

COMING OUT OF THE CONGREGATION:
AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF THE COMMUNICATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY
IN CHRISTIANITY IN THE BOONE AREA

by

Jonathan Ryan Williams

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of Communication
and The Honors College
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

May, 2016

Approved by:

Chris Patti, Ph.D., Thesis Director

Jeffrey Motter, Ph.D., Second Reader

Jennifer Gray, Ph.D, Departmental Honors Director

Ted Zerucha, Ph.D., Interim Director, The Honors College

Abstract

The Church has long faced the issue of discovering where homosexuality fits within its doctrines and beliefs. In this discovery process, communication is vital to ensuring this issue does not dismantle the people and works of churches and their communities. Through an analysis of Scripture and interviews conducted with ten Christian pastors, priests, and religious leaders, this paper attempts to deconstruct the current communication and discourse used in the faith communities of Boone, North Carolina. In understanding how these discourses function in relation to the dialogue of homosexuality, queer Christians and their congregations can move forward in their theological discussions using a discourse that functions on community for the spiritual growth and development in the Christian faith.

Introduction

In a combined study by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Center for Health Statistics, 2.3 percent of Americans identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual between the ages of 18 to 64 in 2013 (Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014). In a typical church congregation of 200 individuals, about five church members identify as queer and thus are impacted in the way that homosexuality is communicated by their church and faith. I was one of those five congregation members, and have heard that I will not inherit the Kingdom of God, I am sinful, and I am going to Hell. Not only is this harmful for those who identify as diverse sexualities, but for the congregations as a whole.

With different arguments of how homosexuality fits into the belief systems and covenants of the Church and Christianity, this paper seeks to uncover and understand the discourse which the Church uses to discuss homosexuality. While Scripture and the Bible factor heavily into this discussion, it does not seek to answer the question “Is homosexuality a sin?” Those arguments and cases, however, will be presented. The goal is rather to see how homosexuality is communicated, and in this particular examination, in the Boone Christian faith community. The first portion of the paper focuses on elements that exist in the discourse, such as Scriptural foundations, different arguments made by those in the Church and faith, as well as general attitudes and beliefs of the larger faith community. The second part of the paper will then focus on interviews conducted with church ministers, pastors, and leaders as they not only serve as Biblical and Christian experts on the issue, they also serve as opinion leaders for their congregations. These interviews were conducted with local Church leaders in Boone, North Carolina, and do not serve as a generalization of the entire

Christian discourse of homosexuality, but rather as a limited, yet grounded, specific, and practical manifestation of that discourse at its current moment in 2016 in the Boone area.

Despite the hate that permeates media depiction of the Church, the discourse of the faith community—and especially of its leaders—tends to be one of community and conversation rather than condemnation as with such demagogues as the Westboro Baptist Church. While viewpoints of how homosexuality exists in the Christian community are a point of division in the discourse, the community itself seems fairly consistent across the Church leaders, regardless of denomination or set of beliefs. Despite these differences, the Church leaders I interviewed all want a community of love and support, so that these differences can be discussed openly and honestly, rather than behind closed doors of shame and hatred. Thus, in understanding the nature and intention of this universal community, heterosexuals and queer Christians can civilly and compassionately discuss sexuality in a way that is beneficial to all involved, talking with—rather than at—one another (Austin, 2016). The goal would be for us to, as author Wesley Hill puts it, “be spiritually adventuresome” (2010, p. 38).

As a gay Christian man, I embarked on this research with the thought of knowing a great deal yet at the same time knowing nothing. Though I do not wish to speak on the experiences of others, I know that my two identities of being gay and being a Christian have brought me closer to my faith and to becoming comfortable with myself. With this paper, it is my hope that I can illuminate this possibility for the entire congregation, so that a more productive, stronger conversation can occur for all sexualities.

Background Information

Scripture and the Bible

At the center of the homosexuality debate in the Church and Christian community is the Bible. Theological arguments stem from the interpretation of different passages of Scripture, as well as a holistic view of the Bible itself, for the moral acceptance and denial of homosexuality as both an attraction and a practice. This distinction is important. Many religious leaders and congregations have made a distinction between homosexuality as an attraction to members of the same sex or gender, versus a practice or lifestyle that is actively chosen by an individual. Religious leaders now see, for the most part, that the attraction itself is not sinful, but the active practice of acting on that attraction is sinful in nature (Allberry, 2014). There are three areas of the Bible that speak specifically about homosexuality, or mention homosexual activity: the Men of Sodom in Genesis, the Holiness Code in Leviticus, and the New Testament Ethics of Paul's Letters in 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy, and Romans. While there are other Biblical arguments that look at the text as a whole, as well as different passages that present values and ethical standards, as to the communicative framework that permeates the conversation, my analysis focuses on the six Scriptural passages that directly mention homosexuality (Furnish, 1994).

The first direct mention of homosexuality in the Bible comes from Genesis 19:1-11, which deals with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The passage reads as follows from the New International Version:

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to

the ground. 2 “My lords,” he said, “please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.”

“No,” they answered, “we will spend the night in the square.”

3 But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. 4 Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. 5 They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.”

6 Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him 7 and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. 8 Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.”

