

Dry Trees Living: Lessons from Queer Christians

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Introduction

Christians generally agree that it is our mandate to proclaim the gospel of good news to everyone on the earth, because it is essential for the world to know this gospel in order for it to be saved from destruction, and for the Kingdom of God to eventually come. And though every Christian from fundamentalist to mainline churches believes that the gospel must be proclaimed, the interpretation of the gospel is usually misrepresented due to our myopic attitudes of clinging to conservative views that have governed our spiritual journeys. Change is hard, and it also threatens the belief system upon which we depend for our wellbeing.

No individuals are entirely responsible for the way they think or believe about everything. We are all raised in families, and our parents, schools, churches and friends all have in some ways influenced us as to how we see the world. When that world around us is threatened by suggestions that our worldview may be wrong, there are only two options to consider. One is the risk of reconsidering what we had initially believed to be absolute and attempt to rediscover a richer, deeper truth. The other is to hunker down and construct and promote apologetics with which we oppose the new suggestions. The first option will require us to experience a measure of growing pains, but will ultimately afford us with a blossoming future. The latter option will afford us the comfort of clinging to a safely understood

mindset, saving us from growing pains, but will hinder us from experiencing growth as well.

The purpose of this paper is to view the Bible through the eyes of queer people in order to understand more fully what God has planned for all of God's creatures in this beautiful world. As the word, queer, has evolved significantly over the last few decades, it is essential that the word is clearly understood. A recent dictionary definition is as follows:

The word **queer** was first used to mean 'homosexual' in the late 19th century; when used by heterosexual people, it was originally an aggressively derogatory term. By the late 1980s, however, some gay people began to deliberately use the word **queer** in place of **gay** or **homosexual**, in an attempt, by using the word positively, to deprive it of its negative power. **Queer** also came to have broader connotations, relating not only to homosexuality but to any sexual orientation or gender identity not corresponding to heterosexual norms. The neutral use of **queer** is now well established and widely used, especially as an adjective or modifier, and exists alongside the derogatory usage.¹⁾

The following definition better describes the intention of the usage of the word in this paper:

The most common use of queer is as an all-encompassing term inclusive of anyone who lives outside of heterosexual and gender-conforming norms. So queer is often used to mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and so on. But queer also has a more radical meaning,

1) 辞書 バージョン 2.3.0(294) Copyright 2005-2022, Apple Inc.

especially in academic literature, as a term that challenges the notion that sexual and gender experiences can be neatly categorized and understood in the fixed, static, and scientifically driven manner we have typically attempted to use in describing these aspects of human experience.²⁾

Viewing the word “queer” as a widely defined concept that challenges norms, first, I will examine a few Bible passages that I believe are significant for opening doors into the queer world which many feel reluctant to enter. Second, I will share two stories of queer people encountered in my ministry as a pastoral care provider who challenge churches to rethink traditional biblical interpretation of marriage and sexual or gender identity. Third, I will address how the church must begin opening doors to unconditionally accept and learn from queer people, acknowledging that they have always been in our congregations so that “coming out” for those who wish to do so will be a blessing rather than a curse, and will demonstrate how queer people can have an evangelical purpose in the church as witnesses to those who need an understanding of the universality of God’s love.

Dry Trees Bearing Fruit

Long before Jesus walked the earth, the prophet, Isaiah, saw that God wants faithful people of all kinds to worship God. In Isaiah 56, the prophet writes:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,

“The Lord will surely separate me from his people,”

2) Cody J. Sanders. *A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 9.

and do not let the eunuch say,

“I am just a dry tree.”

For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,

who choose the things that please me

and hold fast my covenant,

I will give, in my house and within my walls,

a monument and a name

better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name

that shall not be cut off.³⁾

Here we see what God desires of people. A “foreigner joined to the Lord” is not just a foreigner or non-Jew. The person is a “child of Abraham” who becomes so by bearing “fruit worthy of repentance” as John the Baptist points out.⁴⁾ And eunuchs, who were often considered less than whole due to their physical condition, according to Isaiah’s words will be given “a monument and a name better than sons and daughters” that will be everlasting, and will not be cut off.⁵⁾

We have been indoctrinated to conclude that there are two categories of humans in the world—male and female.⁶⁾ In Genesis, we read that humans were commanded to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”⁷⁾ A person who has been castrated is not considered to be either a man or a woman,

3) Isaiah 56:3-5. NRSV.

4) Matthew 3:9.

5) Isaiah 56:4-5. NRSV.

6) Genesis 1:27.

