied to any one denomination's doctrine. He found that churches across the globe typically did not start using biblical arguments against non-heterosexuals until after the 1970s, and before then, would use arguments based on natural law.³² The fact that natural law seems to have divorced itself from the repressive hypothesis and has reconstrued same-sex couples as natural left the church in shock and in a state of ideological isolation.

²⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Lower Than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity* (Penguin Books, 2024), 491.

²⁹ MacCulloch, *Lower Than the Angels*, 10.

³⁰ MacCulloch, *Lower Than the Angels*, 381.

³¹ MacCulloch, *Lower Than the Angels*, 492.

³² MacCulloch, *Lower Than the Angels*, 495.

There is another side of the historiography of sex in Christianity that focuses on how the Christian Right in the United States uses these essentialist claims to enact policy. Historians of the Christian Right are typically not concerned with interrogating the claims of organizations and thought leaders in Christian conservatism and are far more interested in looking at their impact as a voting bloc in United States elections. Legal scholar Didi Hermann identified how the discourses of the Christian Right showed a common strategy of literal demonization in *Christianity Today* to older forms of anticommunist and antisemitic politics made palatable for a mainstream evangelical audience.³³ Carol Mason's *Oklahomo* seemed to confirm Herman's hypothesis common demonization strategies and came to the conclusion that the opposition to liberal/secular-humanism was born directly out of the anticommunist activities of the likes of Billy James Hargis and Sally Kern.³⁴ More recently, authors like William Schultz have used the framework of the culture war as declared by conservative Christian Patrick Buchanan in 1992.³⁵ Schultz, like Herman, recognized the changing tactics of the Christian Right in its rhetoric around Amendment 2 in Colorado and both recognized how the political bloc found itself moving from an enclave of churches to a national cross-denominational movement that always framed the fights it picked as defense against the liberal order.

The Metropolitan Community Church

Various pre-Obergefell v. Hodges churches popped up after 1968 to explicitly entertain the question of homosexual participation in the church without requiring conversion therapy. The first of these was the Metropolitan Community Church in 1968, which formed out of the living

³³ Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 26.

³⁴ Carol Mason, *Oklahomo: Lessons in Unqueering America* (State University of New York Press, 2015), 81.

³⁵ William Schultz, *Jesus Springs: Evangelical Capitalism and the Fate of an American City* (University of North Carolina Press, 2025), 59-90.

room of excommunicated California Pentecostal priest Troy Perry³⁶ only a few months before the Stonewall Riots.³⁷ Perry was excommunicated from his family and his denomination for his same-sex attraction and would create his own enclave for gay and lesbian Christians without a congregation. In the early days of the Metropolitan Community Church, Perry had to maintain a delicate balance as preacher and activist with his small but growing congregation. Perry had a foot in the gay liberation movement before he created the MCC, and so he frequently helped to organize and promote his church in local pride parades starting in the early 1970s. His flock was split on the efficacy of parades, with one 1972 article highlighting the apathy of one of its members despite Perry's enthusiasm.³⁸ Perry's activism sparked intra-congregational debate on what a gay church should look like and came at odds with his own church board, with many in the congregation believing his activism painted a target on their organization.³⁹ While Perry's leadership would persist despite challenges from the more worried members, the MCC's affirming existence did not come without reactionary backlash. Metropolitan Community Churches were threatened throughout the 1970s with some churches in California being allegedly firebombed. The "Mother Church" of the organization in Los Angeles caught fire on January 27, 1973⁴⁰ with city officials and Perry himself suspecting foul play. Months later in July, a San Francisco branch of the MCC would also catch fire. Reverend Willie Smith, when

³⁶ Call me Troy, Directed by Scott Bloom, Frameline, 2007, <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/call-me-troy> 29:05.

³⁷ "History of MCC & Open Table MCC," Open Table, Metropolitan Community Church, accessed 9 November, 2023, <https://opentablemcc.ph/about/history/>. & *Call Me Troy*, Scott Bloom, 23:08.

³⁸ Jeanne Cordova, "Christopher street," *The Lesbian Tide*, 1972, 12, https://www-jstor-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/stable/pdf/community.28039246.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Aff390e142b3e27b162a36bf17f19d95b&ab_segments=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

³⁹ Call me Troy, Scott Bloom, 28:00-28:36.

⁴⁰ John Dart, "Growing Homosexual Churches Aid Many," *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1973, 24.

recalling the fire, noted that the attacks were a wake up call.⁴¹ The MCC in the years following 1973 would ramp up its organization with both secular gay rights groups and religious questioning churches in the cities they were active in. In Detroit in 1972, they worked with a local Catholic church to create a coffee shop for gay and lesbian youth to meet away from the adult-centered bars in the city.⁴² They would continue to host space and organize parades in the years following, but their mettle would be tested again as the AIDS crisis began in the 1980s. As AIDS flared in San Francisco, the MCC stood giving requiems to those who were seldom buried by mainline protestant churches. Historian Lynn Gerber recalled their 1989 Christmas memorial service. Reverend of the San Francisco branch of the MCC, Jim Mitulski was centrally involved in the AIDS activism of San Francisco. The church itself was the only place where gay, lesbian, and AIDS positive Christians in San Francisco could have sacraments and be regarded as widows and widowers of their unofficial same-sex spouses.⁴³ After the shock of the AIDS crisis, the MCC in the 2000s continued vying for seats to be filled in their pews and continued to provide space and affirmation for newly out Christians experiencing a crisis in theological framework.⁴⁴

Lutherans Concerned

Concurrently with the MCC, many gay and lesbian Christians resisted the post-Stonewall inquisition within their own denominations and created affinity groups that sought to change church doctrine at the denominational level. One prominent organization based in Illinois was

⁴¹ *Call Me Troy*, Scott Bloom, 52:53.

⁴² James Coleman, et al. "The Gay Liberator." *Gay Liberator; The*, no. 14 (January 1, 1972). <https://jstor.org/stable/community.28037184>.

⁴³ Lynne Gerber, "We Who Must Die Demand a Miricle: Christmas 1989 at the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco," in *Devotions and Desires*, ed. Gillian A. Frank et al. (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 265.