9 “Get out of our way,” they replied. “This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We’ll treat you worse than them.” They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

10 But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. 11 Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

While this passage discusses sexual implications between men, theologians and scholars on both sides of the discussion conclude that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is unrelated to homosexuality (Hays, 1994; Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1994). The gang-rape scenario presented in the passage deals more with the wickedness of the city and

its severe lack of hospitality among the people of Sodom to the visitors of Lot, in this case angels. The sin that actually brought about the destruction of the city is best described in Ezekiel: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy” (Ezekiel 16:49). In fact, the only reference to this passage being related to sexual misconduct of any kind in the biblical tradition rests in an obscure reference in Jude 7 (Hays, 1994, p. 5). The remaining passages that discuss Sodom and Gomorrah’s fall all center around hospitality, whether it is the passage in Ezekiel, Matthew 10:12-15, its parallel in Luke 10:10-12, or even Jude 7. God’s wrath was shown due to the violent and inhospitable nature of the men threatening the angels. The passage in the Greek text mentions that every last man in Sodom “went after strange flesh,” yet this is not in reference to a desire to have sex with other men, as this is rather an allusion to the nature of Lot’s guest, who unbeknownst to everyone but themselves, are angels disguised as men. The sin does not involve men violating other men, but rather mortals violating the immortal (Furnish, 1994, p. 20). The story of Sodom and Gomorrah, thus, does not relate to the larger discussion of homosexuality as it is directly related to neither homosexual attraction nor homosexual action.

One of the most common Scripture passages used in the argument for homosexuality as a sin comes from the Holiness Code in Leviticus. These two passages are part of two sections of these laws, the first addressing unlawful sexual relations and the second with punishments for sin. The first passage in question is as follows from Leviticus 18:22: “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” The second passage comes from Leviticus 20:13 and has to do with punishment for sins: “If a man has

sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.”

Due to the directness of the text in Leviticus, it has been the easiest to point to in terms of an explicit prohibition of male homosexual intercourse. An understanding of Leviticus, however, is needed to understand how these two passages exist in the larger framework of the book. Leviticus outlines a Holiness Code, which is comprised of morality law and purity law. Ritual purity law addressed the concerns of that time, and is largely disregarded or considered obsolete by the church, such as dietary restrictions, wearing cloth of different fabrics, and circumcision. Then there is morality law, which deals with acts that are more steadfast by nature, such as incest and adultery. The question then rises of where the two references to homosexual intercourse fit, is it under morality or purity law? The challenge of this question is to reconcile ritual purity laws from the moral laws that guide the new, modern community of Jesus’s followers as opposed to the traditional norms of Israel (Hays, 1994). In order to understand the difference, purity must be understood in its traditional context. Purity, in fact, had to deal with literal cleanliness, in that it is in literal opposition to physical pollution or uncleanness. This can be seen with some of the more obvious purity codes, such as breeding animals “with a different kind,” sowing a field “with two different kinds of seeds,” or wearing a piece of clothing “made of two different materials” (Leviticus 19:19). The original piece is operating outside of its role in its relation to another, and is thus polluted or defiled. When placed in the context of male-male intercourse, the idea of physical uncleanness makes sense under traditional understanding, or perhaps lack thereof, of human sexuality. If a man were to lie with another man as he does a woman, one partner’s maleness is compromised according to the ancient Hebrew

conception. The man would no longer be an unblemished, or clean, specimen of his kind. The part, however, cannot exist without the whole. Since one is then defiled, the act itself—as well as the other man—is equally defiled. In taking the role of the female in that instance, one man becomes polluted and physically unclean, leading to the prohibition's total and absolute nature, no matter the circumstances (Furnish, 1994). Hence the motives for the act are not treated as a morally significant factor in the view of the laws (Hays, 1994).

The second part of the context deals with the traditional viewpoint of semen and blood in Leviticus, in that they were viewed as vastly important in creating and sustaining life, and are thus treated strictly in their proscriptions. It is interesting that priestly writers of the same era use the same word, “abomination,” when describing menstruating women, as they do for homosexual acts (Spong, 1988, p. 145). Emission of semen outside of creating children similarly rendered men unclean, even in the event of nocturnal emission as stated in Deuteronomy 23:10. A homosexual act between two men can be seen as a misuse of semen under ritual purity standards (Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1994, p. 65). Under this framework of contextual, traditional purity and sexuality, homosexuality as understood during the timeframe of Leviticus was detestable as described in the text. Yet the modern understanding of homosexuality and sexuality itself has shifted. During Levitical times, as well as later during Paul's writings, heterosexuality was the only sexuality, in that everyone was born heterosexual. This is not representative of our current understanding of sexuality. In comparison with the more blatant purity codes, a man does not lose his manliness in a homosexual relationship, just as a piece of fabric does not lose its own self when met with another. I would then categorize the two references of homosexuality in the passages as

purity laws, as the traditional understanding of physical cleanliness and sexuality does not align with today's understanding of them.

Then there is the New Testament, where homosexuality is discussed in Paul's Letters. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul, who is writing his letter to the people of Corinth, became frustrated with their belief that they had risen above the morality rules of the past. In writing the letter, Paul asks the Corinthians the rhetorical question, "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (Hays, 1994, p. 6). Paul then gives a list of those wrongdoers who will not inherit the kingdom: "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). In a similar list in 1 Timothy, Paul writes that the laws were written for "the lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and the sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine 11 that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me" (1 Timothy 1:9-11).