7) Genesis 1:28. NRSV.

and for this reason, eunuchs are not able to enter the temple.⁸⁾ Eunuchs often had no families as they were taken and castrated in order to serve the government. They were undoubtedly taken from other nations, as according to John Taylor and Norman Snaith, there is no evidence that Israel castrated its own people.⁹⁾¹⁰⁾ They had no family, so there could be no descendants making it impossible for them to obey the command to “be fruitful and fill the earth.” Thus, humanly speaking, one could say that they are not *complete* or *perfect* Israelites, and therefore, cannot be included in the assembly of the Lord.

What Isaiah does in Chapter 56 effectively reverses the way people are viewed through God’s eyes. In the Torah, eunuchs have no future. They serve their masters during their duration on earth, and die without heirs. People who are allowed into the assembly of the Lord, are people in heterosexual unions who can produce children. Like eunuchs, women who were considered to be “barren” shared the humiliating stigma of being like “dry trees.” There was no concept of male infertility in ancient Israel since it was believed that men provided all that was necessary for reproduction through semen, and the woman provided the environment for that seed to grow and develop.¹¹⁾ Therefore, when semen (זֶרַע [seed])¹²⁾ is injected into

8) Deuteronomy 23:1.

9) Elaine Ambrose. *Tears in God’s Wineskin: A Theology of Hospitality, Part 2: Eunuchs* (Theology at the Edge) <theologyattheedge.co.uk> Retrieved July 13, 2023.

10) John Taylor and Norman H. Snaith, *Eunuch*, in James Hastings. *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1963), p.276.

11) Eleanor Vivian. *Human Reproduction and Infertility in the Hebrew Bible* (Sage Journals) <journals.sagepub.com> Retrieved July 13, 2023. “Monogenesis is the understanding that only one party contributes to the process of procreation: namely, the male. This same idea is found in Graeco-Roman understandings of conception under the name “preformationism,” which understands the male contribution of semen to contain all that is required to produce a child.”

the womb (בְּטֶנְאָה [earth]),¹³⁾ if the soil is infertile, the seed will fail to grow and mature. This is also related to how the earth is viewed as our mother and the seed of life comes from the heavenly Father and falls on the earth and can grow if the earth is fertile.

Cody Sanders states eloquently the conditioning many of us have grown up with in our churches:

What we often term “traditional” marital relationships in the U.S. — especially in Christian contexts — come with a host of culturally conditioned gender expectations that are imbued with unequal power relations between women and men. Theological ethicist, Margaret Farley, says about this history, “[T]raditional interpretations of heterosexual sex are steeped in images of the male as active and the female passive, the woman as receptacle and the man as fulfiller, the woman as ground and the man as seed.”¹⁴⁾

Isaiah is assertively encouraging us to understand that traditional roles of eunuchs, foreigners, and women say little about how God is expecting us to see our siblings who don’t fit into the straight and narrow assembly of the

12) William Holladay. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1971), 92–93. The Hebrew word, בְּטֶנְאָה, covers everything from actual seeds of plants to semen to human heirs. Thus if the womb has good soil and is a nurturing environment, the seed will grow. Failure to become pregnant is exclusively seen as a problem with the woman’s body.

13) Ibid., 205. The Hebrew word, בְּטֶנְאָה, is the seat of the origin of human beings, which is clear in Ruth 1:11 when Naomi says, “Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?” At this point, Naomi sees herself as too old for her womb soil to produce humans.

14) Cody J. Sanders. *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow* (Macon, Georgia: Faithlab, 2013), 25.

Lord. Isaiah expands that assembly to a borderless group of souls faithful to God who will be remembered forever, regardless of their sex or ethnicity.

Though the following passage appears only in the Gospel of Matthew, it is one of the best quotes of Jesus concerning the importance of accepting marginalized people and the unimportance of sex or gender identity when it comes to living for God's kingdom:

“Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”¹⁵⁾

Jesus said this to his disciples when they asked him if it might not be better to avoid marriage since marriage and divorce have the potential to cause personal heartache and distress. Jesus shows an openness to a endless variety of people, accepts them just as they are, and encourages such people to accept that about themselves as well. Concerning this quote of Jesus, Thomas Bohache writes:

[W]hat about those eunuchs who ‘were born that way’? ... [R]ecent studies have shown that sexuality is much more fluid than we might expect and cannot be so easily categorized and labelled. Could Jesus not be referring to a broad category of people who, from their birth, have not ‘fitted’ the predominant expectations of gender and sexuality? In effect, Jesus in this saying about eunuchs has not only entered queer

15) Matthew 19:11-12. NRSV.

space, but has ‘queered’ the discussion of marriage.¹⁶⁾

The ‘queering’ of the discussion of marriage can make traditionalists uncomfortable, but it is necessary for understanding the immense vastness of God’s grace in God’s loving every human creature God has created. Contrary to what one may hear from some pulpits, we are not all absolute males or females. A significant number of us belong other categories, and we must recognize them as absolute humans. ‘Queering’ our traditional views of sex and gender may seem radical to some, but it is what Jesus was doing in Matthew 19:11-12. Theodore Jennings says this about Jesus’ words:

The saying of Jesus is scandalous, linking together hermaphrodites or persons who engaged exclusively in same-sex practices, men castrated for purposes of prostitution, and persons who castrated themselves in religious frenzy. Like many of Jesus’ sayings, this one is shocking in daring to link the reign of God with apparently absurd or outrageous behaviour ... The saying in Matthew’s Gospel ... associates followers of Jesus who have renounced family structures with stigmatized or marginalized groups in the hellenistic world ... ¹⁷⁾

There is nothing in Jesus’ words to suggest that marriage is to be avoided, nor is he insinuating that heterosexual marriage is inferior. He simply says, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given,” and “Let anyone accept this who can.” In other words, marginalized people who live in situations outside the traditionally accepted way of life for the

16) Mona West and Robert E. Shore-Goss. *The Queer Bible Commentary, Second Edition* (London: SCM Press), 512.

17) Ibid.

majority *must* accept the “teaching” that says they are living a different way of life, because they “have made themselves *eunuchs* for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven is much more vast than a simple male-female existence on the earth. And when we see and taste of the fruit of wisdom from people who were considered “dry trees,” we can grow in our spiritual walk and be blessed by the vast array of colorful fellow humans God has put in our midst.

Citing Elizabeth Stuart, Patrick Cheng helps us to see how the Eucharist can symbolize the inclusion of all types of people in the assembly of the Lord:

For Elizabeth Stuart, ... the Eucharist is fundamentally queer because it symbolizes the erasure of sex in a number of ways. For example, the traditional eastward-facing or *ad orientem* position of the Roman Catholic priest (who is wearing the traditional chasuble, which is also a nongendered garment) has the effect of erasing the sex of the priest because both the priest and the congregation are facing in the same direction. Furthermore, the priest who acts *in persona Christi*, or in the person of Christ, is actually transforming the body of Christ into something sexless by the act of consecrating bread and wine. Furthermore, to the extent that the body of Christ is the church, this body is made up of a multitude of sexes, genders, and other identities that are rendered nonultimate in the new creation. As such, the Eucharist for Stuart reveals that “for the baptized, sex, gender, sexuality and all other forms of identity by which humans categorize themselves are not of ultimate concern.”

For Stuart, the Eucharist is like baptism in that it anticipates the “eschatological life” in which “gender and the sexual identities built

upon it are rendered non-ultimate.”¹⁸⁾

Jesus appears to be in agreement with this when he answers the Saducees who were questioning who would have a woman in the resurrection if she had been married to several men during her earthly life by saying, “in the resurrection people neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels of God in heaven.”¹⁹⁾

Just as Isaiah proclaimed that eunuchs are far more than dry trees if they “keep [the Lord’s] Sabbaths,” Jesus manages to do the same. The varieties of people who are included in “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” are in our world to open our eyes to the diversity and beauty of all people who make up God’s creation. In support of this, Elaine Ambrose explains, “I believe [an *Exodus* for the gay community] does in fact exist in the biblical history of the eunuch and I propose that this biblical ‘coming out,’ begins with the clearly defined exclusion of the eunuch from the Temple as commanded by God (Deut. 21:1), which surprisingly transforms with the unexpected inclusivity advocated by God through Isaiah (Isa. 56) and culminates in the matter-of-fact teaching of Christ (Mt. 18) with an inclusivity practised by the early church as represented by the Apostle Phillip in welcoming and baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). What God initially and irrefutably forbids, he later welcomes and embraces.”²⁰⁾

Pigs in Peter’s Blanket

“Pigs in a blanket” is an American treat that is essentially a sausage

18) Patrick S. Cheng. *Radical Love* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 122-123.

19) Matthew 22:30. NRSV.

20) Elaine Ambrose. *Tears in God’s Wineskin: A Theology of Hospitality, Part 2: Eunuchs* (Theology at the Edge) <theologyattheedge.co.uk> Retrieved August 24, 2023.

made of pork wrapped in a pastry, and “pigs in blankets” is a British treat with sausages wrapped in strips of bacon. The fact that “pigs” is part of their name is an indication that no kosher Jew would be lining up to get one of these (although there actually is a treat in Israel called “Moshe B’Tayva, or Moses in the Ark” which is a “puff pastry rolled over kosher hotdogs”).²¹⁾ As a matter of fact, there are numerous animals whose meat is off the list for a kosher Jew who adheres to the commands and laws found in the Torah. But in the book of Acts, the apostle Peter finds himself face to face with a vision of all sorts of strange animals which were not on the kosher list:

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, 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.²²⁾

Peter was a devout Jew, and took the way he stood before God seriously,

21) Joanna Freeman. *Pigs in blankets: a comprehensive history of our favourite Christmas snack* (Twisted) <<https://twistedfood.co.uk/>> Retrieved July 16, 2023.

