

## INCLUSION AS A NONVIOLENT NECESSITY: AN APPEAL TO STONE-CAMPBELL MOVEMENT IDEALS

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While discussing violence in the Hebrew Bible<sup>1</sup>, it is tempting to consider the practice of spiritually-motivated violence from a distance. Obscured by the fog of cultural differences and a belief in human progress, we can ascribe these instances to primitive ethical and spiritual understandings. We have a sense that who we believe ourselves to be (rational) and what we believe about the early and persisting Christian witness (loving) create a religious tradition that is not fixated on violent expressions of divine commands.

Nevertheless, spiritually-motivated violence persists within contemporary Christianity--including within the Stone-Campbell Movement--through the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community and enforcement of sanctified cisheteronormativity.<sup>2</sup> Violence, in this context, is not limited to physical harm or outright hate-crimes. The spiritually-motivated violence that is inflicted upon LGBTQ+ Christians is expressed in physical, psychological, relational, and economic forms and manifests both directly and indirectly to diminish, distance, dehumanize, and discard people who are made in the image of God.

To justify this violence, the few biblical texts pertaining to sexuality have been largely maintained as literal and universal precepts. Two verses in particular are used as a foundation to support this violent posture against LGBTQ+ people: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both specify men having sex with other men as a taboo. The penalties for this offense are that the men are to be “cut off from their people” (18:29) and to be executed (20:13). These texts come from within the “Holiness Code” which are most likely post-exilic elaboration on Hebrew rituals and morality.<sup>3</sup> Additional stories, such as the destruction of Sodom, exist in the imaginations of many

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<sup>1</sup> Presented as part of the 2021 Stone-Campbell Journal Conference on the theme of “Violence of God in the Old Testament”.

<sup>2</sup> This paper will employ the acronym LGBTQ+ to signify the spectrum of identities, relationships, expressions, and orientations outside of cisgender, heterosexual, or allosexual definition. I will also refer to gender and sexual *normativity*. This differs from adjacent terms such as cissexism/heterosexism (prejudice), transphobia/homophobia/biphobia/queerphobia/acephobia (fear), or transmisia/homomisia/bimisia/queermisia/acemisia (hatred) to describe the embedded cultures of churches and institutions within the Stone-Campbell Movement. In common usage, -phobia descriptors encompass the range of negative responses based on orientation, identity, expression, or relationships.

<sup>3</sup> Despite critical studies dating its composition to during or after the exile, its placement in the second book of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament conveys a mythic significance as more directly aligned with the character and direction of God. This may have been an intention of the exilic composers. Walter Houston and James Dunn remark, “we find Yahweh speaking directly and personally to his people [in contrast to the “Priestly Code” of ritual instructions in chapters 1-7; 11-15; 16; 27], using ‘I’ and ‘you’ frequently, especially in the constant refrain ‘I am the Lord your God’.” (24).

as a proof of a divine indictment against homosexuality that must be maintained within Christianity.

Stemming from these Leviticus and Genesis texts, subsequent interpretations and ethics that permit coercive behaviors and violence are justified as moral absolutes and essential commitments of those who seek to honor God and follow Christ. The pertinent question is whether faithfulness requires exclusion of and violence against non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people.

## SPIRITUALLY-MOTIVATED VIOLENCE

Exclusionary teachings force a dissonance within people who are acknowledging their identities and orientations yet unable to articulate them for fear of rejection. With a consistent message that gender and sexual diversity are incompatible with Christian faith, this fear is not unsubstantiated. Inclusion is not an abstract question, but a pressing need for people within our churches, classrooms, and communities.

For example, LGBTQ+ youth and young adults have a rate of suicidal behavior that far exceeds their cis-hetero demographic peers.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, according to researchers,

“Those [youth] who were able to be open in their faith-based communities were also less likely to have considered suicide than other non-heterosexual teens.

Those who are in faith-based institutions where there are negative views toward homosexuality and bisexuality rarely are open about their orientation. Those teens live with a very painful silence.”<sup>5 6</sup>

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Walter J. Houston, and James D. G. Dunn. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible: Leviticus*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019) 23-25.

<sup>4</sup> Multiple studies in the United States and abroad have shown a considerable increase in suicidal ideation and action among LGBTQ youth, especially gay youth. For a summary of research, see Gary Remafedi “Sexual Orientation and Youth Suicide,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 282, no. 13 (1999):1291–1292. DOI:10.1001/jama.282.13.1291-JMS1006-6-1.

<sup>5</sup> Clapp, Steve, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak. *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion, and Sexuality*. Fort Wayne: LifeQuest, 2010, 100.