When examining the original language used in 1 Corinthians, male prostitutes is translated from the word *malakoi* while homosexual offenders stems from the Greek word *arsenokoitai*. These two words, and their translations, have an interesting history in the text, which then impacts their interpretation and understanding on the issue of homosexuality. To reiterate, the writers of these books did not understand the concept of homosexuality, or sexuality itself, that we have today (Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1994, pp. 73-74). Thus, the translation is difficult to accurately pin down in terms of this understanding. The first word

used, *malakoi*, was a pejorative term in Hellenistic Greek slang to describe passive partners, often young boys, in homosexual, or rather same-sex, activity. It is literally translated as “soft ones.” In this, the echoes of the Old Testament and purity codes are found. This is also true with the second word, *arsenokoitai*. *Arsenokoitai* is not found in any existing Greek text following 1 Corinthians, leading scholars to argue over the meaning of this uncertain word. One possible theory argues the word is derived from the Hebrew phrase *mishkav zakur*, or “lying with a male,” that is lifted from the Holiness Code in Leviticus. Under this theory, Paul is recognizing and, more importantly, affirming the Levitical law against homosexual acts (Furnish, 1994, p. 24). The word is similarly used in 1 Timothy in its list of the “lawless and the disobedient” in a way that similarly presupposed and affirms the Levitical law (Hays, 1994, p. 7). Recent theological scholarship has evolved on the translation of these words, as some scholars now interpret original Greek as condemning sexual abuse, rather than a blanket condemnation of homosexual orientation or love (Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1994, p. 76).

The modern history of this evolution began between 1946 and 1956, where the translations of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* changed from “effeminate” and “abusers of themselves and mankind” to “homosexuals.” The intent of the change seems to be focusing on a particular type of practice, that of homosexuality, being deplorable, whereas the original language made no reference to sexual orientation. The text made several evolutions over the next fifty years, and has since ended with the most recent New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) printing “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” and the New International Version printing “male prostitutes” and “homosexual offenders” as the translations, as shown in the above passage. Though these translations have also included translations of “men who

practice homosexuality” in the English Standard Version, “homosexuals” and “sodomites” in the New King James Version, as well as other versions that translate it as “men who have sex with men.” The King James Version is still the most popular translation used in the United States, following the New International Version, and then the New King James Version (Ong, 2016). These shifts in translation, the different versions of translation, their overall meanings, as well as the reference to young boy prostitutes are the main issues facing interpretation and discussion of 1 Corinthians and its place in the homosexual discussion. Historian John Boswell argues that Paul is speaking of these young prostitutes taking an active role in sexual intercourse, whether it is with a male or female partner. Therefore, it is not so much about divergent sexuality, but the sexual abuse or exploitation of individuals, as prostitution and sexual dealings with young boys and men were commonplace in the era Paul was writing in (Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1994). With such little context in the original meanings of these words, as well as the fact that there was no psychological conception of homosexuality during Paul’s writing, it is difficult to clearly state 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy directly addressed homosexuality.

The final direct reference to homosexuality is in Romans, and is considered the most crucial text for Christian ethics concerning homosexuality. Since these verses are the only in the New Testament to place condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological context which includes gay men, lesbians, or those of differing sexualities, it has continued to be one of the more prominent passages of Scripture in the homosexual conversation (Hays, 1994). The following is from Romans 1:18-32:

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may

be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

28 Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. 29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they

invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

The purpose of chapters 1 and 2 of Romans is not to set aside a category for the worst kinds of sinners, nor is it a code of sexual ethics or warning of God's judgement against those who are guilty of these particular sins. The aim of these chapters, rather, is to offer a diagnosis of the disorderly human condition in relation to the glory of God. The association between idolatry and homosexual acts seen in the Old Testament is reflected in the Romans passage, again demonstrating Paul's understanding and reinforcement of the old laws. One interpretation is viewing homosexuality as a human phenomenon, and is thus a consequence of God's decision to give up on his rebellious creatures to follow in their own futile thinking and desires, and is not a provocation for the wrath of God. Rebellious creatures refer to those individuals who have rebelled God's ideal of how humans are meant to act; those individuals who have used the gift of free will against their Creator. This is the connection with idolatry, in that individuals follow their lusts and desires rather than following God and His teachings. Paul treats all homosexual acts and activities as evidence of humanity's tragic confusion and alienation from God the Creator. Yet in Hay's (1994) argument for homosexuality as a sin, he adds that self-righteous judgement of homosexuality is just as sinful as the homosexual behavior itself. In looking at the context of homosexuality in the passage, however, it is ultimately framed in this idea of lust and desire. Lust and desire are the idols that homosexuals worship over God. In following these idols, one turns away from acknowledging God. The denunciation of idolatrous people fits here, yet the language is