22) Acts 10:9-16. NRSV.

but he was initially “greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision.”²³⁾ Peter had embraced the Torah as his security blanket, and now, God had presented him with a real “insecurity” blanket. Imagine for a moment if one of the animals on Peter’s crowded sheet was a scary wild boar with vicious tusks and a dirty, slimy snout. As it looks Peter in the eyes, a voice commands, “Peter, kill and eat.” Unimaginable! Yet, when Peter insists that he could never commit such a disgusting act, the voice scolds him: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Peter found himself being asked to do something totally contrary to his paradigm of how to live a godly life. To get a sense of the psychological trauma Peter must have experienced, I encourage you to ask yourself why you would not eat dog or horse meat, but are perfectly fine eating meat from cattle, pigs, and chickens. Without thinking about the reason, many of us feel disgust at the thought of eating dogs²⁴⁾ or horses,²⁵⁾ and often feel disgust toward cultures who consume them apparently because we believe that eating dogs and horses is cruel while eating animals deemed as “livestock” is admissible. There is no reason to judge any culture for the animals they choose to eat, but there is need for mutual understanding in accepting each other’s customs in order to move beyond our theological vacuum toward an expanding assembly of the Lord.

Peter was being taught through this vision that there was no difference between a God-fearing Gentile and a God-fearing Jew. After having ample time to reflect on his experience, Peter says publicly, “I truly understand

23) Acts 10:17. NRSV.

24) Kathleen Taylor. *Why we don't eat dogs* (The Guardian, April 6, 2010) <<https://www.theguardian.com>> Retrieved July 18, 2023.

25) Henrietta Szathmary. *Why Don't We Eat Horse Meat? 4 Reasons Why* (Horsey Hooves, March 16, 2022) <<https://horseyhooves.com>> Retrieved July 18, 2023.

that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him.”²⁶⁾ Later, when Peter went to Jerusalem and reported on his encounters at Joppa and Caesarea, circumcised believers criticized him for eating with uncircumcised men.²⁷⁾ They had heard the report that the Gentiles had accepted or received the word of God, but were resistant to considering these Gentiles as being on the same level as they were. Peter did not give up here, but faithfully told his entire story. In the end, they were convinced by Peter²⁸⁾ who had a life-changing experience due to the vision given him. We must always be ready to speak boldly when we are given visions, regardless of the resistance we may face. Peter’s vision unambiguously reveals, as God speaking through the prophet declares, that God accepts all types of people “who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant.”²⁹⁾

Massive Multicolored Multitude

The book of Revelation is so symbolically complicated to understand because of its apocalyptic symbolism of which there is little consensus among scholars as to their exact meaning. But even when we cannot be sure of all the messages that the author is trying to send, certain sentences are quite plainly written. I would like to focus on the seventh chapter in order to contemplate the vision God has for humanity according to the book’s author, John, who sees the following:

26) Acts 10:34-35. NRSV.

27) Acts 11:1-3.

28) Acts 11:18.

29) Isaiah 56:4. NRSV.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”³⁰⁾

Prior to this, we are told of the 144,000 “sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel.”³¹⁾ But the “great multitude” is made up “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” If this multitude represents every nation, tribe, people and language, it accounts for much more than just circumcised Jews. It represents Jews and Gentiles of all traditions from all over the world. That includes not only those who are kosher, but people who have varying identities according to the way God created them. When this multicolored multitude cries out, “Salvation belongs to our God,” they are speaking out as one saved people. Just as there is no distinction between Jew or Greek, male or female in heaven,³²⁾ there is no distinction between people of differing sexual identities either. We are all one in the Spirit even as we fully embrace our God-given sexual and gender identities.

Queer Quirks Questioned

Taro³³⁾ had come to me with a problem. He felt attracted to men, and could not get this out of his mind. He told me that he had read in a book by one of his professors that same-sex attraction was unacceptable because it

30) Revelation 7:9-10. NRSV.

31) Revelation 7:4. NRSV.

32) Galatians 3:28.

33) “Taro” is a pseudonym chosen to maintain the subject’s privacy.

was against biblical teaching. He respected this professor, and decided that he should see his attraction to men as contrary to Christian principles for living, and should move on to become a respectable minister. He seemed to view his same-sex attraction as an inconvenient quirk from which he needed to release himself. He later married one of his female classmates. I have not had a conversation with him since he graduated from seminary in the mid 2010s, but I wish now that I had had the tools to better understand how to help him along at the time. As he never expanded on anything further about his feelings, I can not be sure whether he is bisexual, gay, or simply questioning. When I first met him in the early 2010s, my understanding was that traditional marriage between a man and a woman was the only type of God-sanctioned marriage. If I were able to counsel Taro today, I would come with a very different approach—one that would attempt to truly acknowledge and affirm his identity while helping him to unearth what questions he needs to answer concerning his sexual preferences or orientation in order to know himself and move on free of self-condemnation.