<sup>6</sup>These negative views have been cultivated and mainstreamed in evangelicalism due to works that focus on enforcing family hierarchy to prevent feminization of boys, believing this to be a cause of homosexuality. See Jack Hyles, *How to Rear Children*, (Hammond: Hyles-Anderson Publishers, 1972), 172; James Dobson, *Dare to Discipline*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1970), 23.

A disproportionate number of youth without housing identify as LGBTQ+<sup>7</sup> and they are 120% as likely to become homeless, compared to their heterosexual peers<sup>8</sup>. Reports suggest that these high rates of homelessness are often the result of young LGBTQ+ people being abandoned or fleeing violence fueled by their family's religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

People who do "come out" within a non-supportive religious environment may also be driven to cure the dissonance through a combination of physical, psychological, and spiritual violence in the practice of "reparative" (or "conversion") therapy. The precepts of this type of intervention are also intertwined in many pastoral approaches that use prayer, church discipline, support groups, and other spiritual practices in an attempt to diminish the significance of one's orientation.<sup>10</sup> While advocates claim an ability to change someone's orientation, the effect is more often focused on eliminating non-cisheteronormative behaviors and may involve self-flagellation, arranged marriages, chemical castration, or corrective rape. Though denounced by prominent professional medical associations<sup>11</sup> this activity is almost exclusively practiced and supported by conservative evangelical Christians.

The admission of an LGBTQ+ identity may also be met with an expectation of involuntary celibacy, which is a form of dehumanizing violence.<sup>12</sup> This "option" can bar a person from

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<sup>7</sup> Choi, S.K., et al. (2015). "Serving Our Youth 2015: The Needs and Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth Experiencing Homelessness," Los Angeles: True Colors United (June 2015): <https://truecolorsunited.org/portfolio/serving-our-youth/>.

<sup>8</sup> Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., and Samuels, G.M. (2017). *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America. National Estimates*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (2017). <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Ray, Nicholas, et.al. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness* (Washington: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007), 1. [http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports\\_and\\_research/homeless\\_youth](http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/homeless_youth).

<sup>10</sup> The underlying assumption being that non-heterosexuality is a disordered state with spiritual remedies or mental health interventions.

<sup>11</sup> Including the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, among many others.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Beck describes an implicit theology regarding sexuality that "holy sex" requires mutual stimulation to be truly relational in contrast with sexual behaviors that are "hedonistic". He applies this framework to the perception that "frequently occurring pleasure asymmetries in homosexual sex highlight the hedonics, leading to the conclusion that homosexual sex is 'just about the sex': sex that is non-relational, non-intimate and aimed mainly at physical gratification" (109).

In a parenthetical statement, he does admit that this message is harmful to LGBTQ+ people: "Specifically, if the Christian community, wittingly or unwittingly, communicates to the homosexual population that their sexual lives are perceived as non-relational and excessively hedonic, we are communicating a message that is inherently dehumanizing. And this communication, wittingly or unwittingly, is contrary to the Christian witness." (109)

Richard Beck, "Regarding Sex, Beyond Hedonic Ambivalence," *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 3. 2008.

companionship, authenticity, romantic and physical affection, and the ability to be fully known and included in a community.<sup>13</sup>

Exclusionary Christian communities also consistently practice economic violence. Parents may threaten to withhold material support, or students at conservative Christian universities may face the revocation of scholarships or be expelled if they openly identify as LGBTQ+<sup>14</sup>. Within the church, LGBTQ+ clergy often rightly fear that their employment would be in jeopardy if they were to come out. Similar fears of economic violence are also prevalent among potential allies who would face sanctions if they were to publicly support the full inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community.

People may leave a church or organize for a pastor to be fired. A donor may threaten to withhold their pledge. A faculty member may find themselves distanced from their colleagues or administration<sup>15</sup>. And, especially in a church setting that relies upon networking and personal connections (such as the Christian Church/Churches of Christ), an LGBTQ+ identity or support for the community can be considered incongruent with the character of the movement and a sign of spiritual deficiency, which may result in a form of shunning.

The justification then for violence against the LGBTQ+ community is typically supported by three main components: (1) the Bible clearly forbids LGBTQ+ intimacy; (2) cisheteronormativity is the exclusively orthodox Christian position; and (3) it is not possible to be fully Christian while fully embracing one's LGBTQ+ identity.

To respond to these three claims, I will apply identity markers familiar to the Stone-Campbell Movement to demonstrate the potential for the nonviolent inclusion of LGBTQ+ people within those communities that consider themselves heirs to the Movement.

