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Sex After Church: Sexuality via Christology, Revelation, and Ecclesiology

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I have two theological trains of thought I'd like to follow here, one on the line between Christology and anthropology and the other between theology about revelation and hermeneutics. The first, as far as I can tell, does not yet lead to anywhere conclusive for our questions about sexuality, which will put extra strain on the second, which doesn't either but will at least offer some practical ecclesiological stops. After that, I have a few personal comments and some related observations.

*When unity is derived from agreement, the bond is tenuous
and church leaders have good reason to worry.*

CHRISTOLOGY

I use the term *Christology* to refer to attempts to explain one of the church's basic confessions about Jesus: that he is fully God and fully human in a way that neither half of that confession cancels out or infringes on the other. This confession is simple enough to say but in the history of the church it has not always been easy to explain. Indeed, it's not even been clear if the confession is *conceivable*.

The parameters of conceivability for early Christians were established by the Greeks, and in a Christian or modern culture, these parameters remain largely in effect. In our so-called *postChristian* or {158} *postmodern* culture, the same parameters are there, they're just more like guideposts than boundaries.¹

The Greek mind was largely concerned about the threat of change, the way everything seems to fade and disappear over time. This impermanence made things seem less real, or maybe not real at all. The remedy sought and found was *stability*—that which does not change is truly real—and this stability was famously located in two places: a thing is real either deep within itself, beneath the possibility of change, or insofar as it reflects something high above itself, beyond the possibility of change. The common theme is resilience to *change*—to really exist is to be substantially solid or ideally stable.



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In Christian theology, this kind of thinking has always been a sticking point. Right at the crux of what we believe are two big changes—God somehow becomes a human and then, somehow, dies. The consequent conundrum meant Christology had some fundamental questions to tackle: what remains and what is change; what is *being* and what is *act*? My hope is that by looking at how the church has tried to understand Jesus in these terms we will see some similarities with how we think about sexuality. What I think we'll find is that some of our most difficult questions arise from beliefs that are rarely made explicit. We tend to think something or someone is real or legitimate either to the degree that they simply are that way very deeply, or to the degree that by being that way they somehow correspond to a higher ideal.

These two modes of thought began as conceptual alternatives long before Christ but by the time the church started trying to explain itself they had mostly blended into a set of common parameters. Within these, the mystery of Christ had two opposing pulls: either Jesus is human and divine *deeply*—by being both “substances”—or he is human and divine *ideally*—by being both “forms.” Most of Christological history is about the to-and-fro between these options and most of our settled creeds are various careful blends of both. From time to time in this history someone would take one of the original two modes of thought to its logical conclusion, to a point inevitably beyond the shared parameters, and thereby achieve for themselves a new title: *heretic*.

Several of our various Christological heresies are germane to our questions about sexuality for the way they show us some of our deepest presuppositions in rare high-relief, and for the way this view enables us also to see some of the consequences of ideas that fall out of step with the Christian community. I'll simplify the story² by following roughly half the semantic field in this section about Christology, and then move more broadly across the other half in the next section about revelation. {159}

From the side inclined to think of being in terms of *substance*, the incarnation looks like a quick breakfast down to the last two Cheerios. One Cheerio represents divine being/substance and the other, human. These two substances can come very close to one another but in no meaningful way can they become one without either removing one or squishing them together to make a new third one. The come-very-close option in Christology is usually called *Nestorianism*; the removing-one approach is either *Arianism* (keeping the creature, removing the Creator) or *Apollinarianism* (keeping the divine, removing the human); and the third-thing approach is usually pinned on Eutyches. Each of these Christological heresies survives and occasionally flourishes today, and each has its own consequent misguidance for our questions about sexuality. I'll leave the historical order of these developments beside the point and look at each in turn.

THE NESTORIAN CHRIST

Nestorius explained the incarnation as a divine *act* but stopped short of affirming a change of *being*. For him, Jesus is a human being and the Son is

divine being, and the incarnation—subtleties and nuances aside—is about these two things coming very, very near one another. The ethos of this idea arises today in the now familiar suggestion that the church should “welcome but not affirm” LGBTQ persons.³ For Nestorius, God is present *in* the incarnate Christ but not fully *identified with* the humanity of Jesus. Deity, in other words, is “welcome” to creation but “not affirmed” as truly a creature.