⁴⁴ Michelle Wolkomir, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 107.

the group Lutherans Concerned, which published pamphlets, program materials, and newsletters to the leadership of Lutheran churches across the country. While starting in 1974, their activities would only break into the national stage in the mid-1980s when they hosted the Reconciled in Christ Program. By around 1988, 32 total congregations considered themselves a part of this early affirming model.⁴⁵

Lutherans Concerned dealt with backlash because of the confrontational tactics of their organization. They would send pamphlets to explicitly Lutheran congregations that would call the pastor to action in their ministry to Christian homosexuals within the church. They wrote a Q&A and received mail throughout the late 1980s from pastors either praising their program or condemning their program using different variations on the “homosexuality is sin” argument. One Minnesota preacher in 1987 cited an article of a preacher using ex-gay strategies to maintain his doctrinal purity. Others were slightly more cynical, like an Arizona preacher who asserted that there were no homosexuals in his parish. A select few were far more extreme and even exterminationist in their rhetoric, with one Charles Ali X writing in to the organization that A.I.D.S. was the solution to homosexual perversion because it “destroyed” the homosexual.⁴⁶ A reverend Philip Merten of Wisconsin wrote a sarcastic letter calling LC “Sodomites for Christ” and mocked the suffering of young “sphincterites.”⁴⁷ The last explicit sentiments were outliers to the rest, who advocated to “love the sinner and hate the sin”⁴⁸ and used the weapons of shame

⁴⁵ Reconciled in Christ Congregations, undated, Box 1, Folder 3, Lutherans Concerned/North America records, 1974-1994, Gerber/Hart Library.

⁴⁶ Letter from Charles Ali X, 12 January, 1987, box 7, Folder 8.02. Lutherans Concerned/ North America records, 1974-1994.

⁴⁷ Letter from Reverend Philip Merten, 13 October, 1986, box 7, Folder 8.02, Lutherans Concerned/North America records, 1974-1994, Gerber/Hart Library.

⁴⁸ Grace Lutheran Church Wisconsin Synod letter, undated, box 7, Folder 8.02, Lutherans Concerned/North America records, 1974-1994, Gerber/Hart Library.

and fear of damnation to change the sexualities and genders of homosexual and transgender parishioners.

“The dream of participating fully and openly in the life of the Church remains a dream, and only a dream, for most of us.”⁴⁹

-Lutherans Concerned Call for Repentance 1988

In the years after the one-on-one mailing Lutherans Concerned dealt with throughout the 1980s and after the call to dialogue seemed to fall on deaf ears, the organization changed its strategy to look nationally and reach the whole Lutheran denomination with a unified message. This came to fruition in 1988 with the Call for Repentance. Even though their Reconciled in Christ program had amassed 42 total congregations by that year,⁵⁰ AIDS was tearing through gay churches just like any other group, and Lutherans Concerned saw little change in Lutheranism nationally. The Call for Repentance sought to create a Christian-centered message condemning the larger denomination for both its denial of sacraments to gay and lesbian Christians as well as the denomination’s refusal to condemn the idea that AIDS was divine punishment: which was one of the primary excuses for the Christian Right to oppose medical intervention into the epidemic. The *Call to Dialogue* was Lutherans Concerned’s initial good faith attempt at changing minds at the ground level to hopefully enact national changes on the attitudes against homophobia in the church through a moral lens, but that strategy ended after years of being rejected from the ecumenical and intra-denominational table as they realized their position had become oppositional rather than reformist.

⁴⁹ Call for Repentance, 1988, box 7, folder 8.12, Lutherans Concerned/North America records, 1974-1994, Gerber/Hart Library.

⁵⁰ Rose M. Smith Letter, 1988, box 7, folder 8.12, Lutherans Concerned/North America records, 1974-1994, Gerber/Hart Library.

The Call to Repentance represented a change in the organization's previously toned-down rhetoric. The severity of the AIDS crisis and the unchanging (or even hardening) church doctrine in the face of the epidemic radicalized the group. Later in 1990, Lutherans Concerned would burn paper copies of the decision to suspend two San Francisco Lutheran churches for ordaining homosexual ministers. LC's break with the larger Lutheran community is evidence that dialogue alone was not enough to institute doctrinal change and that the affirming model could only be adopted on a church-by-church basis. LC's harsher relationship with larger Lutheranism would mend over time as more Lutheran Churches began subscribing to the affirming Reconciled in Christ model in the 2000s and would eventually reach critical mass in 2009 as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) ordained gay clergy, prompting 87 churches to leave the large, 10,000 strong organization.⁵¹

Dignity

On the opposite end of the protestant organizations of LC and the MCC, Dignity Chicago was one of the foremost gay Catholic institutions in the United States. Dignity, like the MCC, officiated same-sex unions, hosted space for gay and lesbian Christians to discuss exegesis, and provided information and education on matters of sexual health. In their publication, they hosted articles and dedications to John Boswell and John J. McNeil, cementing themselves as a gay Christian organization with a heavy focus on liturgical analysis in addition to their activism.⁵²

⁵¹ Julia Duin, "Lutherans second church to split over gays," *Washington Times* November 19, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091122101747/https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/nov/19/conservative-lutherans-to-leave-synod/>.

⁵² Blessing of Couples, September/October 1989, Jim Bussen papers, 1972-1995, Gerber/Hart Library.

McNeil is an important fellow of Catholic gay theology because his efforts at reform began within the Catholic church through the proper channels. McNeil was a Jesuit priest and Dignity leader who wrote *The Church and the Homosexual* in 1976 under the review of Catholic officials.⁵³

The Christian Lag

The understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender in the Christian Church lags behind the larger societal understanding of sexuality as provided by the American Psychiatric Association.⁵⁴ The chronology discussed by the likes of Harper to explain the history of sexual repression by the church is flattened by mainstream evangelicals in favor of a streamlined declination narrative based on the Pauline notions of nature. Harper's history of Christian sexuality noted how, no matter what the legal justifications of the codes against homosexuality were, marriage could only happen for the purposes of procreation in the church.⁵⁵

The evidence for this lag is vast in the pamphlets that assume a genealogy of same-sex sexual behavior to the mythological events in the Genesis story of Sodom and Gomorrah. One of the causes of this lag may be due to the anticommunist infrastructure the Christian Right built starting in the 1950s. Christian Right historians have written much on the relationship between individuals like Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, and J. Edgar Hoover and their militant anticommunist crusades.⁵⁶ Similarly to how the House Unamerican Activities Committee was

⁵³ John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976), x.