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<sup>13</sup> The view of sexuality extending beyond biological necessity, though still reserved for heterosexual expression, is developed in detail in Eddie Parish, "Thinking More Wholly and Holy About Sexuality," *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 7. 2008.

<sup>14</sup> See "The LGBTQ+ Student Divide: The State of Sexual and Gender Minority Students at Taxpayer-Funded Christian Colleges," *College Pulse* (2021) <https://reports.collegepulse.com/lgbq-student-divide/>. and Christopher Yuan *Giving a Voice to the Voiceless: A Qualitative Study of Reducing Marginalization of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex Attracted Students at Christian Colleges and Universities* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> As the guest editor for an issue of *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry* on the theme of Human Sexuality, Jack Holland recounts that when discussing the upcoming issue, a colleague responded, "You do have tenure don't you?". This precarity was present over the potential of academic members discussing *heteronormative* sexuality, which should convey the additional challenge in advocating for broader inclusion within the Movement, even among scholars.

Stuart Love and D'Estira Love, with Jack Holland. (2008) "Editors' Notes," *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 2. 2008.

## INCLUSION IN THE STONE-CAMPBELL MOVEMENT

Among the traditions that share a heritage in the Stone-Campbell Movement, there is no established position regarding human sexuality or gender identity, nor is there standard practice for how to faithfully and lovingly relate to people within the LGBTQ+ community.

The authors of the *Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* wrote, “At the beginning of the twenty-first century most members of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ reflected conservative Evangelical positions on sexuality. The same was true of Churches of Christ ...[w]hile Disciples [of Christ] were much more diverse in their stances on these issues”<sup>16</sup>. At the time of writing, this author is unfamiliar with any LGBTQ+-affirming churches within the independent Christian Church or the Churches of Christ. Despite the Disciples of Christ adopting an inclusive principle in a 2013 resolution<sup>17</sup> and an affiliated LGBTQ+-directed ministry<sup>18</sup>, the number of officially inclusive congregations lags far behind those who remain unaffirming.<sup>19</sup>

A search of the *Stone-Campbell Journal*, *Leaven*, *Discipliana*, *Restoration Quarterly*, and *Telois* reveal that none has published any peer-reviewed articles addressing LGBTQ+ inclusion.<sup>20 21</sup> Articles in magazines such as *Firm Foundation*, *Gospel Advocate*, and *Disciple Renewal* that speak to sexuality typically center on literal readings of specific texts and arrive at exclusionary conclusions.<sup>22</sup> More recently, articles in *Christian Standard* and *Christian Chronicle* maintain a

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<sup>16</sup> D. Newell Williams, Douglas Foster, Paul Blowers, eds, *Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 223.

<sup>17</sup> Resolution No. 1327, *Becoming a People of Grace and Welcome to All*, accepted by the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Orlando, Florida, July 13-17, 2013.

See also Resolution No. 9719, *A Call on the Participation of Gay and Lesbian Persons in the Life of the Church*, accepted by the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Denver, Colorado, July 25-29, 1997 and Resolution No. 1929, *An Invitation to Education for Welcoming and Receiving the Gifts of Transgender and Gender-Diverse People*, accepted by the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, July 20-24, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance, [www.disciplesallianceq.org](http://www.disciplesallianceq.org), formerly GLAD Alliance.

<sup>19</sup> At the time of writing, 215 Disciples of Christ congregations were officially Open and Affirming, representing about 6% of the total number of congregations within the United States and Canada. Inclusion is a concern for all branches of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

<sup>20</sup> Search queries included the terms “gay”, “homosexual/ity”, “LGBT”, “LGBTQ”, “queer”, “same-sex”, “sexuality”.

<sup>21</sup> In an issue of *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry* devoted to the topic of Human Sexuality, a concluding note reads “In determining the focus of this issue the decision to avoid the topic [of homosexuality] was intentional.” Despite this editorial directive, several contributors included material that specifically dismissed the sexuality of LGBTQ+ persons.

Jack Holland, “Resource Guide,” *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 12. 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Browning “Gay and Lesbian Rights.” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas Foster, Paul Blowers, Anthony Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 354.

position that non-hetero sexuality is against biblical directives and Christian spirituality. LGBTQ+ characters are described as being outsiders to the church<sup>23</sup> or people whom Christians are meant to love<sup>24</sup>, in some vague way, despite not allowing them to recognize their full humanity or place within the community<sup>25</sup>. In a movement known for its breadth of perspectives, it is surprising that there has not been more thorough engagement on the topic.<sup>26</sup>

Dean Walker, describing the theological process of the Christian Church/Churches of Christ in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writes that rather than “encourag[ing] depth of thought and scholarly research, they turned to ‘evangelical’ books presenting the very errors of ‘fundamentalism’ from which their forebears had been rescued”.<sup>27</sup> This is the setting in which societal questions of gender and sexual diversity began to become more pronounced in the church, creating the hostile environment for LGBTQ+ inclusion that we see today.