Nestorian Christology allows us to see one of the most central features of all substantialist ontologies: relationships are peripheral to a person’s being, so “welcoming” someone while keeping them at arm’s length is their *modus operandi*. Relationships describe a proximity *between* individual substances so even if we are the most welcoming creatures in existence we’d only be capable of a welcome *near* and never a welcome *in*, in an ontological sense. Similarly, this anthropology enables the old ghost-in-a-machine, brain-in-a-vat type of rational isolation wherein each individual’s ideas are their own exclusively and absolutely. “Affirmation” therefore is mainly about agreement with another’s ideas, a simple matter of ideological compatibility. *I affirm you over there from within myself over here because that which is within myself over here appears to be the same as that which is within yourself over there. Or, I do not affirm you over there etc., etc.* This kind of anthropology is not just a problem for how LGBTQ persons are “welcomed” by the church, it’s also at the root of problems for how we understand {160} church altogether, and about what we think is happening in divine revelation and the Bible—lines of thought I’ll return to soon below.

Arius’s idea that Jesus was not God but just the first and greatest creature would score low for preachability today but high for effort and ease of presentation. We know—or try to believe—that Arius was wrong, and so did early Christians. But soon after him there were more religiously palatable attempts to bring his ideas mainstream. We usually group these ideas together and call them *Gnosticism*. Gnosticism had and has a much broader appeal than simple Arianism because it re-spins the vibe of his idea in mythic and spiritually fantastic terms. The shocking confession that Jesus was not one with the Creator is hidden beneath religious lingo, spiritual jargon, woolly clichés and sentimental metaphors—what today we call *Christianese*. Gnosticism’s lasting appeal within and among us rests on the still deeply-held belief that “spiritual” and “good” are synonyms for *immaterial* and *eternal*, while on the flip-side, “sin” and “evil” are associated with *material* (flesh!) and *temporal* (change!). Despite millennia of effort, it should now be clear to us that these associations are perfectly incompatible with belief in the incarnation and, more to the point, tend to put a serious damper on sex.

Arian and gnostic presuppositions have long been recognized as at the root of why even nominally Christian societies behave badly within the material world⁴ so I imagine there is already an expanding literature about the stifling effects these ideas also have in Christian bedrooms. The problem, however, is not just joyless coitus—although a remedy for that is, I presume, related. A belief that Jesus is a creature who is nearly-but-not-quite the

Creator, that God is almost one with us in Christ yet ultimately aloof and in control of the world from a position behind or above the incarnation, is, I think, what quietly props up some of our most destructive ideas about gender. For example, Christians today too easily embrace male stereotypes according to which masculinity is measured in proportion to a man's ability to achieve and maintain mastery over the material world, either in unsubtle ways like having noticeably large muscles or slightly more subtle ways like managing tools or in overt and sometimes brutal ways like exerting control over bodies other than his own in athletics or politics or commerce or sex. On the generic flip-side are feminine ideals too closely aligned with simplistic notions of sexual purity. Instead of mastery over their material bodies, women are expected to control them from within by subversion and concealment. This is typically couched as an imperative for feminine modesty, a cautious responsibility to keep the muscular male at his godlike distance. The consequence is not just a vague sense of shame about sex in {161} general but an implicitly misogynistic shame about the female body in particular. Altogether, these are textbook conditions for a rape culture.⁵

THE APOLLINARIAN CHRIST

Apollinaris's Christological attempt is especially near our questions about sexuality because of the route he took—an approach we'd call *psychological*. Apollinaris taught that the human spirit or mind of Jesus was displaced by the *Logos* at the incarnation. The Son took on human "flesh" so, *psychologically*, Jesus was something else. It's an awkward thought with only a brief footing in the church until Gregory of Nazianzus gave his famously adequate reply, "the unassumed is the unhealed." If there were any bit of humanity not assumed at the incarnation, so the creedal logic went, that bit would be left likewise unrecovered from sin. And since our spirits and minds are generally considered important bits, Apollinaris was numbered among the villains of church history and his works promptly burned.

The summary term for what the church came to understand *was* actually "assumed" at the incarnation is human *nature*. Although this maneuver drew on terms from the other side of the field, it can frame a dilemma of our own. To put the matter as agreeably as possible: Jesus was, and is, male, presumably heterosexual, and apparently celibate. Yet most Christians would be comfortable advising a woman to find her identity in him even though their genders are exactly different. To believe this is actually possible and not just wishy-washy church-talk means a woman's human nature has been assumed and healed in a man. But that would mean gender must be peripheral to human nature, or else we have a choice between the salvation of womankind and another Apollinaris. For maleness *and* femaleness to be assumed and healed by Jesus requires that gender is about human *act* and not about human *being*, that it's something we *do*, not something we *are*. On these terms, either the incarnation was "psychological" or gender is.