ultimately not reflective of a sincere Christian homosexual relationship. If a Christian individual wants to devote themselves to and follow Christ, while at the same time they are, for unknown reasons, attracted to individuals of their same gender—not because of lust, but due to a sincere, heartfelt love—then the language of idolatry or destructive desires of forgetting God’s existence are not in question. It would then seem that instead of homosexuality in terms of mere action, Paul is discussing sexual activity in terms of idolatry and lust, which is possible regardless of sexuality. Paul was writing during a time when homosexual practices involved adultery, with men having a wife with a young male lover on the side. These young male lovers, which largely took the form of prostitution, were commonplace. The issues then described in Romans were not ones of homosexuality and heterosexuality, but the understanding of the abuse of society, sex, and power during that time (Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1994). Ultimately, all of the references to homosexuality in the Bible presume that it is wrong or sinful, yet no specific arguments are presented that explain why they are wrong. These reasons are instead inferred from the literary, cultural, and theological context of the ancient Israeli or Hellenistic-Jewish time period from which they originated. Paul was writing in a time where homosexuality was seen as “unnatural” by many cultural leaders and critics of the time. Homosexuality was seen as unnatural because the assumption was that people were heterosexual and heterosexual only, and naturally only attracted to members of the opposite sex. Defying the natural makeup of our beings would then go against God, as we return to the language of lust as an idol (Furnish, 1994).

Yet reaching outside these direct references, discussion of Jesus is rare in the literature analyzing homosexuality in the Bible. This is perhaps because Jesus never discusses homosexuality in any of the Synoptic Gospels, which are comprised of Matthew,

Mark, and Luke. Though Jesus was silent on the issue of homosexuality, this does not mean he didn't have anything to say about it. It does suggest, however, that Jesus did not think it of vital importance to his church that preserved and applied his sayings (Furnish, 1994, p. 23). Yet in a content analysis of the Synoptic Gospels, looking at what Jesus directly stated, the subject Jesus discussed the most was the kingdom, which included its nature, entrance requirements, and nearness. This accounted for over ten percent of Jesus's voice in the Bible. Interestingly enough, Jesus discussed other topic areas that border the issue of homosexuality as presented in their direct references: 4.3 percent of Jesus's teachings dealt with Hell and judgement, a little over one percent concerned marriage and divorce, and 4.82 percent dealt with hypocrisy (Smith J. E.). These topics and teaching moments seem like prime spaces to discuss homosexuality in his church, and yet not once does Jesus refer to tradition Jewish Holiness Codes nor the status of homosexuality in his church. While it is difficult to determine where Jesus's tenants towards homosexuality stand, it seems that homosexuality was nowhere near the focus of his teachings or his church.

Again, we see that context matters, and that the current understanding of homosexuality matters in this discussion. It is under these different interpretations that civil discourse has become angry, hyperbolic, and divisive. It is difficult to have discussions of inerrancy when one could be discussing a passage that has "men who have sex with men" and another that says "effeminate." Scripture provides its audience access to what Furnish (1994) describes as the apostolic witness of faith, wherein the community of believers discovers the norms under which appropriate Christian faith and conduct, including sexual conduct, can be found. If Scripture provided a clear cut answer on issue of homosexuality, the norm would easily be discovered and followed. Yet given the evidence, it seems

Scripture does not clearly address homosexuality or homosexual practices as we now understand them (Furnish, 1994, pp. 32-33). Even if one were to take a different interpretation and believe that Scripture is clear, the divide in opinion and interpretation seems to be evident that Scripture is unclear of how to view homosexuality. Of course, there are many different interpretations of the Bible, and the interpretation presented in this paper is just the surface of a much larger discussion. An important note given that these passages do not exist in a vacuum as time and individuals have shaped different meaning. The Bible was, after all, used to justify slavery in United States history. This is by no means a direct comparison, as both exist in different contexts and times, yet it serves as an example of the difference of interpretations of Scripture, and how it impacts our realities.

The Argument against Christianity

Faith plays a major role in shaping the realities of religious followers on an individual, interpersonal, and societal level. There is, after all, a reason they are called faith communities. Yet despite increasing tolerance, and even acceptance and affirmation of gay Christian members in the church, some question whether the church or even faith is the place for members of the LGBTQ community. W.C. Harris (2014) presents the argument that atheism is the only true place of survival and preservation of queer voices and lives. While he addresses the overt hate used in some churches maligning homosexuality, his discussion of “well-intentioned Christians and gay Christians” is the more important argument.

The church is seen as an institutional space for the proliferation of homophobia, in that heteronormativity will always be dominant. Congregations will ultimately remain incompatible with what Harris describes as “the breadth of queer pleasures, individuals, and modes of belonging” (Harris, 2014, p. 88). The best response for those in the LGBTQ

community would then be abandoning religion and spirituality altogether. While religion has historically been and continues to be a heteronormative and homophobic enterprise, Harris is more concerned with the continued desire of queer individuals to seek the shelter of any religion, regardless of its beliefs. This continued desire only gives further affirmation of religion as a legitimate participant in the civil rights discourse, in that the discourse of the church overtakes the discourse of the queer. This allows the toxic communication of religious rhetoric's more homophobic strains to further perpetuate a system of emotional, physical, political, and cultural damage against queer individuals. Until queer individuals leave the church and their religions behind, they will never have total self-control over their self-definition, disclosure, or play. Simply put, those in the queer community will never be able to embrace their identities in a system where the discourse is based on heteronormative and oppressive foundations. While some may attempt to bridge the divide, they are still using a discourse that works against them. For every stride made towards inclusion in language and belief, more poison is slipped into the larger discussion of religion and society. This proliferation has showed its face in hatred, bullying, and inequality that has led to fear, depression, self-doubt, self-hatred, and suicide (Harris, 2014). A cyclical system is created where queer communication urges for toleration and affirmation in the religious rhetoric, which is then channeled back into the hate and oppression that produces marginalization and silence. Therefore, religion, especially American Christianity, is detrimental to the efforts and identities of queer individuals.