Even so, the ethos of the Restoration Movement extends beyond the limits of fundamentalist evangelicalism and has the capacity to model a healthier posture for determining a faithful response to contemporary questions with missiological significance. And, more urgently, the members of our Movement have the ability to choose nonviolence--eschewing the harms caused by exclusion, dehumanization, and coercion--and more courageously follow the path of Christ.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, see Caleb Kaltenbach, “Living in the Tension: How the Church Must Respond to Sexual Identity Issues in Both Truth and Grace” *Christian Standard*, April 25, 2019. <https://christianstandard.com/2019/04/living-in-the-tension/>.

<sup>24</sup> See Sean Palmer “All God’s Children: Loving Our LGBTQ Friends As We Love Ourselves” *Christian Standard*, July 6, 2015. <https://christianstandard.com/2015/07/all-gods-children-loving-our-lgbtq-friends-as-we-love-ourselves/>.

<sup>25</sup> See Bobby Ross Jr. “How to keep LGBTQ people from becoming ‘spiritual orphans’” *Christian Chronicle*. October 16, 2018. <https://christianchronicle.org/how-to-keep-lgbtq-people-from-becoming-spiritual-orphans/>.

<sup>26</sup> John Brown, writing a history of the movement in 1904 remarked, “The Disciples have no trial court for the adjustment of matters of general interest but the court of public opinion, and the most efficient means of pleading before that court is the religious journal.”

John T. Brown, *Churches of Christ: A Historical, Biographical, and Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in the United States, Australasia, England and Canada* (Louisville: John P. Morton and Company, 1904), 96, referenced in John M. Imbler (2021) "Journalism's Deep Roots in the Stone-Campbell Movement," *Journal of Disciplina*: Vol. 74 : Iss. 1 , Article 2. Page 3.

<sup>27</sup> Dean Walker, *Adventuring for Christian Unity & Other Essays* (Johnson City: Emmanuel School of Religion, 1992), 599-600.

## WHERE THE BIBLE SPEAKS

This essay is not exegetical in nature, in that I do not intend to provide lexical analysis of the so-called “clobber passages”<sup>28</sup> as significant scholarly and pastoral work has been done in this area<sup>29</sup> and it is not within my scope to catalogue their conclusions, only to establish that serious, cohesive, faithful interpretations of the Bible exist that support the full inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community.

The issue is not textual, but hermeneutical, as a selective literalism and reliance on English translations create an environment for restrictive reading that establishes a norm with violent and exclusionary sanctions. The priority with which the Stone-Campbell Movement considers scripture requires a more thorough engagement than literalism to determine the nature of faithful practice.<sup>30</sup>

Translations of texts pertaining to sexuality are forced into alignment with Levitical code to create a supposed divine mandate. It is ministerial malpractice to treat select verses as eternal and literal, given their historic usage to justify abuse, while ignoring the existence and validity of alternative interpretations more consistent with the messages of Jesus and the early Christian community.

To maintain the literalist reading is, in Walker’s words above, an embrace of fundamentalism. Literalism is a “lowest common denominator” approach to unity on the basis of scripture, though this approach cannot claim to support unity while it is used to exclude others and other faithful interpretations. Recent history has seen a resurgence in appreciation of the Old Testament within the Movement, which William Baker has described as an “area of change that makes Christian Churches more compatible with evangelicalism”<sup>31</sup>. We should be cautious, however, not to uncritically adopt assumptions of evangelical interpretations and reductionist conclusions, which

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<sup>28</sup> Genesis 19:11; Leviticus 18:22-24; 20:13; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 1:7.

<sup>29</sup> See James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013); Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016); Robert Gnuse “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45, no. 2 (May 2015): 68–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107915577097>; David Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* (Canton: Read the Spirit Books, 2015); Brandan Robertson, *The Gospel of Inclusion: A Christian Case for LGBT+ Inclusion in the Church* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019); Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> There is a frequent implication that supporters of inclusivity are unaware of biblical texts. In truth, LGBTQ+ Christians are often painfully familiar with scripture as they have exegeted for their spiritual survival.

<sup>31</sup> William Baker, *Christian Churches (Independent) Are We Evangelical?* in *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, William Baker, ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 47.

may neglect cultural and contextual analysis<sup>32</sup>, covenantal schema<sup>33</sup>, contemporary scholarship<sup>34</sup>, and our commitment to the freedom of interpretation<sup>35</sup>. Especially when a haphazard use of Old Testament texts is used to form the buttress of exclusionary theology.