In some relatively obvious ways, this direction of thought runs counter to lines from both sides of the debate about sexuality. The common LGBTQ claim

that *God made me this way* would remain true in an absolute or mundane sense but would become firmly beside the point as a moral defense. On the other hand, the claim from those who oppose LGBTQ sexuality, that human beings are heterosexual by *nature* would also lose its footing.

THE EUTYCHIAN CHRIST

Eutyches may or may not have expressed his theology in the extreme form his name now conjures but, by his time, the idea that the {162} incarnation was some kind of fusion between human and divine substance, that Jesus was neither God nor human but some kind of *third thing*, was pretty much the only one left from his side of the field, and somebody had to put it out there so it could finally be put to rest. If the early church's Christology was mostly occupied with where to locate Jesus on the map of ontological conceivability, Eutyches's emphasis on the absolute uniqueness of Jesus took him beyond the pale.

There is a sense of exasperation in Eutychian theology, like we've reached the limit of what a particular starting-point allows. And I am indeed as far along this line of thought as I'd like to go here. But before we switch trains, the fate of Eutyches offers one final observation. His failure to understand the incarnation brings to mind the way the church is often flabbergasted about what to do with single people. With its regular refrains about "family values" and the "sanctity of marriage," the evangelical church often feels *Eutychian* about singleness. It's as if there are married men and there are married women and then, in some mysterious *third-thing* category, there are single people. Aside from the fact that this is a moral inversion of the New Testament ethos in which celibacy is the ideal and marriage is a concession, the seeming inconceivability of singleness in our churches suggests we have indeed followed a trajectory beyond the parameters of an intentionally Christological framework.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUALITY

Throughout our Christological history, the church has learned through blood, sweat, and toil that some of our basic beliefs about the way things exist simply do not jive with our central confessions. The example I've just blazed through: if Jesus is human *and* divine—and if we refuse to fudge or shrug-off or skew the "and" in that belief—then our intuitive sense that something is real to the degree that it is resilient to change cannot stand. For Jesus to be fully God and fully human such that neither way of being cancels out the other, the incarnation cannot be about a coming-very-close of God and creation, nor some variation of looks-like-both-but-is-really-just-one, nor a fusion of the two into something new that's ultimately neither.

There have been others in the history of Christology, ones I've not mentioned, with a significantly different approach to the mystery of Christ. Their attempts to explain the incarnation are still broadly on the field we've been tracking but they tended to adjust this field around Jesus rather than vice versa.⁶ As with most things in church history, these understandings didn't

always meet with easy or unanimous approval, but they did and still can provide a reframing of our received parameters of conceivability. {163}

In short, their approach runs like this: for Jesus to be both a man and the Son means his relations with others, whether triune or created, are not peripheral to divine and human being but *constitutive*. To exist is therefore neither about raw *being* nor unhinged *act* but to be *real-ized* by others in a both-in-tension we can call *being-in-relation*. This would mean divine and human beings don't first exist and then have relations, we exist *only in* our relations.⁷ There remains a difference between God and the rest of us, of course, and it's that the possibility of his being-in-relation and the actuality of this possibility are the same, which is just a somewhat awkward way of affirming the standard theistic belief that God is his own cause. But for us, the possibility of being-in-relation waits on him. We are creatures, he causes us; indeed, this "us" could be expanded indefinitely: *everything* exists only in relation to the Creator and to the others among whom/which he has created and is creating us.

This way of framing Christology has many implications for theological anthropology. One related to our questions about sexuality is deeply counter-intuitive: there are no "selves" beneath, below or behind our relations; no "substances" to which "accidents" can be ascribed; no nugget of identity at the inner bottom. Similarly, our concept of human being is chastened at the upper end, too. If we have our being-in-relation, to exist cannot mean to somehow reflect or participate in some category or ideal that's above or beyond Jesus's relations with the Father and the Spirit and the rest of us.⁸

The point I've been creeping toward with all this is simple, albeit inconclusive for our questions about sexuality: we should think of sexuality as a feature neither of *substantial* human being nor of *ideal* human being but rather as a *form of relation*. In short, we have our being in sexual *ways*, but our *being* is not sexual. Gayness, as well as femaleness and maleness, and indeed whiteness, tallness, celibateness, wealthiness, righteousness, loneliness, etc., are all ways of describing the various give and take dynamics in which we live and move and have our being. The point is that these dynamics are both ontologically constitutive and mutable. And it's the *both-and* there that leaves things unresolved. To be lesbian or gay or bisexual or transgender or queer/questioning on these terms is indeed an ontological verity, a way of being in which a person's identity is made and sustained. And although there could be much important discussion about the relative seriousness of these forms of relation, that the bond, for example, between a lesbian couple is more ontologically constitutive than the one between me and my truck, there cannot, I think, be any talk of sheer immutability.