The rhetoric of hatred and condemnation has produced some very real and destructive consequences for queer individuals, that much is very clear. Bringing the Christian faith under scrutiny and criticism is important not only as a social institution, but in terms of a

larger community of religious believers as well. It is clear that there are problems inherent in the discourse that serve as very toxic pressure points for queer people both inside and outside the faith community. Yet Harris's plan of mass exodus will not solve the problem of homophobia, nor will it give the support and comfort many seek in faith regardless of their sexual orientation. While sexual orientation is an important aspect of identity, it is not the only source of identity. Some individuals want that support and comfort from the faith community, whose discourse cannot be left to fester in hatred and ignorance. Change happens through engagement and relationships. This is the focus on my next section analyzing interviews conducted with church leaders in the Boone area.

The Interviews

Method

In order to understand how homosexuality is communicated, it was crucial to ask questions that drew from different aspects of the discussion. The questions focused on homosexuality on an individual, personal level, an interpersonal level, and then grew in their application to broader, more global perspectives and concerns. I chose Christian church leaders, such as pastors, priests, and ministers, as they serve as opinion leaders for their congregations. When looking at immigration reform and Church leaders, researchers Tatishe Nteta and Kevin Wallsten (2012) found that members of the largest religious denominations were communicating messages supporting liberal immigration reform to their congregations, and that these messages were then influencing the preferences of the congregation members exposed to these messages. While homosexuality is a different issue, this study nonetheless demonstrates that Christian leaders do serve as opinion leaders for their congregations and influence positions when it comes to their faith. Given this idea, the 12 questions I asked the ten pastors, priests, and church in each interview can be found in Appendix A.

Results

In determining the contrast between how these communities are meant to view homosexuality, authors Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott (1994) state that there are two distinct perspectives that divide the discourse: the deviance position and diversity position. With the deviance position, individuals view homosexuality as breakers of society's, or Christian Scripture's, rules. Under this perspective, homosexual activity is sinful and thus not meant to be encouraged. The perspective, however, does recognize that same-sex attraction exists and is not inherently sinful. This is not meant to be marginalizing or

ostracizing, but merely the view that homosexual activity is inconsistent with an inerrant interpretation of the Bible. The other perspective is the diversity position, in which members of the LGBTQ community are viewed as any other minority group within the larger pluralistic society. While this is potentially problematic in that it has the potential for erasure of LGBTQ experiences in the faith community, as noted previously in the argument against religion and queer individuals, it is also a perspective based in acceptance and affirmation. This ideology is focused more on understanding and mutual conversation, as well as realizing the discrimination LGBTQ individuals face from both a larger society and Christian individuals.

While their points are over 20 years old, and thus the dialogue has changed considerably, these categories still generally fit with the data I collected. The one difference is that even those who identify themselves as more conservative, evangelical leaders do recognize the discrimination and hatred faced by gay and lesbian people in both society and the Church. In one interview, an evangelical pastor said that the Church “needs to be taught by people of the LGBT community to see what it is like. The church has a lot to teach the LGBT community, too. We need to have a community of figuring it out with Jesus together” (Horne, 2016). In another interview of similar nature, a pastor believes that ministry is about people and stories, and describes a community of mutual sinners and the love of the church. While he said he would work through the Scripture in an authoritative, yet humble manner with a gay or lesbian individual seeking advice on their sexuality, he also expressed great interest in their own personal stories and struggles with their sexuality (Talley, 2016). So while a same-sex attracted individual is not deviant of themselves, their actions based off that attraction are deviant, just as any other sin presented in Scripture. For those who believe

Scripture is clear about the sinful nature of homosexual action, two different ideas are communicated. Firstly, they ultimately communicate the faith community for the person, one of belonging and love. At the same time, however, there is a discussion concerning how action on same-sex attraction deviates from the understood tenants of the same faith community. It is not that an individual is sexually perverted, but rather in what way one is sexually perverted, as one pastor said (Scott, 2016). In these communicative spaces created by the deviant perspective, there seems to be an understood acceptance of God's grace and charity at play (Codd, 2016). Yet at the same time, these spaces exist under the assumption of transformation, in that it seems communication reaches an impasse and breaks down when there is disagreement of the role of homosexuality in Christianity. When asked if they had given counsel to a congregation member about their sexuality, most, if not all, of the religious leaders had this experience. Some leaders who have served in their congregations for a longer period of time stated those conversations happen more often than not (Scott A. , 2016; Horne, 2016; Hankins, 2016). One response to the initial question of how this conversation would be carried out involved first building a relationship with the individual and listening to their story. Once the relationship has been established, the pastor would try to reach a consensus on Scripture. "What do you believe about the Bible? Before we get into any specific issue in the Bible, let's talk about what it is. Is it the inerrant word of God? Is it authoritative? Does it mean something to us? And if yes, then we have something to work with" (Talley, 2016). Thus, the discourse of deviance operates only with the understanding of Biblical innerancy, with the notion that homosexuality is clearly defined as sin. Without this presupposition, the discourse cannot function on a interpersonal level, as it is reliant on what some would view as a literal interpretation of Scripture. Of course the discourse functions

under love and grace regardless of opinion and personal belief, but the discourse does reach that impasse of noncontinuance in which the communication no longer functions.