Further, literalists attempt to wring something inappropriate from scripture when they expect it to provide authoritative confirmation of modern cishetero norms within the text. This question is anachronistic to the biblical authors, though the presence of people described as presenting and behaving against these norms is not.<sup>36</sup>

We see this as Jesus uses non-heterosexual persons (“natural-born eunuchs” = εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως = “eunuchs who out of stomach of mother were born thusly”<sup>37</sup>) as a positive ethical example of who can better accept and follow his teaching in Matthew 19:12.<sup>38</sup> Likewise in Acts 8, the Ethiopian Eunuch is baptized without regard to their sex/gender presentation or designation. We also cannot claim that there is a clear biblical imperative that sexual relationships between “one man and one woman” are the basis for human flourishing. Rather, some of the healthiest relationships described in the Bible appear to be the

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<sup>32</sup> Tim Sensing. (1996) “A Strategy for Preaching Paraenesis,” *Restoration Quarterly*. Vol. 38: No. 4: 207-218.

<sup>33</sup> A parallel may exist in Alexander Campbell’s “Address on War”, where he specifically states that Christians cannot claim “justification or extenuation” of violence that is commanded or permitted for the Jewish people. Alexander Campbell, “Address on War” in *Alexander Campbell Reader* Lester McAllister, ed. St. Louis: CBP Press, 1988), 103.

<sup>34</sup> Reading within contemporary scholarship may involve ethical considerations (Bernadette Brooten "Research on the New Testament and Early Christian Literature may Assist the Churches in Setting Ethical Priorities." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 1 (2017): 229-236. DOI:10.15699/jbl.1361.2017.1367) or intersectionality (Gale Yee "Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of our Discipline." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139, no. 1 (2020): 7-26. DOI:10.15699/jbl.1391.2020.1b) among other concerns.

<sup>35</sup> For example, whether assent to policy/doctrinal positions is expected to participate within the Evangelical Theological Society, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, and other evangelical institutions.

<sup>36</sup> For a description of how early Christian communities existed within cultural sexual identities, see S. Scott Bartchy, “Power, Submission, and Sexual Identity Among the Early Christians” in *Essays on New Testament Christianity*, C. Robert Wetzel, ed. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1978) 50-80; Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> Paul McReynolds *Word Study Greek English New Testament* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1999), 73. The use of κοιλίας to refer to both “womb” and “stomach” in the New Testament should caution against relying too heavily on the biblical text or its authors possessing an accurate understanding of physiology. For more detail regarding the eunuch language in Matthew 19:12, see J. David Hester “Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*: Vol 28: Iss. 1, 13-40. 2005. DOI: 10.1177/0142064X05057772.

<sup>38</sup> A similar ethical mention of the “natural-born eunuch” is found in Sirach 20:4 & 30:20, which--as intertestamental wisdom literature--would have been known to Jesus and the early church. The term "natural-born eunuch" was a neutral term to distinguish a man who does not have sexual desire for women.

non-heterosexual partnerships between David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:1-4) or Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:16-18).

In our desire to “speak where the Bible speaks”, we must avoid the fundamentalist tendency to flatten scripture and instead acknowledge that there are multiple faithful readings, including those that support the full recognition and inclusion of gender and sexual diversity. Instead, we must evaluate the influences upon our hermeneutic that would lead us to rationalize oppression and violence. The ramifications of this exclusionary hermeneutic will be discussed below.

## NO CREED BUT CHRIST

Following an assumption that there is a simple, straightforward biblical stance on sexuality is the construction of cisheteronormativity as an integral doctrinal position of Christianity. This is where the rhetorical impact of those who have branded cisheteronormativity as the “traditional” position has succeeded<sup>39</sup>. While it seems that there are more historical examples of cishetero-described people, our understandings of sexual physiology and social norms have changed from centuries past when gender and sexual diversity were present but either repressed, left unrecorded, or referred to in terms or euphemisms unrecognized by the modern reader.

The framing of LGBTQ+ inclusion as a divergent theological position creates an artificial shorthand that functions as a de facto creed.

The effect of creedal governance is to enshrine doctrine and to measure one’s association within a community. These efforts are largely reductive, defensive, and punitive, which is why the Stone-Campbell Movement has rejected their use. Even when they are re-cast as “Statements of Faith” or similar nomenclature, their authority stands in defiance to our commitment to the freedom of interpretation and an open invitation to participate in the Christian faith.