⁵⁴ "Understanding sexual orientation and homosexuality," *American Psychological Association* 29 October, 2008, <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/orientation>.

⁵⁵ Harper, *Shame to Sin*, 103.

⁵⁶ Lerone A. Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

able to utilize its status as an anticommunist platform to become an antigay platform during the lavender scare, so too did organizations like Billy James Hargis' Christian Crusade.⁵⁷

Carol Mason's *Oklahomo* tracks the direction of the New Right's scapegoating after the fall of the Soviet Union. She claimed that "secular humanism became the boogeyman of conservatism"⁵⁸ and cited individuals like Republican Sally Kern's book *The Stoning of Sally Kern*. Politicians like Kern leveraged their rural background against urban metropolitan homosexuals. This is the common theme throughout the book: the Christian churchgoer is juxtaposed against the atheist, liberal, or homosexual activist.⁵⁹ Mason focused on Christian Crusade parallel to the work of Anita Bryant because she and other scholars of the Christian Right have recognized Hargis' rightward shift as a transition from old right politics to politics of the new right (from security concerned around communism to social concerns around family purity).⁶⁰ Homosexuals became the foot soldiers in the culture war and filled the role that communists had in the conservative zeitgeist for decades. Mason highlighted an interesting juxtaposition between Kern being scorned by Ellen DeGeneres for her perceived backward Middle-American ideals while being praised for such ideals at home in Oklahoma.⁶¹

Part of the anti-homosexual strategy of the Christian right was to use mass-produced tracts to be disseminated at pride parades and to be used in arguments about the morality of homosexuality. The most prolific of these are tracts by Jack Chick under Chick Publications, whose tracts during the 1970s and 1980s used put the origin of homosexuality in promiscuity,⁶²

⁵⁷ Mason, *Oklahomo*, 81.

⁵⁸ Mason, *Oklahomo*, 42.

⁵⁹ Sally Kern, *Stoning of Sally Kern* (Frontline, 2011), 168.

⁶⁰ Mason, *Oklahomo*, 93-94.

⁶¹ Mason, *Oklahomo*, 31.

⁶² Chick, *The Gay Blade* (Chick Publications, 2000), <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=84>.

child abuse,⁶³ and demon possession⁶⁴ in the imagination of a mainstream evangelical audience. Chick only popularized the underlying assumptions about homosexuality held by fundamentalist Christian psychologists and evangelists. As shall be discussed in the next section, the traditionalist ministers, both straight and ex-gay, all held to these assumptions to varying degrees.

Exodus, Love in Action, and Kent Philpott

On a similar timescale to the MCC, traditionalist evangelical thought leaders saw a need to create ministries for what they saw as a homosexual churchgoing demographic that was hemorrhaging to heterodoxy or leaving the faith altogether. For ministers and authors Kent Philpott and Frank Worthen, the answer to this problem was to circle the wagons around the traditionalist interpretation linking the emergent homosexual identity of the 20th century to the behaviors of Romans. Philpott and Worthen were collaborators in this ex-gay movement in different parts of California that represented two sides of the same ex-gay coin. Philpott was a straight minister and psychologist who used his work in the ministry to reach out to troubled gays and lesbians and offer his own method of therapy to Christianize and turn his patients into heterosexuals or celibates. He worked in the San Francisco area and founded House Ministries—a house church bible study group—and Church of the Open Door.⁶⁵

Worthen was himself an ex-gay, believing homosexuality to be a sin. He founded Love in Action Ministries in 1973 with the help of Philpott and was the director of New Hope Ministries until he passed the mantle to a colleague in 2009 and partially retired from both ventures.⁶⁶

⁶³ Chick, *Doom Town* (Chick Publications, 1999), <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=273>.

⁶⁴ Chick, *Birds and the Bees* (Chick Publications, 2004), <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1052>.

⁶⁵ Frank Worthen, *Destiny Bridge* (Forever Books, 2010), 170-171.

⁶⁶ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 293.

Worthen and Philpott offered a more palatable theology to mainstream Christianity in contrast to the MCC, LC and Dignity. Their ministries offered change and belonging to Christians who were same-sex attracted and used the claim of orthodox teaching to save these people from lives that Worthen believed could not end in lifelong partnerships.⁶⁷ It would not be until 1977 that the two viewpoints would begin to clash in the public forum, with state and local newspapers providing opposing platforms for the reverends Troy Perry and Kent Philpott.⁶⁸ Articles like *Difference of Viewpoints* published in the San Francisco Chronicle would only be the beginning of the clash between the two interpretations of Gospel.

Philpott published the testimonials of six ex-gay Christians with an address to Christian psychologists on the methodology of conversion therapy in his *The Third Sex* (1975). In addition to his exploits in the therapy space, he also worked tirelessly to oppose the emergent Side A and even the Side B theological movement in the 1970s in his *The Gay Theology* (1977). Philpott saw both the Side A perspective (gay identity as god given and something to be proud of) and Side B perspectives (gay identity as god given and a cross to bear) as detestable because of a lack of evidence on homosexuality's innate existence. He based his evidence on the prevailing "If God gave anybody homosexuality as a gift, or as a cross to bear, there would be no commandments against homosexuality."⁶⁹ Philpott wrote this line three years before Boswell published his repudiation of the uniform understanding of Paul's use of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*.⁷⁰ Even without the debate over the translation of the Greek into the English

⁶⁷ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 292.

⁶⁸ James Kasper, *Gayness and the Gospel A Difference of Viewpoints* (San Francisco Chronicle, 1977), <https://www.newspapers.com/image/1243898844/?match=1&terms=%22Frank%20Worthen%22>

⁶⁹ Kent Philpott, *The Gay Theology* (Logos International, 1977), 126.