Similar points were expressed during interviews that followed the diversity perspective as well. Yet there doesn't seem to be the same impasse or breakdown in communication. Under this discourse, churches are meant to be a welcoming place in a sense of being accepting and affirming, where there is a seat for everyone at the same table, where the main focus of spiritual efforts is placed on loving your neighbor (Hankins, 2016). Regardless of sexuality or place in life, that individual is a beloved son or daughter of God. The church serves as a community that absolutely loves you just as you are, and an individual has access to everything the community has to offer (Banks, 2016). So while both perspectives root themselves in this loving and open community, it is interesting that in terms of sexuality, the divide occurs on the issue of equality: the deviance perspective deals with equality of sinful experience, while the diversity perspective deals with equality of identity in terms of sexual orientation. The one issue that could occur with the diversity perspective, however, is the erasure of the queer experience. While this is mainly unintentional, one response to how homosexuality will be communicated in the next ten years is the hope it will be a non-issue, and they were tired of the conversation, in a way that it is blocking the real problems the Church could be facing. Though they mentioned that this shouldn't be done in a way that dishonors the struggle of queer individuals, there is that slight erasure that exists as a possibility in the discourse (Hankins, 2016).

In looking at these two perspectives, there exists a middle ground, where homosexuality as an action is almost neutral, as in it is neither sinful nor accepted and affirmed by the Church. These were seen in two separate Methodists pastors that were

interviewed. This is perhaps due to the fact that the United Methodist Church as a whole is currently divided on the issue, with the General Conference happening this May 2016. While the current stance of the Methodist Church is that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and same sex unions cannot be performed, the Conference will be voting on whether to change the language, stance, and statements on homosexuality (United Methodist Church, 2012). This shift is seen at the local level as well, as the two interviews that were neither deviant nor uniform, but somewhere in the middle, were both Methodist. One of these pastors said his “personal understanding is to love and care for people. It is his job to open that door and offer full access for everything the church has to offer. It is never his job to condemn [homosexuality] as a sin. If it is a sin, how is it more of a sin than anything else? Who am I to draw the line where God has not?” (Austin, 2016). This response was common in several of the interviews (Codd, 2016; Colton, 2016; Smith, 2016). Yet in another interview with one of the more conservative pastors, he said that it was our job to judge others and to decide what is and what is not moral (Scott, 2016). Thus, there is already a deep divide in how leaders approach Scripture, as well as use it in both their roles as a religious leader and follower. In regards to Scripture, the other Methodist pastor said that “the texts around homosexuality are murky. It’s not lost on me that Jesus never says anything about it, and we can’t just dismiss that” (Hockett, 2016). Austen even stated in his interview (2016) that when he reaches Heaven, he will ask God why He didn’t make this any easier. Yet in all of the evangelical interviews, each religious leader stated the Bible is clear in regards to what it says about homosexuality, and that homosexual behavior is against the teachings of Christianity (Horne, 2016; Scott, 2016; Talley, 2016). There seems a disconnect and dissonance in the communication when it comes to homosexuality and its

relation to Scripture. In this disconnect, divergent interpretations present themselves for intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. A more conservative leader might, for example, explain to a same-sex attracted congregation member the innerancy of the Bible passages that address homosexuality. A more undecided or neutral pastor might simply reinforce the idea that this is between God and that individual, but they would be there for that journey (Austin, 2016).

While both of these conversations have very different directions, they stem from the same foundation: one that is driven by narrative and open dialogue and exists in the Christian community. In every single interview, the response in nearly every interview to question nine regarding a same-sex couple attending church was answered with welcome, regardless of belief. This welcoming and open community is a thread that existed in every interview. This community is ultimately an ideal, and not something that currently exists. This community is based on the principles of love, comfort, and fellowship, as these were the most common words used when the community ideal was evoked. In fact, when looking at the more conservative evangelicalism, the Christian path for an individual who is same-sex attracted is to become more intimately a part of this faith community and develop deep friendships (Hill, 2010). In a sermon given during the Amendment One vote for North Carolina, one of the interview subjects gave a sermon where he reminded his congregation that “we are called to walk and cry with, empathize, forgive, and support those who struggle with this temptation.” He then later states, “everyone of us is sinfully broken—even in this area of sexuality—everyone of us need accountability and grace” (Scott A. , 2012). Regardless of the perspective one has of the nature of homosexuality, queer church members who are open to the perspective of their congregations can find a community that supports them. The same is

said by the Methodist pastors (Austin, 2016; Hockett, 2016). This community would serve as a place “not of unnecessary condemnation, but a place of grace, healing, forgiveness and restoration for those who sin in anyway” (Scott A. , 2012). These conversations will be able to happen more and more, as the discourse allows for more discussions based on the principles of community and personal narrative, rather than the indifference, condemnation, and oppressive politics of the past traditions (Austin, 2016; Horne, 2016).