Transformed by a Trans Friend

While serving as a missionary in Hamamatsu, Japan from 1994 to 2001, my wife and I attended Enshu Eiko Church. The church had several youth, and ministering to them was a rewarding part of our ministry there. One of the youth was a young girl by the name of Hiroko.³⁴⁾ We knew she was different from the others from the beginning since she generally wore jeans, and avoided dressing to appear feminine. At the time, the thought that she may be queer was not in our minds. We thought of her as simply what used to be called a “tomboy.”³⁵⁾ We felt that she was “boy-like” but would

34) “Hiroko” is a pseudonym chosen for the birth name of the subject.

eventually come around and begin acting more feminine. She loved participating in the Hamamatsu Festival, and was hanging out with the guys more than with the girls. We discovered that many of Hiroko's friends called her, "Gen," and she told us that she really preferred being called that rather than her given name.

Having moved to Tokyo, I had not thought too much of Hiroko for years, but one night after dinner, our TV was on and the show, "*Potsunto Ikkenya*"³⁶⁾ was being aired, a show that features homesteads isolated from cities deep in the mountains or forests of Japan, and I heard the documentary announcer mention that the place was in Hamamatsu and the person was "Gen Suzuki." Although "Suzuki" is a common Japanese name, "Gen" is not so common, and to be put together with Suzuki and Hamamatsu caught my attention and got my eyes glued to the screen. When Gen appeared to be interviewed, there was no question that this was the Hiroko I knew in Hamamatsu. When Gen spoke, the voice was the same as Hiroko's, and the expressions, tone of voice, and gestures used were clearly like those Hiroko displayed some 20 years earlier. Gen had made a living for himself as an artisan making elaborate bamboo baskets, and shared on the documentary that he was transgender, and had met a female partner. The two were married about two years after the program aired.³⁷⁾ Gen says he

35) Though the term seems to be falling out of use, Merriam-Webster defines "tomboy" as "a girl who behaves in a manner usually considered boyish," and the Apple Inc. Dictionary defines it as "a girl who enjoys rough, noisy activities traditionally associated with boys." Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tomboy>> Retrieved August 25, 2023. 辞書 バージョン 2.3.0(294) Copyright 2005-2022, Apple Inc.

36) タグログ「ポツンと一軒家 静岡県浜松市 鈴木げんさんの竹細工の鞆の購入方法は？」 October 15, 2018. <<https://today247.info/suzuki-gen/>> Retrieved July 22, 2023.

37) Ibid.

has never felt that he was a girl or a woman.³⁸⁾ He lives as a man, but has chosen not to have sex reassignment surgery. For this reason, he is not able to be recognized as a man on the family register which he claims is in violation of the constitution,³⁹⁾ so he is working through the legal system to get the law changed. He did succeed at having his partnership recognized legally under Hamamatsu's new "Partnership Declaration System"⁴⁰⁾ of which he and his current spouse are the first ever couple to be officially registered.⁴¹⁾

Changing the Questions

Many of us have spent the last few decades debating the questions of whether or not LGBTQ people should be included in our fellowship, whether their lifestyle is acceptable to God, and whether they can be leaders in our churches. These questions often lead to heated debates of the "for" or "against" variety which often sends both sides back with little movement away from their decided belief. Some will use as a defense for their position that what they are arguing is written in the Bible or supported by the Bible. Since Protestants claim to believe in "*sola scripture*," the biblical canon is the only book from which they can deduce God's will, and when they say that the Bible opposes homosexuality, they have only to point out to the

38) 「適合手術なしで性別変更を求め静岡家裁に申し立て（静岡県）」*YouTube* (SBS News 6) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XXa2dl8zXs>> Retrieved July 22, 2023.

39) 「手術なしで性別変更を静岡家裁浜松支部に申し立て 戸籍要件『違憲』訴え」（あなたの静岡新聞）2021.10.5 < <https://www.at-s.com/news/article/shizuoka/968182.html>> Retrieved July 22, 2023.

40) 「浜松市パートナーシップ宣誓制度」（浜松市公式サイト）<<https://www.city.hamamatsu.shizuoka.jp/ud/universal/partner/index.html>> Retrieved July 23, 2023.