⁷⁰ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 480.

understanding of homosexuality, Philpott stood against the idea of hermeneutics entirely, stating “We must be concerned about a right relationship with God more than manipulating passages that challenge our thinking and living.”⁷¹ To Philpott and Worthen, homosexuality was a phase and their ministries could help gay men find wives and lesbian women find husbands; returning a forlorn group to a natural, albeit painful, state. For many gay men and lesbian women, the hardship of self-rejection was seen as necessary to achieve an ideal heterosexual life and preferable to the pain of believing they were living in sin.⁷²

The Garrett Affair

The ex-gay/affirming debate created a crisis for traditionalist interpretations of sexuality and marriage. The national debate on gay theology forced leaders of theology to either allow gay theology to be professed as a subsection of the Christian tradition, or be condemned as heterodoxy. As LGBT+ visibility increased after Stonewall, many churches, seminaries, and political causes would choose the latter. As some same-sex couples would stake their livelihoods in their places of faith, both Protestant and Catholic orthodoxy were tested, and this either resulted in hushed dialogue—typically the case with Catholic research as the McNeill study was under years of review⁷³—or explosive censure. This censure culminated in what was known as The Garrett Affair when the Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary would become a twofold battleground when two of its students—Terry Colbert and James Mason—announced their partnership as well as their intention to enroll in the seminary as graduate students in a letter to the seminary on April 12, 1978.⁷⁴ The decision was intentional, as both acknowledged the risk to

⁷¹ Philpott, *Gay Theology*, 128.

⁷² Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 121.

⁷³ McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*.

⁷⁴ Northern New Jersey Annual Conference, June 4-7 1978, xxxx-51, box 1, series 1, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary Matter papers, 1978 – 1980, Gerber/Hart + Library.

their careers as both had received diaconal orders and would be ordained in 1979 and 1980. They made their announcement in both love and, importantly, faith, as the two wanted to minister in the Methodist church and believed their existence as gay men could lend understanding within the Methodist tradition. President of the seminary, Dr. Jameson Jones, refused their entry into the graduate program and quashed their hopes of deaconship in May.⁷⁵ The fallout of this decision was widespread, affecting both the seminary and the secular Northwest University it was technically part of. The Garrett Affair garnered much attention in the press and with Methodist churches nationwide. The Northern New Jersey Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in 1978 included a paragraph in their bulletin condemning the action of the seminary as both an overstep of the seminary into church affairs as well as a denial of Colbert and Mason's human rights guaranteed by the 1976 Book of Discipline.⁷⁶ At Northwestern University, the seminary was condemned first by faculty in June of 1978 by an array of 48 professors partly organized by Chairman of the Department of Philosophy Samuel Todes. In a letter to the *Evanston Review*, Todes accused the seminary of hypocrisy in their admittance of Catholic Nuns, who could not be ordained, because the cause for the seminary's dismissal of Colbert and Mason was because of their inordinability.⁷⁷

The Garrett Affair is evidence of homosexuality being less of a disagreement in the Christian tradition and more, rather, a thorn in the side of fundamentalist evangelicals trying to maintain ideological purity. Todes' and the NJ Conference's accusation of seminary hypocrisy

⁷⁵ Methodists face Dispute on Homosexuality, 1979, box 1, series 2. Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary Matter papers, 1978 – 1980, Gerber/Hart LGBTQ+ Library & Archives.

⁷⁶ Northern New Jersey Annual Conference, June 4-7 1978, xxxx-51, box 1, series 1, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary Matter papers, 1978 – 1980, Gerber/Hart LGBTQ+ Library & Archives.

⁷⁷ Samuel Todes Evanston Review Article, 9 June, 1978, xxxx-51, box 1, series 1, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary Papers, 1978 – 1980, Gerber/Hart Library.

show that the rejection of Colbert and Mason was a peculiar decision by the institution to break its policy of ecumenist admissions and is yet another example of a mainstream Christian group that could not see homosexuals as Christians. Dr. Jones treated the homosexual students as an out group to his institution and his message was clear: homosexual Christians should not be involved in the theological work of the seminary.

The New Ecumenism

The fact that Catholics were allowed at Garrett Seminary but not homosexuals lends credibility to Mark Noll's book *Is the Reformation Over?: An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism*, where Noll claimed that the *Catechism* of the Catholic Church opened the door for common understanding on the opposition to homosexuality.⁷⁸ Other authors have also come to a consensus that the 1960s and 1970s were a time of curious ecumenism between American protestants and Catholics despite recent divisions in political belief. For instance, Protestants from 1966-1972 supported abortion access nationally, which Sabrina Danielson believes was due to the opposition to Catholic political power.⁷⁹ The emergence of secular humanism as a defense of civil rights may have radicalized protestants out of the ability to play the political party game against whatever the Catholics supported. Instead, the state removed the theological wedge between the two groups by abandoning laws of morality that infringed on civil rights and allowed Protestants and Catholics to consider themselves a part of a similar political bloc. With the emergence of the Second Vatican Council moving the

⁷⁸ Mark Noll & Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation over? : An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Baker Academic 2005), 125.

⁷⁹ Sabrina Danielson, "Consensus and Conflict: Abortion, Mainline Protestants, and Religious Restructuring Since 1960," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 15 no. 7 (2019): 4, <https://www.religjournal.com/pdf/ijrr15007.pdf>.

Catholic Church toward political liberalism,⁸⁰ thus distancing conservative individual Catholics from the Vatican, conservative and moderate Catholics were spiritually homeless in terms of representation.

Political ecumenism went both ways, as the MCC collaborated with other individual churches who saw collaboration with their own flock to be impossible in the political climate surrounding LGBT+ ministry. In the early days of Perry's ministry, he even worked with gay-affirming rabbis within the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to admit the first "Metropolitan Community Temple" into larger Reform Judaism.⁸¹

Mark Noll cited Alexis de Tocqueville's 19th century study of *Democracy in America* when discussing the anti-Catholic sentiments of American protestants in the mid-1800s. The context of the protestant/Catholic divide in the United States was far more about the status of immigration, nativism, and the isolationist view of French Canadians and the perceived illiberalism of Europeans.⁸² Knoll posited, that if liberalism in the United States secularized and Catholicism democratized after the Second Vatican Council, then American evangelicals and Catholics would find themselves moving closer together in the 20th and 21st centuries.⁸³ In my interview with Reverend Jyrekis Collins, the reverend seemed to confirm the existence of political ecumenism and that the denominational differences across churches has become largely aesthetic.

⁸⁰ Noll, *Reformation Over*, 221.