With a focus on the queer individuals as distinct members of this idealized community, whether they are seen or unseen, a stronger discourse can be achieved. In regards to the deviance perspective, the focus on the community and the benefits of the queer struggle would allow more communication to occur without the impasse of different Biblical interpretations. In the diversity perspective, giving LGBTQ individuals space to talk about their queerness in relation to their faith would help block the possibility of erasure of experience and struggle. Conversation and relationship are important foundations of this discourse, regardless of belief or opinion. In retooling these discourses, better communication, and more importantly better understanding, can strengthen the faith community and the queer community immensely.

Conclusion

In a recent study, researchers Corinne Gilad and Elena Stepanova (2015) investigated whether priming undergraduate college students with a religious message affected their attitudes towards members of the LGBTQ community. Participants who identified as Christian reported more negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians compared with their non-Christian peers. Despite this trend, there was no significant effect of the priming manipulation, which involved being shown Biblical passages of God in either a loving or wrathful position, on either group. Negative or angry priming using these passages did not have an impact on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, just as positive or loving passages did not prime participant attitudes. The study demonstrated that religious affiliation, religiousness, spirituality, intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation, and religious fundamentalism had a far greater role in determining attitudes toward gay men and women. I introduce this last to shed light on what transforms and evolves the discourse that is already in place. A simple sermon will do little to make a deep impact on anyone's beliefs. The key to a better discourse is the interpersonal relationships that exist in the idealized faith community.

This is created in deep discussions where all perspectives are able to be freely exchanged, outside of presuppositions and barriers that keep the discourse from flourishing. In contrast to Harris's argument of queer exodus from the faith, queer individuals need to become an integral part of the faith communities so they may share their struggles and celebrations of being queer. This is something far easier said than done. At the present moment, the deviance discourse reaches a point of breaking down. In fact, I received a book following one of my interviews from the subject. When discussing the issue of whether

Christians can agree to disagree on the matter of homosexuality, the author writes, “We are not to tolerate in our churches those whose teaching leads people to sexual sin. They must be confronted, their ministry forbidden, and their teachings refuted. This is a gospel matter. If we allow this to be a matter of acceptable disagreement within our fellowships, Jesus will hold it against us. Some forms of tolerance are sinful” (Allberry, 2014, p. 72). This seems a blatant example of the ultimate fragmentation and destruction of the discourse under the deviance perspective. There is absolutely no room for disagreement.

This is why queer Christians cannot abandon their faith. I understand their reasoning for leaving their faith behind. Over the course of this research, I myself have wondered why I still remain faithful and view this work as important. I have arrived at this conclusion: it is important because change works through relationship, through knowing the struggles of another. It is no coincidence that when asked why they held their beliefs on homosexuality, most of those who did not view homosexuality as sin cited close, personal relationships they had with individuals as a means that either started their thought process or changed their mind (Austin, 2016; Banks, 2016; Colton, 2016; Hankins, 2016). Not that those who view homosexual action as sin don’t have relationships with queer individuals, but their main source for their view stemmed from their personal understanding and interpretation of Scripture (Codd, 2016; Hockett, 2016; Horne, 2016; Scott A. , 2016; Talley, 2016). Yet it seems when looking at the historical and linguistic aspects of Scripture, there is no “literal” or “clear” consensus on Scripture. It seems that even in inerrancy of the Bible, and inerrant analysis of the text provides far more questions than answers. It is in the crucible of the rhetoric of Scripture and the personal relationships that stem from community that the

Church should be focusing on in their congregations. I know that my personal coming out has impacted the thoughts of many in my family, including my mother and grandmother.

In implimenting this change, it is important to segment each population of individuals out, as each grouping brings something different to the discourse and interactions surrounding the discourse. These groupings also provide more pragmatic and useful actions for the betterment of both the Christian and queer communities.

For those who identify as people of faith, whether queer or straight, it is important to understand the role queer individuals have in Christian community. For those queer Christians, it is important to reconcile your two identities and how they operate seperately and well as how they interplay together. Queer Christians can use and communicate this intrarelationship of identities in the faith community, as regardless of communicative perspective, it seems that this is believed to strengthen congregations. Straight Christians must then allow for spaces that these conversations can be held. In providing these spaces and opportunities to honor both the Christian and the queer, loving your neighbor seems all the more possible. For those who are open and affirming, there must be these spaces in order to minimize the problems in the discourse Harris lays out in his book. For those who see homosexual practice or play as deviant, it is important to surpass the barriers that are created within possible interpretations of Scripture, as well as a self-reflection of what has driven your beliefs. Faith and belief are difficult to pin down, and much more difficult to argue. Yet if faith was clear and easy, everyone would be religious, faithful, and believe the same thing. There needs to come a point of consensus, so that this does not persist or intensify as a poison in the discourse.

The next group that is important to this discussion is non-Christians in the LGBTQ community. As I've said before, this project has made me question why I believe what I believe, and I think I've emerged with a better understanding of the foundation of my faith. I might not be able to persuade another to believe as I do, as they have not had the experiences I have had in life. This is why Harris's argument frustrates me. Though he wants queer Christians to disregard and cast aside their faith, this argument seems similar to those who believe queerness is disreputable to being Christian. I understand why many have left the faith, and I would never fault anyone for that choice. It is difficult to be faithful even when straight, and the added oppression of queerness in the Church only adds to difficulty. Respect, however, must be mutually shown for queer individuals who value their faith and religion as much as their sexuality. It is just as difficult for me to cast aside my faith as it would be my sexuality. Both identities come together, along with many others, to create who I am. Thus, for those queer and straight non-Christians, there needs to be mutual respect of identities. And of course, for those queer and straight Christians, this respect of non-Christian identity is equally important.