These positions, whether implicit or explicit, become the expectation for belonging to a church as a member, following a call to ministry, or employment or education in an affiliated institution. Because these statements are presumed to have derived from scripture, they function as canon law for interpreting other aspects of morality and personal ethics. Further, these shadow creeds

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<sup>39</sup> For example, Adam Mearse uses the term “orthodox sexuality” to combine doctrinal correctness with orientation and expression. His definition is the “beliefs that: (1) Sexuality is a natural part of being created human and, as such, is neither inherently good nor evil. It is instrumental to human life in helping us connect with others, *marry, have children*, etc. (2) Sexual intercourse is an experience that God has designed and *intends specifically for a man and a woman to engage in within the context of marriage*. (3) All Christians are called upon to live sexually pure lives, regardless of their age or marital status.” (emphasis added to demonstrate cisheteronormativity)

Adam Mearse "We Need to Talk: Evangelical College Students' Perceptions on Positive Orthodox Sexuality and Pedagogical Implications for Church Leaders and Parents", PhD diss., (Trinity International University, 2015).

may operate at a level of church governance that is hidden from the view of the community. There may be a public posture of welcome, only for a person to be confronted by exclusionary policies as they begin to become more involved with ministry.

As such, one's position on LGBTQ+ inclusion is used as a litmus test to evaluate one's commitment to a combination of positions regarding biblical authority, family structure, gender hierarchies, and spiritual purity. To be affirming of oneself or of another in the LGBTQ+ community is deemed as a deficiency in character and a sign of compromised faith. The rhetoric insists that inclusivity is merely a "capitulation to secular culture" and stands in contrast with true worship and devotion derived from a simple reading and application of the Bible<sup>40</sup>.

The exclusionary violence that stems from this can be seen in requiring LGBTQ+ people to hide their lives from the community in ways that people who follow cishetero norms are not required to do. This hiding of the self enforces internalized phobias, self-hatred, and destructive compartmentalization. Additionally, economic violence (or the threat of it) hangs over the heads of clergy and other leaders if they are to come out or to even express support as tentative allies for the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>41</sup>

The significance of "no creed but Christ" challenges us to interrogate the qualifications we use to determine association within our communities. The teachings of the Stone-Campbell Movement have the capacity to help us hold ambiguity, which ultimately enriches the witness of our Movement within the broader religious landscape. It also forces us to examine what we have elevated to replace discipleship and Christlikeness in our evaluations of ourselves and our spiritual maturity. Inclusion is an opportunity to re-calibrate Christ as the center of our identity rather than cisheteronormativity derived from literalistic, exclusionary readings of select texts. From this center, we are better able to understand the dynamic nature of a restorative and liberating gospel and integrate the components that make us who we are.

## CHRISTIANS ONLY

Christians who are part of the LGBTQ+ community face erasure or minimization within the church, based on fellow believers' interpretations and creeds described above. This

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<sup>40</sup> Advocates of restrictive interpretation may advance a position based on a "plain reading of scripture", though this is an overapplication of the tradition of perspicuity in Protestantism.

<sup>41</sup> The hesitation of Christian leaders to move toward some detente over inclusion demonstrates that they can calculate the reality of what it means to be neutral or affirming in their Christian environment. Yet their reluctance and avoidance transfer the effects of dissociation to the lives of the marginalized. Demands of loyalty, whether explicit or implicit, that people remain closeted, restrict their public and private lives, avoid "rocking the boat", resign quietly, or delay until a "right time" are a coercive tactic that is rarely, if ever, reciprocated by a church or institution. Many believe that they can affect change from within a system, though this is difficult, if not impossible, to do when negative sanctions persist that limit one's ability to live and speak openly.

psychological violence creates an environment in which the very existence of LGBTQ+ Christians is in doubt, causing people to question the limits of their belonging in the community and in the world.<sup>42</sup>

Various forms of exclusion persist that seek to discredit the co-occurrence of LGBTQ+ orientation and Christian faith. Rhetoric directly equating LGBTQ+ identity with a sinful condition establishes a dissociative spirituality that confers deficiency<sup>43</sup> though more subtle forms of this type of exclusion have become common due to social pressures.

A purported “middle” position is to “welcome all” and claim to be neutral on matters of sexuality, gender identity, and presentation. However, without the explicit policies to support inclusion, these claims fail to protect LGBTQ+ people who believe a church is open to them until they are proven otherwise. Similarly, individual leaders may present themselves as “allies” or discerning their position, while the congregations and institutions they represent remain exclusionary. LGBTQ+ Christians may be welcome to contribute toward a community but not allowed to serve openly or in leadership. There may be strict behavior limits, such as which bathrooms to use, whether one can express affection with a partner, or restrictions on one’s clothing and mannerisms. More restrictive is the directive that LGBTQ+ people are to remain celibate<sup>44</sup> or seek cisheteronormative relationships if they are to remain Christians.