⁸¹ Dart, "Growing Homosexual Churches Aid Many," <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/hnplatimes/newspapers/growing-homosexual-churches-aid-many/docview/157281278/sem-2?accountid=14657>.

⁸² Noll, *Reformation Over*, 218-222.

⁸³ Noll, *Reformation Over*, 217.

Evershifting Antigay Strategy

The central text to the strategy of the Christian Right on sexuality is Didi Herman's *The Antigay Agenda* (1998). Herman's monograph included a rhetorical analysis of magazine *Christianity Today*⁸⁴ and of the praxis of the Christian Right against gay men and lesbian women, namely with Colorado's Amendment 2.⁸⁵ *Christianity Today* was one of the most important voices of Christian Sexuality in the late 20th century. Its role as a magazine was twofold: to provide a platform for thought leaders in the Christian right (i.e. Billy Graham, J. Edgar Hoover⁸⁶) and to establish a common conservative Christian discourse in response to the liberal discourses forming out of publications like *Christian Century*.⁸⁷ Herman's evidence shows a definite shift in rhetoric across several eras of the magazine's lifespan. Herman's *Antigay Agenda* and Carol Mason's *Oklahomo* (2015) both recognize antigay and antiqueer politics as having a common ancestor with anticommunist politics. Even going back to 1971, Mason cited the American Christian College's reorientation of anticommunist rhetoric to explicit opposition to the sexual revolution as the larger threat.⁸⁸

Evangelical Protestantism is far more decentralized than Catholic doctrine, and because of this, the dissemination of doctrine and dogma is different. The only structure of protestant churches that resembles the structure of the Roman Catholic Church is that of the convention and the conference organized on state and national levels. Judging by the surge of televangelism, evangelicals and their pastors relied on faith leaders through channels of *Christianity Today*,

⁸⁴ Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 25-60.

⁸⁵ Herman, *Antigay Agenda*, 139.

⁸⁶ Lerone A. Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

⁸⁷ Herman, *Antigay Agenda*, 25.

⁸⁸ Mason, *Oklahomo*, 93.

radio, television, and tracts. Tracts and pamphlets were the primary way of getting theological information from the top to pastors and evangelists, no matter how small. The most prolific of this were Chick Tracts sponsored by Jack Chick.

Lutherans Concerned received many negative responses through the mail, and the common theme for six of the twenty-seven total negative responses to the organization from 1986-1989 was the usage of tracts and articles from third party sources rather than a letter from the pastor of the church itself.⁸⁹

Ex-gay writings (and some early gay ones) were obsessed with phenomenological accounts to improve their own credibility. Troy Perry's autobiography makes numerous references to the voice of God as the "still, small voice"⁹⁰ and includes a moment of clarified divinity after he attempted suicide.⁹¹

Molly Worthen's book *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* looks at the strategies and authority figures within the Christian Right and how the decentralized nature of American evangelicalism led to differing unity based on political affiliation. Authors like Worthen recognize that there may be a deeper kind of compromise going on in theological changes within the church. The shifts in rhetoric, enemies, even down to the way pastors dress all may be components of a kind of theological horse trading going on at the intellectual level of American churches. In the face of fashion changes, churches will change the dress code. Facing social change, churches will shift rhetoric and offer minor concessions in the pulpit in order to retain orthodox doctrinal purity, like opposition to same-sex unions and

⁸⁹ Letter from Carol & Denny & Jesus People USA, undated, Box 7 File 8.02, Lutherans Concerned/North America records, 1974-1994, Gerber/Hart Library.

⁹⁰ Troy Perry, *The Lord is My Shepherd and he Knows I'm Gay* (Nash Publishing, 1972), 6.

⁹¹ Perry, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, 121.

women's ordination. One of these was the adoption of complementarian theology, which Worthen took to be a response to the feminist and gay theologies of the late 20th century.⁹² Complementarian theology stressed the equal but separate role of women and men in relationships.

Decades of homosexual discourse in the church lead theology into two strains. The first-evangelical strain continued its rejection of homosexuality as a valid expression of love. The second strain, known as affirming, accepted homosexual Christians and homosexuals in society broadly for their sexual orientation without requiring change on the part of the individual. In other words, the difference between the two strands is a question. Affirming doctrines, either in Side A or in Queer theology ask if the Bible prohibits homosexuality while the non-affirming strand of theology asks how the Bible prohibits homosexuality. Stanley J. Grenz was on the fundamentalist and evangelical side of things in the 1990s when he wrote *Welcoming but not Affirming* as a response to homosexuality in Christianity. Grenz jettisoned many of the clobber verses that fundamentalists in the pulpit rely on for their rhetoric. Grenz still relied on the arguments about natural law by the Pauline standards of sexual morality, but rejected the notion that the Roman philosophical influences on Paul disqualified him from being divinely inspired. (101) His arguments stemmed mainly from a large teleological narrative on what the natural design for sexuality was as understood by the ancient Israelites' code and affirmed through the work of the disciples in their writings on Christian marriage during and after the Common Era. From these precepts, he concludes that homosexual sexuality is not necessarily sinful—although

⁹² Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (OUP USA, 2014), 164.

he defines sin as any aspect of human life that falls short of divine design⁹³--but instead a deficient act which only imitates the context of heterosexual sex in child rearing.⁹⁴ He does not address whether this makes sex between infertile couples a deficient act, however. In this respect, being a homosexual is not sin in Grenz's context of Christian sexual ethics, but homosexual activity is worthy of condemnation because of its unnatural nature.

The Death Knell of Ex-Gay Organizations

One perspective that would not survive the 21st century was the ex-gay movement, started by the likes of Worthen in Love-in-Action and Exodus international. Coming out of the 1990s, ex-gay organizations had a lot of momentum with the Christian Right. Michelle Wolkomir's ethnographic study of ex-gay and pro-gay Christian organizations published in 2006 shows that both the outlooks of Philpott/Worthen vs Perry were places of community for homosexual Christian men who felt the tension between their sexual and religious identities. According to Wolkomir's analysis, the self-realization of homosexual attraction was isolating to subjects in both camps of the ex/pro-gay ministries, but that ex-gay ministries preyed on the fear of rejection in ex-gay men, and so abandonment was the primary driving motivator for those joining Expel or other ex-gay organizations.⁹⁵

California was the state where ex-gay ministries had the most trouble. The complications of conversion/reparative therapy would culminate in an outright ban in 2012 by Governor Jerry Brown.⁹⁶ The death of *Exodus* in 2012 weakened the heterosexist vision for Christianity greatly.