In other words, if the direction of this anthropology is correct, both parties in this debate lose significant terrain. On the one side, LGBTQ {164} persons and their advocates would need to accept that human acts are peripheral neither to our own beings nor to the being of anyone or anything else. The conversation, in other words, would need to become less about

individual rights and more about whatever is right for the community of *beings-in-relation* in which we all exist together. At the same time, the Christian community would not be able to quench this conversation before it begins, neither by insisting we're all heterosexual at some deep-down level nor by restricting the terms of conceivability so that hetero-sex and celibacy are the only imaginable moral ideals.

As is often the case in theology, answers along these lines are not immediately clear, but the issue perhaps gains an adjusted framework. Ethical questions become less about looking back/inward to an original state or forward/up to an ideal form and more about looking around to how our behaviors effect the others, God and creatures, among whom we find ourselves. For example, one such question is, *What is it exactly about homosexual sex that we imagine is wrong or bad?* As far as I'm aware, oral, anal and manual sex are tacitly endorsed as a matter of personal taste for traditional matrimony. But if these and other sexual acts/behaviors/forms-of-relation are acceptable for some but not for others, we ought to have a reason for the prohibitive distinction.

I am aware of a number of theological arguments that seek to provide these kinds of reasons but they all seem to me to boil down to either a kind of natural theology (obviously the penis and the vagina belong together⁹), or a line of thought that might prioritize heterosexuality for pragmatic¹⁰ or pedagogic¹¹ reasons but fades considerably when it comes to excluding the conceivability of alternatives that could be morally acceptable. The strongest of these alternatives, in my opinion, is the idea that gender difference is a binary embodiment of the fact that human beings are not autonomous, that we are ontologically structured to relations with others.¹² Even though arguments like these leave some questions,¹³ I find them interesting and important. I also realize that most in this conversation tend to focus instead on one very common rationale for sexual prohibitions: *because the Bible says so.*

BIBLICAL REVELATION

An instinct for biblical authority is universal among Christians of every time and place. The ways we behave with that instinct, on the other hand, are, and have been, very different. Today, we tend to approach interpretive events as though there are two parties in view, the subject and the object, the reader and the author. These two can meet or collide and affect one another but ultimately they are and will remain two substantially distinct entities. Breakfast comes back to mind: with the {165} reader on one side of the cereal bowl and the author on the other, the text is the milky chasm between and interpretation is the effort of the former to come as near as possible to the latter.

With biblical interpretation these efforts are aided—or, depending how you look at it, *complicated*—by the addition of yet a third player, the Holy Spirit. Usually reading involves the absence of the author but Christians believe the books of the Bible each have at least two authors and that one of

these is always God, and we further believe that God not only authored/inspired these texts in the past but also illuminates/enables their reading in the present. Now the reading space has become considerably more crowded, and this awkward scenario is, I think, what has led to so much difficulty in our efforts to find biblical rationale for understanding sexuality.

Some of our most difficult hermeneutical differences come down to how to read a text while in the presence of its author. What we need is a way of understanding biblical hermeneutics as a dynamic that includes both the real, authoritative presence of the text's divine author *and* room for the human authors' and interpreters' contingencies. It's like a remake of our Christological quandary, only now instead of the being and act of God in Jesus, we have the author and reader of the Bible in the Spirit.¹⁴ As before, both must be held together.