41) 「適合手術なしで性別変更を求め静岡家裁に申し立て（静岡県）」*YouTube* (SBS News 6) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XXa2dl8zXs>> Retrieved July 22, 2023.

opposition where and how they arrived at their answer—case closed. Peter Enns writes about this way of approaching disagreements:

The presence of diverse points of view in the church is unavoidable, seeing that ... people of faith, including those we read about in the Bible, are always meeting God where they are, asking their questions within their contexts.⁴²⁾

We must remember what the Bible really is. Pamela Lightsey writes about our beloved book:

We understand that everything about God has been recorded by humanity and that therefore God stands within and outside the text. We love the Bible for its ability to touch our lives in deep ways, we love its metaphorical and poetic language, we seek out daily its deeper meaning for our lives, but we understand that the Bible is not God.⁴³⁾

So the Bible is not a collection of documents with all the information necessary for directing our lives between its covers. In a Facebook conversation with Lightsey, Dr. Mitzi J. Smith says, ““God ... was before, and transcends the Bible. How do you give the same authority to God that you give to the Bible?”⁴⁴⁾ Though the Bible is a book that provides us ample information for knowing and learning how God relates to us, it is from a different culture and time, and cannot be expected to unambiguously

42) Peter Enns. *The Bible Tells Me So* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 241.

43) Mona West and Robert E. Shore-Goss. *The Queer Bible Commentary, Second Edition* (London: SCM Press), xviii.

44) Ibid.

address every question that we are contemporarily dealing with. As Peter Enns writes:

[I]f the Bible’s true purpose were to provide us with rulebook information about what God is like and what God wants from us, then why can the Bible be so easily used to: Justify both slavery and its abolition? Justify both keeping women subordinate to men and fully emancipating them? Justify violence against one’s enemies and condemn it? Justify political power and denounce it?⁴⁵⁾

The Bible should be a book that unites Christians, but unfortunately can be used to justify one’s own political stance. And indeed, the Bible is used to both justify affirmation of LGBTQ folks and to condemn them.

Rather than regurgitating the old questions that divide people into two sides, pastoral theologian Cody Sanders suggests changing the questions in a way to build a new and fruitful discussion. In his book, *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow*, he writes of what he experiences as a most precious time when giving therapy:

My proudest moments as a therapist are the ones when I am able to ask well-crafted questions. When it becomes obvious that a client and I become stuck — arriving at an impasse and not quite certain how to proceed — I often wonder to myself, “What question might get us moving again?” A good question has that ability. Questions can move us in ways that propositions and statements and truths and speculations cannot. A question, carefully crafted and presented at just the right

45) Peter Enns. *How the Bible Actually Works* (New York: HarperOne, 2019), 10.

moment, opens space for dialogue and discovery. Questions create room to move — not the movement of liner progression toward the “right” answer, but room to explore, to grow, to become genuinely curious.⁴⁶⁾

Sanders is explaining not only a better way of getting a stuck therapy session moving, it is also a fun and exciting way—a way that rewards both therapist and client with space for discovery, reflection, and a quest for a “good” or “workable” answer rather than a “right,” “correct,” or “perfect” one. The “impasse” is conquered by dialog which facilitates a partnership of the client and therapist that can walk through a situation, not with the goal of solving a problem, but with one of learning how to navigate the problem. Efficacious counseling is not problem-solving but problem managing.

In helping us to consider how forming the right questions may foster a progressive conversation in our church, Sanders writes:

[W]hy have our churches’ discussions about sexuality centered almost exclusively upon only two concerns: whether or not your sexual partner is of a different sex and whether or not the two of you are married? If churches seized the critical moment provided by queer lives and examples to rethink sex altogether, we might begin asking: How do our churches’ teachings on sex unnecessarily limit the discussion, leaving our most important questions and concerns unaddressed? Whose lives are regularly omitted from our discussions of sexuality (e.g., single people, elderly people, etc.)? Even within what we deem the “appropriate” forms of relationship, how can sex still fail to live up to ideals of mutuality and equality and instead be practiced in ways that harm

46) Cody J. Sanders. *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow* (Macon, Georgia: Faithlab, 2013), 9.

relationship?⁴⁷⁾

I must admit that when I was attending church as a teenager in the 1980s, the only two issues seemed to be whether your partner was of the opposite sex and whether the two were married. Queer people did not really exist. There were people referred to as “homosexuals” who were considered to be deviant and were more identified by the fact that they participated in same-sex acts than by their sexuality itself, corresponding to Annamarie Jagose’s writing in *Queer Theory* in a section titled “The Invention of Homosexuality.”⁴⁸⁾

In *Queer Lessons*, Sanders suggests to churches how we can move beyond the initial stages of affirming queer people and focus on lessons we can learn from them. One of the lessons is on forgiveness. Sanders writes, “in a book that invites churches to learn important lessons by inquiring compassionately and curiously into the lives of queer people, the real difficulty with lessons on forgiveness is that churches are the transgressors most in need of forgiveness.”⁴⁹⁾

Although some queer people have left the church due to the hurt they have experienced, because of their love for the church, many have endured by forgiving the very church that Jesus invites them to be a part of. They are called to be a part of Christ’s body, and instead of demanding entrance into congregations that reject them, with the patience of Job they peacefully await the day that all congregations will affirm and accept them. Concerning queer progress, Sanders writes:

47) Ibid., 30.

48) Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 10-16.

49) Cody J. Sanders. *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow* (Macon, Georgia: Faithlab, 2013), 127.

While it seems telling that the remarkable gains queer people have made toward justice, inclusion, and equality in the United States have largely come without violent revolt — proving to be a very peaceable transformation in the realm of human rights — the violence enacted against queer people in this transformation of society has been quite severe. But rather than queer voices becoming strained by the incessant call upon churches to witness to the gospel of peace by turning from their wicked ways of violence and contritely seeking the forgiveness of queer people, we have the opportunity to take this prophetic mantle of peace upon ourselves. Queer people may become the prophetic witnesses to the gospel of peace that the majority of churches are currently unwilling to become in relation to LGBTQ justice.⁵⁰⁾

Discriminatory churches cannot be forced to change their ways of viewing queer people, but when queer brothers and sisters stand before churches as “prophetic witnesses to the gospel of peace,” the light will slowly but steadily shine into the congregations making confession of sin possible, leading to repentance and ultimately, forgiveness. The fear that congregations have of change that queer people would bring them is unfounded. Just as Israel’s prophets were “different” from most Israelites, queer people are different from the heterosexual majority. But it was the prophets who brought wisdom and direction to God’s people when their world was on the wrong trajectory and they needed salvation. The church needs queer people to bring us words of wisdom and direction as we navigate our way toward a church that will indeed proclaim salvation for all

50) Ibid., 129-130.

peoples. And just as the prophets were always among God’s chosen people, queer people have always been in our midst as well. They simply have remained hidden because, just as Israel did not always want to see and hear their prophets, modern churches do not necessarily want to see theirs either. Yet, queer Christians are presently evangelizing us through their prophetic voices that reveal the amazing love that Jesus offers to all peoples.

Conclusion

Growing up in the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the concept of *semper reformanda* — “always to be reformed,” was the road Christians were supposed to be on. As Cody Sanders correctly emphasizes, “Reformation is always incomplete; it must be goaded ever forward by a more radical vision and persistence in enacting change.”⁵¹⁾ The RCA proclaims, “Reformed Christians sometimes say we’re ‘Reformed and always reforming.’ This means we never stop asking whether we’re being faithful to God’s vision and reforming the church to follow God’s will. We do this because we believe humans are broken.”⁵²⁾ Sam Hailes, editor of *Premier Christianity*, the UK’s leading Christian magazine writes, “a ‘new reformation’ is taking place as they voice their doubts and embrace a process known as theological deconstruction.”⁵³⁾ “Hailes say that “theological deconstruction ... [refers] to what happens when a person asks questions that lead to the careful dismantling of their previous beliefs. Some talk about

51) Ibid., 59.

52) Reformed Church in America. *rca.org* <<https://www.rca.org/about/theology/>> Retrieved August 21, 2023.

53) Sam Hailes. *Deconstructing faith: Meet the evangelicals who are questioning everything* (Premier Christianity, March 18, 2019) <<https://www.premierchristianity.com/features/deconstructing-faith-meet-the-evangelicals-who-are-questioning-everything/267.article>> Retrieved July 27, 2023.

a ‘mid-faith crisis’, where deeply held doctrines are re-examined and sometimes jettisoned in favour of more progressive ideas. Many continue to self-identify as Christian throughout this time, others take on another label which they say carries less baggage, such as ‘follower of Jesus.’”⁵⁴⁾ As the reformers call on us to always be reforming, are they not encouraging us to deconstruct our faith appropriately according to the questions that arise?

Deconstruction of our faith can sound rather frightening and painful, but Richard Rohr explains how theological deconstruction can ultimately be a positive journey:

Picture three boxes. The first is order, the second is disorder, the third is reorder. We’re all raised in the first box of order. We were given our explanation of what reality means and what God means. It gives you so much comfort that most people want to stay in the first box forever. But what has to happen between your 30s and 50s, is the glib certitudes of the first box have to fall apart. Who’s right, who’s wrong, who’s holy and who’s a sinner — I know these beliefs gave your ego great comfort — but if you stay inside the first box, it creates angry people, rigid people and unhappy people. When you leave the first box it feels like dying. When I had to leave my early Catholic certitudes it felt like a loss of faith. But that wonderful early evangelical gospel holds you strong enough to endure the second box and not throw the baby out with the bathwater. In the second box you realise ‘it wasn’t as simplistic as I was told, but it’s not all wrong either’. If you can let God lead you through the second box while hanging onto order, God can lead you to the third box, reorder.⁵⁵⁾

54) Ibid.