⁹³ Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 120.

⁹⁴ Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 115.

⁹⁵ Wolkomir, *Be Not Deceived*, 60.

⁹⁶ "'Ex-Gay' Men Fight Back Against View that Homosexuality Can't be Changed," *New York Times*, 2012, <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/globalnews/blogs->

President of the organization Alan Chambers did not end the organization silently; he went on a media tour in 2013 to publicly apologize for his actions as the leader of the organization and recanted the position of *Exodus*: that human sexuality could or should be changed. Chambers' statements are even more important as he recanted his claims to biblicism in a CNN interview and acknowledged his continued same-sex attractions despite his previous assertions of losing them.⁹⁷ The downfall was the death knell for the previously exalted antidote of homosexuality, and what was seen as a victory for gay rights activists trying to outlaw conversion therapy and legalize same-sex marriage was seen by magazines like *CT* as a temporary fracturing of the ex-gay cause, where they cite Wheaton College provost Stanton Jones as saying "My research supports the idea that some people do experience clinically meaningful change."⁹⁸ Chambers' backstab would be answered with the formation of *Restored Hope Network (RHN)*: a national discipleship program consisted of *Exodus* remnants that abandoned the claim of reparative therapy and instead advocated sexual change through ministry and personal restraint. The position of RHN was an admission that antigay politics had to shift again and sexual morality had to reform anew in a cry of asceticism rather than restoration through opposite-sex marriage.

The Celibate Christians

Grenz and many other evangelicals at the tail end of the gay liberation movement took a much less confrontational approach to the homosexual opposition. Grenz represents a new outset of the evangelical movement that moved beyond the question of whether homosexual identity

podcasts-websites/ex-gay-men-fight-back-against-view-that/docview/2215577796/sem-2?accountid=14657.

⁹⁷ Ed Payne, "Group apologizes to gay community, shuts down 'cure' ministry," *CNN* 8 July 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/us/exodus-international-shutdown>.

⁹⁸ Weston Gentry, "Exodus from Exodus," *Christianity Today* 56, no. 11 (December 1, 2012): 17–18, <https://research-ebSCO-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=711b4eb6-cdd1-3e9f-8e0a-dcf689a08452>.

was sinful and rather focused on whether homosexual behavior was sinful.⁹⁹ The distinction, while not as visible to homosexual activists who believed what Grenz called behavior was a matter of identity, is important in the discussion of gay and anti-gay theology as it opens up the possibility for nonsexual gay identities to be considered in the Christian discourse. Grenz provided a middle ground for evangelicals in which the heterosexism of previous generations was seen as something to repent from (i.e. sinful)¹⁰⁰ while homosexual partnerships were still in a moral gray zone. Grenz's framework of Christian sexual ethics would be adopted by a subset of evangelicals who found the church to be lacking in its hospitality for homosexuals but still felt uncomfortable with the affirming movement within the church. Grenz represents a move away from the hostile outlook of Kent Philpott and the reactionary churches who responded to *Lutherans Concerned* in the 1980s with articles on AIDS—rejecting any idea of ministry to the homosexual.

Grenz was not fringe in his ideas, and even in the volatile political atmosphere around marriage equality in the 2010s, other gay Christians clung to his type of message when ex-gay programs were under fire for the inefficacy. Same-sex attracted Christians in the 2010s, especially after *Exodus* and *Love In Action* shuttered their doors, lost a subset of community. In the 2010s, there was a minority of homosexual Christians who held to the traditional ascetic view of Christian sexual morality espoused by Grenz and identified by Boswell, but, like Grenz, wholly rejected heterosexist dogma. These types of gay Christians used the label of Side B to differentiate themselves from the doctrine of what was called Side A or affirming Christianity. These were people who did not want to be affirmed in their sexuality, still believing the Christian

⁹⁹ Grenz, *Welcoming But not affirming*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 154.

sexual ethic only allowed for coitus between men and women in marriage, but who also understood that sexuality was immutable. The cognitive dissonance from these two beliefs results in either a reformation, reinterpretation, or outright deconstruction of Paul's asceticism (typically the strategy taken by Side A Christians) or the solemn recognition of no other recourse other than celibacy. New Testament Scholar Wesley Hill took his oath of celibacy due to his same sex attraction and wrote about his experience in 2013.¹⁰¹ After the litigation of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, authors like David Bennett tried to replicate the work of ex-gays like Frank Worthen without using the term ex-gay and even condemning the work of *Exodus* and conversion therapy writ-large.¹⁰²

The Queer Christians

Susannah Cornwall's *Controversies in Queer Theology* is a good text to start with when looking at the theological ripple effects of the sexual revolution. Cornwall asserted that queer theology was first born from a Foucauldian poststructuralist understanding of sexuality.¹⁰³ Since queer theologians take the position of sexuality as a constantly redefined mosaic of discourses, the question of origin is secondary or even nonexistent to authors like Cornwall, Elizabeth Stuart, and Marcella Althaus-Reid.

Althaus-Reid warrants a closer inspection because of her chapter on demonology as a component in queer theology. She spoke of a path of redemption by listening to voices who were previously cast out or conquered by an imperial narrative.¹⁰⁴ She resisted the efforts of retention,

¹⁰¹ Wesley Hill, "Once More: On the Label 'Gay Christian,'" *First Things*, February 1, 2013, <https://firstthings.com/once-more-on-the-label-gay-christian/>.

¹⁰² David Bennett, *War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus* (Zondervan, 2018) 120.

¹⁰³ Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (SCM Press, 2011), 19.

¹⁰⁴ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (Routledge, 2003), 135.

however, in which churches would pave over past narratives of conquest in order to retain members of a previously conquered people as a part of a parish. Reid was immersed in the literature of the gains of liberation theology in Latin America, so she knew both the advantages and shortcomings of the strategies of liberatory theologians and working-class parish priests. In this framework, Reid accepts the demon designation that conservatives in *The Antigay Agenda* gave to queer people as a sign of rebellion against heterosexist imperial orthodoxy. In queer existence, humans could be redeemed by separating sex from reproduction, which she saw as analogous to Christ's kenosis by appearing on the earth as human.¹⁰⁵ In way, queer theologians leverage social constructionist ideas of sexuality against the entire structures of marriage and relationships set up by the church and show how Christology, while not gay, was certainly a study of queer sexuality completely subverting both sexual mores of the western nuclear family and domesticity as well as the sexual expectations of the time of the Christ.