We could revisit the church's Christological forays as a learning experience: Arius's primary concern was to preserve the absolute otherness of God, and his failure to also hold onto the relatedness of God to the world in Christ is repeated in the sometimes academic tendency to separate the authorial presence of God from the interpretive act altogether. In this direction, biblical studies become like gnostic mythology—very technical and complex but finally content with a hermeneutical object much like Arius's Christ, of primal importance perhaps, but ultimately devoid of the real presence of the Creator. On the other hand, neither ought we to imagine biblical hermeneutics as a Nestorianesque close proximity of the Spirit and the text, as if the being of God is maybe nearby to help but not fully present in the interpretive act. We do this whenever we relegate the Spirit's role to only his past work in inspiring the text but leave aside his present role illuminating it.¹⁵

At the same time, Apollinaris's route will not do, either. His Christology effectively displaced the mind of Jesus with the Logos, and we do this in biblical interpretation whenever we proceed as if the Spirit can somehow be disembodied from the church. A Spiritless church is the epistemic equivalent in hermeneutics of a spiritless Christ in soteriology—it leaves our interpretations unassumed and so unhealed. {166}

Finally, the least popular Christological heresy is parallel to what may be the most common hermeneutical mistake. Rather than locating authority in either authorial presence or the interpretive act, a Eutychian notion of Biblical revelation conflates hermeneutics and exegesis altogether.¹⁶ The interpreter's human understanding and the Spirit's divine authority are merged so tightly that the preacher becomes neither fully divine nor humanly fallible, a mysterious *third thing* between the church and God.

As I see it, what we need is a more intentionally Christological concept of hermeneutics, a way of reconceptualizing a seemingly *either-or* dilemma so it includes *both-and*—both the authorial sovereignty of God *and* the contingent freedom of biblical writers and readers. The result would be an approach to

biblical interpretation more in line with the way God reveals himself in the divine economy: a body of Christ enabled by the Spirit to freely obey the Father. To do this, we would need to drop the thing-first-relations-after-ontological presuppositions and understand the interpretive event altogether differently.

A THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC

If we are related to others (and Others) first and only *thereby* substantiated as individuals, then reading a text is a fundamentally relational event, one in which, as with all relational events, the stakes are existentially high. The event in play is not merely informational but transformational. In a broad sense, this would be true of all reading events but especially of biblical ones since the author of the Bible, we believe, is not just *a* creator but *the* Creator, nor just noetically present but *real*-ly so. The interpretive act, then, is not just about discovering the meaning of a Biblical text but discovering ourselves in the hermeneutical real presence of God, the one in whom we find *our* meaning. The distinction I have in mind here is between a belief that divine revelation is *personal* and a belief that divine revelation is *a person*. These are not hard alternatives but, as with any important journey, much is determined in hermeneutics by even a few degrees of difference at the start. A letter, a greeting, even a tweet can be personal, but none of these things are persons, and neither is the Bible. If the object under consideration in hermeneutics is ultimately the Bible—if our intent is to discern the meaning of this holy thing—our course is off by those critical few degrees. The proper object of biblical hermeneutics is and must remain the utterly non-objectifiable Object, God himself. This of course is a perilous and indeed impossible task; unless, of course, God makes it both possible and safe.

This kind of trajectory could reform our conversation about sexuality in several ways, the first of which has to do with our basic hermeneutical {167} posture. If I approach a text with the intent to understand *it* rather than *Him*, my aim is to arrive at ideas or beliefs which, if I decide my aim has found its mark, I'd then describe as *true*. But if my aim is to understand *a person*, my ideas about the text become secondary and my notion of truth must adjust.¹⁷ Now “true” is not an epistemic ideal, it's more like a personal attribute. Again, we're dealing with a difference of only a few degrees but, again, they are crucial. In one direction, “faithfulness” is understood primarily in terms of commitment to an established set of beliefs and to a particular way of expressing them, and *especially* “faithful” (zeal, passion, “strong” leadership, etc.) becomes an especially stubborn refusal to change one's mind. In the other direction, where the hermeneutical posture is more like how we might approach a relational encounter, “faithfulness” is a dynamic event involving at least two but effectively many persons. The future of this event, like all relational futures, is uncertain, its direction only anticipated in the broad terms established by trust among the related persons.¹⁸ On these terms, *zeal*, *passion*, *strength*, etc., are not about the power of an ideological grip but about relational proximity and personal freedom and the courage to be

vulnerable—the power, in other words, of what we usually call *love*.

Hermeneutics on these terms are consciously and unabashedly theological—they begin from confessions about Jesus and take their shape from there.¹⁹ And whatever else that might mean, with Jesus as a starting-place, theology is at least about knowing God *personally*. In other words, good or bad, theology is like sex. When it's good, it respects and enhances the otherness of the beloved so that both lovers transcend themselves enough to freely love the other. With respect to God, we call this *faith*—such is good theology. When sex is bad, it objectifies the would-be beloved and thereby increases the relational distance, the potential for love deteriorating into Cheeriosque isolation. And this is serious for creatures who have their being-in-relation because it means a drifting away from being, as if it were possible, an undoing of creation. With respect to God, we call this *sin*—such is bad theology.