Lastly, I want to speak to those that seem invisible, that walk between the lines of these two camps: closeted Christians. Simply put, there is a community that will hear your story. There is a community that will love you for who you are as an individual. Though this community isn't always easy to find, and there will always be insidious communities, but they do exist. Coming out is a journey that is shared, but it is also completely your own. No one can take that away from you. There is, however, a community ready and willing to help. This community is here to love you, to offer compassion, and to travel with you on this path. You do not need to see your identities as separate faculties of yourself, and do not be

ashamed of either. Your identities and overall identity as a human being are gifts from God. The church community is where you can communicate and celebrate these gifts with your fellow brothers and sisters. If you feel ready and comfortable in sharing these gifts, the community is waiting.

So I ask as a wise man once did, pick up your cross and follow me. While the community ideal is not perfect in reality, we can make it a reality for queer Christians. A space that permits freedom of discourse, rather than the exclusionary, hierarchal, and ultimately nondemocratic shackles of tolerance (Jakobson & Pellegrini, 2003). The discourse exists for beginning our work of relationships and discussions. It is time for our voices to be heard. It is time.

References

- Allberry, S. (2014). *Is God Anti-Gay?: And other questions about homosexuality, the Bible and same-sex attraction*. Purcellville: The Good Book Company.
- Austin, W. (2016, March 3). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Banks, C. (2016, April 8). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Codd, M. (2016, April 12). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Colton, B. (2016, April 8). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Furnish, V. P. (1994). The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context. In J. S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (pp. 18-35). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Gilad, C., & Stepanova, E. V. (2015). The Effect of Religious Priming on Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men. *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 20(4), 188-196.
- Hankins, S. (2016, April 7). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Harris, W. C. (2014). *Slouching Towards Gaytheism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hays, R. B. (1994). Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality. In J. S. Siker, *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (pp. 3-17). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Hill, W. (2010). *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Hockett, D. (2016, February 22). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Horne, C. (2016, March 1). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Jakobson, J. R., & Pellegrini, A. (2003). *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of*

- Tolerance*. New York: New York University Press.
- Nteta, T. M., & Wallsten, K. J. (2012, December). Preaching to the Choir? Religious Leaders and American Opinion on Immigration Reform. *Social Science Quarterly*, 93(4), 891-910.
- Ong, C. (2016, March 26). *King James Version of the Bible is most widely used translation*. Retrieved from Christianity Today:
<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/king.james.version.of.the.bible.is.most.widely.used.translation/82689.htm>
- Scanzoni, L. D., & Mollenkott, V. R. (1994). *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?: A Positive Christian Response*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Scott, A. (2012, June 10). *A Christian's Response to Homosexuality*. Alliance Bible Fellowship, Boone, North Carolina.
- Scott, A. (2016, February 23). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Smith, J. (2016, April 19). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- Smith, J. E. (n.d.). *What did Jesus Teach?* Retrieved from The Bible Professor:
<http://www.bibleprofessor.com/files/JesusTeachings.pdf>
- Spong, J. S. (1988). *Living in Sin?: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*. Nashville: Parthenon Press.
- Talley, M. (2016, February 23). (J. Williams, Interviewer)
- United Methodist Church. (2012). *What is the denomination's position on homosexuality?* Retrieved from United Methodist Church: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-denominations-position-on-homosexuality>
- Ward, B. W., Dahlhamer, J. M., Galinsky, A. M., & Joestl, S. S. (2014). Sexual Orientation

and Health Among U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2013. *National Health Statistics Reports*.

Appendix A

1. First, can you explain your own faith journey and why you decided to become a church leader?
2. Describe your congregation, in terms of size and demographics.
3. Can you please explain your church's ideology behind homosexuality? Is it consistent or is there some divergence from your larger Church organization's views?
4. Can you please explain your own, personal view regarding homosexuality on an individual level? What influenced your views?
5. Why do you believe this is such a divisive issue for the Church today?
6. Some have argued about the context of the passages that discuss homosexuality, and also argue that the Bible does not discuss a committed, Christian same-sex relationship? What is your interpretation of this ideology?
7. If you were to plan a sermon about the issue of homosexuality in the Church, how would you go about it, and what do you think the overall message of the sermon would be?
8. If a member of your congregation were to meet with you and explain they were only attracted to members of the same sex, and wanted your advice and counsel, how would you expect that conversation to be held? What would be some of the major points you would say to them?
9. If a same-sex couple came to your church for a Sunday service, how would you react? How would you honestly expect your congregation to react?
10. How do you see homosexuality being communicated by church leaders in the next 10 to 15 years? What do you expect to change as well as stay the same?

11. Some individuals, such as W.C. Harris in his book *Slouching Towards Gaytheism*, suggest that homophobia won't end until religion is eradicated. How would you respond to this notion?
12. What would you say to those that feel they have to choose between their sexuality and their religion? Why should those who are homosexual not turn away from their faith despite many feeling hatred from their churches?