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<sup>42</sup> “[I]t is evident that negative and ambiguous religious statement does impact the spiritual, religious, and particularly the psychology health of LGBT individuals.”

Scott Boscoe-Huffman, et al. “Religious Belief and Perceptions of Psychological Health in LGBT Individuals”, Presented at the 116<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (Boston, MA, August 2008) 6.

<sup>43</sup> In a very personal essay, Leroy Garrett describes the tragic death of his son, who was gay, to AIDS in 1986. While stressing the need for unconditional love and acceptance, he also advocates to “love and accept them without approving of the lifestyle. That is the way God loves and accepts us in our erring way” (138-9). Homosexuality is described as a “problem” and a “complex and disturbing question”, to be countered by centering the “biblical view of God’s intention for human sexuality...that God made sexual union for a purpose-the uniting of husband and wife in holy matrimony” (139) and as a model for the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:25). He sees no place for LGBTQ+ relationships within this model, baselessly claiming that “[homosexuality] is nearly always grossly promiscuous, with as many as a thousand partners during a lifetime not uncommon. Lasting monogamous relationships are very rare. It does not overstate the case to say that to be homosexual is to be nonmonogamous” (139).

This description of the death of their son and excurses on homosexuality come within an article reflecting on the value of relationships that extend beyond sexuality to emphasize companionship and mutual discipleship throughout life, yet he will not allow for this possibility for LGBTQ+ persons.

Leroy Garrett, “Now That I’m Ninety,” *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 9. 2008. 137-139.

<sup>44</sup> The decision to abstain from sexual activity remains valid as a voluntary decision that is open to all, regardless of sexuality. Voluntary celibacy among LGBTQ+ Christians is presented in Wendy VanderWal-Gritter *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014).

A problem with the “loving all, welcoming” rhetoric when detached from full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people is that it allows Christians to distance themselves from their ultimately violent rejection of God's children. This serves to make the LGBTQ+ or affirming person the instigator of conflict rather than the victim of institutional ostracism.<sup>45</sup> Exclusion language persists through the use of terminology to differentiate the LGBTQ+ Christian, such as “same-sex attracted” or “struggling [with one’s ‘sinful’/’abnormal’ sexuality, gender identity, etc.]”. These terms are not used by the larger LGBTQ+ community and do not have cisgender or heterosexual counterparts.

Regardless of the intent, the effect is to isolate a person from the wider inclusive community and from their church (in which cisheteronormativity is centered and enforced through sanctions). This isolation reinforces the belief that LGBTQ+ people are inherently disordered.

Affirmation of the validity of individual faith has been central to our Movement’s identity since its beginnings. Barton Stone wrote, “If our faith be ever so imperfect, and blended with error, yet if it leads us to do the will of God, and bear fruits of the Spirit; if it works by love; if it purifies the heart; if it overcomes the world -- it is the faith of a Christian”.<sup>46</sup> The basis of belonging has always resisted narrow definition and been more concerned with acknowledging where faith exists and not about requiring doctrinal assent.

LGBTQ+ Christians who are part of the Stone-Campbell Movement exhibit signs of faith and are rightfully members of the Priesthood of All Believers. Similar to how the faith of Cornelius (Acts 10) persuaded the early church to welcome Gentiles (Acts 15), the inclusion of LGBTQ+ Christians fulfills the universal restorative message of the gospel.

Even if a local congregation, university, or organization does not yet practice inclusion, they must recognize that there are LGBTQ+ people—both in the wider church as well as in churches within the Stone-Campbell tradition—whose faith is legitimate and fruitful. US national data shows a growth in both participation of and support for the LGBTQ+ community within Christianity<sup>47</sup> and if *the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and*

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<sup>45</sup> This pattern is known as DARVO: Deny (the accusation or validity of offense), Attack (the character of the person reporting offense), Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender.

<sup>46</sup> Barton Stone, "An Humble Address to the Various Denominations of Christian in America," *Christian Messenger*. 2, No. 1 (November 1827): 5.

<sup>47</sup> According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report, even though Christian identification had declined 7.8 percent to 70.6 percent total, the percentage of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons identifying as Christian had risen 6 percent, from 42 to 48 percent, since 2013.

“America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (May 12, 2015) <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

“A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (June 13, 2013) [https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/06/SDT\\_LGBT-Americans\\_06-2013.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/06/SDT_LGBT-Americans_06-2013.pdf).