55) Ibid.

Many 21st century folks are living as theological or religious deconstructionists. Like Calvin and Luther in their time, these people are challenging others to restructure their thinking according to righteous living. Just as the early reformers did not have everything right, none of us do either. So would not the universal assembly of the Lord be a much more pleasant place to be than one filled with “angry people, rigid people and unhappy people” who refuse to reexamine their theological or ecclesiastical “glib certitudes?” It is time to acknowledge that God created us male, female and queer, and is commanding us all to be fruitful and fill the earth, not by creating combative enemy tribes to give our “ego[s] great comfort” when we feel so arrogantly sure of ourselves, but by God’s promise to Abraham. That promise is that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” or “shall bless themselves”⁵⁶⁾ through Abraham, the universal ancestor who God chose to bring all of humanity together as one, warped egos and all.

Jane Coaston writes that Gallup releases a survey each year of how many Americans identify as LGBT, and that the percentage who say they do in 2023 is about 7% which has been steady for the past three years. But in 2012, only 3.4% identified as LGBT.⁵⁷⁾ From this information, one can reach one of two conclusions. Either the number of LGBT people has doubled since 2012, or only about half of LGBT people in 2012 acknowledged their sexual or gender identity.

It is impossible to finalize a conclusion from these statistics alone, but what is obvious is the fact that queer people are becoming much more

56) Genesis 12:3. NRSV.

57) Jane Coaston. *More visible L.G.B.T.Q. people isn't a crisis—it's normal* (New York Times International Edition, OPINION, July 22-23, 2023), 10.

comfortable coming out, and publicly acknowledging their sexual or gender identities. This is a positive development for which to be thankful, but many countries still have a long way to go. Alexander Dmitrenko, who grew up as a Ukrainian during the collapse of the Soviet Union, and is a gay lawyer who is chairperson of TELL (Tokyo English Life Line), a nonprofit organization “dedicated to providing effective support and counseling services to Japan’s international community and its increasing mental health needs,”⁵⁸⁾ explains that, “many gay professionals in Russia would marry and have kids and live a double life, just to be able to succeed. ‘That wasn’t an option for me—I wanted to be honest to myself, I wanted to fully contribute to society without hiding.’”⁵⁹⁾

Queer people should not have to hide in churches either. Like Taro, who had questions about his attraction to men, and Gen, who identified as male all his life,⁶⁰⁾ churches need to discard the fear of change, and provide an affirming loving atmosphere which allows queer people to feel comfortable in the fellowship of Christians rather than hiding their identity to keep the peace. Cody Sanders encourages us to use forgiveness as a tool for peace and justice⁶¹⁾ by forgiving while not forgetting:

Rather than ignoring or trivializing the significance of anger, hostility and other emotions of the queer people long subjected to religiously-fueled instrumental violence, the weak force of forgiveness provides a

58) TELL (Tokyo English Life Line) <<https://telljp.com/>> Retrieved July 24, 2023.

59) Warren Meehan. *No exceptions to equality: lawyer Alexander Dmitrenko* (Japan Times, sustainable Japan, July 24, 2023), 9.

60) 「適合手術なしで性別変更を求め静岡家裁に申し立て（静岡県）」*YouTube* (SBS News 6) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XXa2dl8zXs>> Retrieved July 22, 2023.

61) Cody J. Sanders. *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow* (Macon, Georgia: Faithlab, 2013), 136-140.

long-sought voice for those feelings to be expressed constructively toward a hoped-for era of peace and justice.

We must leave behind the mentality of forgiving and forgetting and therapeutic forms of forgiveness in order to realize the subversive potential of forgiveness as a tool for peace and justice. It should neither lead to forgetting nor the denial and trivialization of wrongdoing. In this vein, [John] Caputo argues, “Forgiveness is the opposite of repression. In repression, something that is there keeps recurring just because I deny it; in forgiveness, something that is there is dismissed just because I affirm and forgive it.”⁶²⁾

As we remember Taro and Gen along with many others like them, let us earnestly strive to put an end to any ostracism that prevents us from seeing and hearing the queer prophets in our churches. We need their wisdom, insight, and love, and they need ours too. As the apostle Paul writes when emphasizing that we are all parts of the one body of Christ and are mutually interdependent, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”⁶³⁾ Acknowledging that we are all parts of one another is the way to realize the blessing of all peoples in the world who are part of Christ’s body. By not forgetting the ways we have hurt queer people in the past, we can truly affirm the mistakes we made, and move toward building a healthy body of Christ where we can celebrate the beautiful fellowship of souls with which our Creator has endowed us.

62) Ibid., 139.

63) I Corinthians 12:26. NRSV.