The Reformist Christians

Large-scale denominational reform became a bygone strategy after affirming reformists failed to enact any large scale doctrinal change without fracturing churches. As the label of evangelicalism claimed more Christians under its umbrella and it consolidated under right-wing ecumenism, affirming and queer Christians changed their strategy in the era of marriage equality. Organizations like The Reformation Project and the Q Christian Fellowship would form in the firestorm of the marriage equality debate and would focus on providing online resources and finding common ground rather than confronting heterosexist doctrine directly.¹⁰⁶ Confrontation

¹⁰⁵ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 138.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, Tony. "Evangelical and Gay." *The Christian Century* 131, no. 15 (December 31, 2014): 30–33. <https://research-ebSCO-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=b9d380f2-e5d0-330e-aa29-514aca53756e>.

would be headed by a fringe subset of queer theologians who saw the potential of specifically queer participation in Christianity to be a unique challenge to the church and offered new understandings about the Atonement and other aspects of Christology. Reforming Christians typically reject this approach, partly because of how mainstream evangelical thought continued its opposition to gay rights in and outside of the church, but also because queer theology offered a language many considered sexually vulgar.¹⁰⁷

Althaus-Reid's theology of redemption and the larger tradition of queer theology is in contrast to much of the Side A integrationist bent of the LGBT+ Christian movement. Namely, people like Justin Lee and Matthew Vines took up the mantle in the 2000s as gay, mostly white, evangelicals who struggled in their congregations and native denominations to achieve respectability.¹⁰⁸ What sets Lee and Vines out from queer theologians is their desire to reform their respective denominations from within rather than as outsiders—a strategy which Althaus-Reid would have avoided and seen as a retention measure rather than a redemption measure. Lee leverages his evangelical convictions against other nonnormative sexual practices in order to present himself as a middle of the road compromise for centrist Christians still on the fence: “Mr. Lee plans to remain sexually abstinent until he is in a long-term, religiously blessed relationship, which would make him a curiosity in straight and gay circles alike.”¹⁰⁹ While Lee took this stance to differentiate himself from the already existing world of the MCC and other queer theologians, his apologetic stance gave him audiences with establishment-level evangelicals who

¹⁰⁷ Matthew Vines, “Queer Theology” *The Reformation Project*, November 17, 2023, <https://reformationproject.org/affirming-theology-vs-queer-theology/#15>.

¹⁰⁸ Neela Banerjee, “Gay and Evangelical, Seeking Paths of Acceptance” *New York Times*, 12 December 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/12/us/gay-and-evangelical-seeking-paths-of-acceptance.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Banerjee, “Gay and Evangelical,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/12/us/gay-and-evangelical-seeking-paths-of-acceptance.html>.

were willing to listen. Lee's most recent conference with the organization *Embracing the Journey* in 2023 was the most recent example of LGBT+ Christian groups working in dialogue with conservative evangelicals to find compromises and inroads among neutrals in the struggle for acceptance. *Embracing the Journey* and Lee's pragmatic vision for repairing American evangelicalism. On the other hand, Matthew Vines was directly confrontational with queer theology in a recent Reconcile and Reform Conference in 2023 where he poked at Althaus Reid's description of the Trinity as an orgy¹¹⁰ and defended the struggle for gay normativity in the church.¹¹¹ Althaus Reid would warn against the practice of retention, in which Christian Churches' reforms would be miniscule and surface-level in order to keep queer bodies in the pews rather than entertain the new theological possibilities offered by queer existence in the pulpit.¹¹²

Althaus-Reid's theology of redemption and the larger tradition of queer theology is in contrast to much of the Side A integrationist bent of the LGBT+ Christian movement, so much so that people like Vines spend time condemning its work. Vines' work through the project shows that he was not only pushing the boundary of same-sex acceptance in the church, but also enforcing the future stability of that boundary without entertaining any further testing of Christian sexual and eschatological claims. Justin Lee was coming out of a gay and lesbian Christian movement that had been scorned by religious heterosexism for decades with no sign of reconciliation in the years after his NY Times interview. Cornwall's chapter on being queer in the church recognized the decades long tension and how it was driving queer Christians to either

¹¹⁰ Reid, *The Queer God*.

¹¹¹ Matthew Vines, "Matthew Vines: Expressive Individualism, Queer Theology, and Our Identity in Christ," The Reformation project, Nashville, TN, October 27, 2023, 36:52-38:43, <https://youtu.be/GES1AzpCI4w?si=c8A18AEHophZyWZu>.

¹¹² Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (Routledge, 2003), 135.

direction on a scale of apostasy and complete removal from the church or what she calls “living with the tension”¹¹³ and continuing the Christian way of life among peers who opposed their homosexuality. Lee seems to be one of many advocates who chose the latter option and entered a new apologetics for their reformist outlook.

Vines and Lee were not the first to take this type of position, as has been discussed before, the MCC, Lutherans Concerned, and Dignity were all guilty of the same kind of criticism for their gay liberation roots. In a 1989 issue of Dignity, the newsletter cited a quote that equated a lack of commitment to perpetual adolescence.¹¹⁴ Lutherans Concerned, in a response to a skeptical theologian, agreed with the criticism levied against promiscuity.¹¹⁵ In both cases, gay and lesbian church organizations worked to uphold a new sexual standard under their interpretations of biblical texts and used their unmoving position to advocate equal standards and restrictions for sexual morality. The orthodox members of the evangelical movement make an argument with a similar standards: there is a sexual standard that every person, straight or same-sex attracted must hold to and that is to not have same-sex genital contact. To the orthodox churchgoer, that standard is applied equally to every member of the creed just as the admonishments to other sexual deviancies is applied to every member of the creed. For the reformers, there has been pressure to stand on a more exact form of sexual morality, to draw the line, so to speak. This may be a partial explanation for why the reformist wing of affirming church doctrine has not become mainstream. To put it simply, LGBT+ Christianity became too Christian for queer spaces and too queer for Christian spaces. The reformers in Lee and Vines

¹¹³ Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, 199.