*constitutionally one*, LGBTQ+ Christians are already part of the church, despite anyone's denial or protestations.

LGBTQ+ Christians worship, serve, and learn throughout the churches, ministries, and institutions of higher education<sup>48</sup> of the Stone-Campbell Movement and they have had to accept that they must coexist with people who would deny their very presence, faith, and personal validity or cause them physical harm. Their survival is a testament to their faith and commitment to the Movement, which is waiting to be reciprocated by the people and institutions who have stoked division and perpetrated violence against them. The initial steps towards fostering mutual relationships that lead to greater understanding of one another are recognizing the damage that has been done and committing to repair harm. These steps open the possibility for further fellowship and policy change.<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

While this paper has focused primarily on the identity of LGBTQ+ persons, a similar argument can be made for the full inclusion of people who identify by their racialized identities, sex or gender, disability, or national and ethnic origins. For one to be safe to bring their whole self into

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In a 2018 PRRI poll, 26% of Religiously Affiliated respondents identified as “Consistently Liberal” positions (whose definition included support for same-sex marriage) compared to 12% who selected “Consistently Conservative” positions (including opposition to same-sex marriage). The “Consistently Liberal” identification also led each subcategory aside from White Evangelical Protestant. Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons *Just Faith: Reclaiming Progressive Christianity* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2020), 89-101.

Among self-identified Protestants, the percentage of those responding that “homosexuality should be accepted by society” grew by 10 percentage points between 2003 and 2013 (36% for/57% against to 46%/46%; +8% for White Evangelicals: 22%/71% to 30%/71%; +19% for White Mainline: 49%/43% to 68%/28%).

“Growing Support for Gay Marriage: Changed Minds and Changing Demographics.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (March 20, 2013) <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2013/03/20/growing-support-for-gay-marriage-changed-minds-and-changing-demographics/>.

<sup>48</sup> A 2021 report by College Pulse estimates that 30% of undergraduate students in schools associated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (of which many Stone-Campbell institutions are members) identify as or express relationships outside of cishetero norms.

“The LGBTQ+ Student Divide: The State of Sexual and Gender Minority Students at Taxpayer-Funded Christian Colleges,” College Pulse (2021) <https://reports.collegepulse.com/lgbtq-student-divide/>.

<sup>49</sup> As churches, universities, and institutions within the Stone-Campbell Movement consider altering positions regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion, there are people within our traditions with experience and competencies to shape meaningful policies that are consistent with the values and expressions of the Movement.

In addition to the Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance, CenterPeace ([www.centerpeace.net](http://www.centerpeace.net)) is a resource to the Church of Christ, see Sally Gary *Affirming: A Memoir of Faith, Sexuality, and Staying in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2021).

a Christian community is imperative for experiencing the *koinonia* community that we seek to restore from early Christianity. These identities shape our experiences with the world and with one another and are not impediments to Christian discipleship. This is the type of fellowship, which William Robertson describes as “the interpenetration of personality...without its loss”<sup>50</sup>, that creates a more robust community to hear and live the gospel.

My contention, then, is that within the Stone-Campbell Movement there is no basis for considering sexual orientation or gender identity as an essential component of our faith practices. Therefore, policies and practices which would discriminate against LGBTQ+ persons are the result of social factors that are assumed and uncritically adopted from outside the tradition. As such, they must be scrutinized to determine whether they reflect the spirit of Christ and the direction of the Movement. Inclusion, however, cannot happen by decree but must be cultivated among the contextual environments of local churches and associations through attention to the heritage of our Movement, as explored in this essay. Likewise, inclusion cannot happen without intentionality, and so our churches, ministries, universities, and institutions must resist the inertia of a cisheteronormative status quo adopted from evangelical fundamentalism.

We must not settle for the passive type of nonviolence that is better understood as mere tolerance. While this is necessary in the short-term in order to prevent further harm, the tolerance-ethic will retain implicit hostilities under the veneer of “welcoming all”. Rather, to actively seek to be anti-violent and restorative in ways that make room for the full belonging of all members allows us to continually root out the biases and prejudices that prevent us from fuller discipleship in our communities.

To be “open and affirming” is not just possible with our restorative ethos, it is the necessary alignment with the guiding principles that give shape to Christianity as a whole and to our distinctive expression of Christian unity and discipleship in particular. The full inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community is an opportunity to renounce the violence that is permitted and perpetrated against our Christian siblings, so that we might be fully able to live up to our banner ethic of “*in essentials, unity; non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, love*”.

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<sup>50</sup> William Robinson *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 17.

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