¹¹⁴ Cenacle Protest, March/April 1989, Jim Bussen papers, 1972-1995, Gerber/Hart Library.

¹¹⁵ Lutherans Concerned, “Response to: Dialogue with Gay and Lesbian Lutherans” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, December 1986, 359, <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/index>.

were doing their best to shift LGBT+ Christians into dialogue with mainstream evangelical Christianity while the queer theologians in Althaus-Reid saw that effort as folly at best (due to the past failures of groups like Lutherans Concerned to achieve any long-standing denominational reform) or collaborationist at worst (sailing the gay liberationist and queer roots of the emergent gay church down the river in favor of respectability).

In order to obtain a closer look at how Side A places itself in opposition to standing heterosexist dogma, I interviewed with *Pride in the Pews* operative Reverend Jyrekis Collins. *Pride in the Pews* is a Chicago-based Black-centered organization that reaches out to Black churches in an effort to break down toxic theology and promote discussions of sexual orientation in churches that typically keep these topics on the down-low. One fascinating element of *Pride in the Pews* is the way the organization recognizes the varied theological understandings of churches in the field through what they call the Institutional Church Continuum (ICC).¹¹⁶ The ICC ranks churches on a single-axis scale that starts at “antagonizing” and ends at “advocating.” Antagonizing churches are organizations which preached active heterosexist messaging in the pulpit. Advocate churches are religious groups that actively preach for LGBT+ integration and care within their own churches, especially in the areas of HIV and AIDS fellowship.¹¹⁷ Reverend Collins stressed the importance of locality in church struggle and spoke at length at how moving a church from left to right looks different in an urban environment vs a rural environment.

The process of this advocacy starts with discord within a local church. Typically a Black church leader would reach out to *Pride in the Pews* about their congregation’s engagement with In rural churches, which are typically more conservative in their sexual theology than urban

¹¹⁶ Reverend Jyrekis Collins, interview by Josiah Kinsky, video conference call.

¹¹⁷ “Faith and HIV Advocacy Fellowship,” *Pride in the Pews* retrieved from <https://www.prideinthepews.com/fhf> on 5/29/25.

churches, Pride in the Pews uses a separate advocacy sub-group called the Rural Black Church Equality Fellowship (RBCEF) for rural-targeted outreach. The strategy of the RBCEF differed greatly from the BCEF as rural churches start with taboos and isolation that make it hard for common dialogue to be used at the outset of RBCEF's intervention.

It is important to note that he recognized that the antagonizing-advocate divide was not a divide of traditional church vs emerging church as he stated, “[A church] can have the lights camera and action, there can be churches where you can wear ripped jeans and all of the things and drink coffee in the sanctuary and those churches can be just as conservative as churches that are wearing suits and singing hymns.”¹¹⁸ This shows that the issue of sexuality in American Christianity is not an issue of generations, aesthetics, denominations, or region, but instead an issue of theology.

Everything between Side X and Side A sees itself as the center of the discussion between two polarities, despite all having disagreements with one another. Even a recent article in the still-conservative *Christianity Today* on Fuller seminary used both-sides rhetoric to describe a seminary taking the Side Y position: “We will be criticized by both sides, but we want to complicate the polarization and call people to the richness of the gospel.”¹¹⁹ And continued to disallow same-sex unions in the seminary.

Conclusion

The history of sexuality and Christianity started in the social constructionist understanding of church archives and has achieved increased attention through the struggle of

¹¹⁸ Interview with Reverend Collins, 14:41.

¹¹⁹ Daniel Silliman, “Fuller Seminary Reaffirms Historic LGBTQ Stance,” *Christianity Today* 23 May, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/05/fuller-seminary-reaffirm-lgbtq-sexuality-marriage-stance/> on 5/25/25.

the gay liberation movement and the counter-struggle of the Christian Right. While the gay Christian movement modeled itself and pulled members from the gay liberation movement, it was not able to achieve the same goals as the secular gay liberation movement in the court of public opinion. This happened for multiple reasons: one, the affirming stance is split between reformers and queer theologians whose spirituality intentionally subverts Christian orthodoxy. Reformers are marginally more successful in the real-world steps of the affirming doctrine, as many have models for improvement and strategies for inserting themselves into the tension of the heterosexist church. Queer is much more difficult to accommodate in the church than gay or transgender, and for the LGBT+ churchgoer, the gay church may seem more like a half measure between the heterosexist orthodox church and the allure of American individualist spirituality. The deciding factor seems to be the role the church plays in a community and the importance that community places in its rites. For the MCC's time, the rites of death and of community were absolutely necessary because of the mortality of AIDS. The rite of marriage was necessary in the pre-Obergefell world of relationships. Throughout the 1970s and into the court fights of the 2010s, however, the Christian anti-gay right made their quarrel with secular humanism, and so the defense of antidiscrimination (e.g. Amendment 2 in Colorado, *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*) and civil rights (*Lawrence v. Texas*, *Obergefell v. Hodges*) became a defense of the secular state, further entrenching the evangelical argument against public homosexuality. All of these issues of course, stem from the Christian Right's opposition to the establishment clause, but as long as parties ignore such a clause, whatever group has a monopoly on theological truths and whatever party follows them will be king, at least half the time. This is why a history of Christian sexual moral ethics is so important to the American story of gay liberation and is an essential chapter in the chronicled decline of American religiosity. The

Garrett Affair showed how big of a threat Terry Colbert and James Mason were to the ideological fabric of the conservative opposition to homosexuality. The Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary needed to quash heterodox thinking (in an ecumenical context) to the point where they were willing to receive backlash from the secular university and the bureaucratic manuals of discipline of the Methodist church. The Christian Right from 1968 until 2015 dealt with a changing world where the institutions that upheld anti-sodomy statutes secularized and changed as society began to accept LGBT+ people as equal citizens. As ex-gay theology started to falter in the 2010s and churches continued to fracture in the face of societal change, churches would form new positions on the place of LGBT+ congregants and would have to reevaluate how close to the pulpit same-sex attracted Christians could sit and whether that Christian was a queer, a sodomite, or a friend.

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