This kind of theological hermeneutic bears directly on what we mean by the phrase *biblical authority*. The authority of biblical texts is real for the church because it reads them in the presence of their author. The text by itself is, of course, objectively dead. But the author is alive and well—an authentic Other freely enabling the church to understand and obey his texts. Biblical authority, in other words, is *His* biblical *author-ity*.

Two points here: first, too much church-talk about sexuality feels like an argument in which the parties don't even agree about what truth is. If truth is correct ideas and the Bible is a sourcebook for those ideas, {168} then appeals to biblical authority will inevitably deteriorate into exegetical scrums. But if truth is a person (Jesus), and the one who leads us to that person is *also a person* (the Spirit), our hermeneutical conversations are of an entirely different genre.

Second, if we continue along the first direction by objectifying both truth and knowledge, we thereby set the church on a course to becoming a hostile and unwelcome place, both for Persons *and* persons. Such, I imagine, is the view of us from many outside church today, maybe especially among LGBTQ persons and their advocates.

A CHURCH IN LOVE

This genre distinction raises at least as many problems as it seeks to resolve. If truth and knowledge are persons, how do we come to moral conclusions about important questions like how and with whom to have sex? Or, even before that pressing concern, how should the church talk about *any* ethical question?

For starters, we should notice that Jesus did not pray *May they agree, Father, just as you and I agree*. Next, we should admit that the church often behaves as if he had prayed that way and as if it's somehow our responsibility to demonstrate the granting of that request. My guess at the authorial intent of Jesus's high priestly prayer is that he had no delusions of perpetual unanimity in mind. Instead, he was asking for something much bigger—*love*.

There's an irony in the fact that a conversation about how and with whom people should love one another so frequently becomes unloving. I think this is partly because the church categorically overvalues agreement. It's as if we're afraid to disagree. Yet we do. All the time. And about important things. These disagreements are awkward, messy, difficult, risky—a lot like love. Such is the nature of the God vulnerable enough to so love the world that he avoided neither the mess of the incarnation nor the danger of the cross, and so also should be the nature of Christian unity. Mess and danger, difficulty and risk, this is what incarnational and cruciform living looks like. So, when it comes to difficult and complex conversations like how the church should understand sexuality, we should first aspire to disagree *better* and then, maybe afterward, as a kind of added bonus, to disagree *less*.

When we fail to disagree well, we are left striving for a unity based on substantial agreement and this requires very little faith, involves only tentative hope, and tends to function as an alternative to love. It's the off-by-a-few-degrees ecclesiological equivalent of a hermeneutic aimed at the text rather than its Author. Both prioritize ideas over persons and so both displace the Spirit, rendering his activities functionally {169} redundant. Nobody needs a supernatural explanation for unity where everyone agrees. Unity, on the other hand, *within* and *through* disagreement is a miracle. And not a miracle in the abstract sense where God enforces consensus with a cereal-spoon from the sky, but a miracle like finding ourselves more concerned about the well-being of others than about the correctness of our own ideas. At the risk of sounding corny, Christian unity is literally *being-in-love*. To love one another is to *know* one another, so here we are talking about the ecclesiological correlative to the epistemological claim that the Spirit leads us to Jesus/the Truth.

Listen to Robert Jenson:

How is an I-Thou relation ever to be other than an overt or covert struggle for power? How is its "bond" ever to be love?...Surely we must acknowledge that if there is to be a freely given love there must be a third party in the meeting of "I" and "Thou". If you and I are to be free for one another, someone must be our liberator...if another, whose intention for you and me is precisely our mutual love, objectifies us by that very intention, we are free to love each other.²⁰

The Spirit enables us to get over ourselves, frees us from the constant struggle to create unity ourselves by freeing us first from the constant struggle to *be only ourselves*. "I" am not an isolated self-sufficient human substance after all. And, as it turns out, you are not an isolated self-sufficient "Thou," either. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there we find our *I-Thou* otherness is not a deadlock of mutual objectification but an occasion for mutual love. *That* is freedom—freedom to transcend raw binaries and find ourselves instead in a community of beings-in-relation created and sustained by God himself.

As is sometimes pointed-out, one of the consequences of this

miraculous, Spirit-enabled unity will be a kind of *peace*. But we must be careful to get the sequence right. Where peace is an end in itself it too easily becomes yet another flat, vacuous ideal. The peace, on the other hand, that surpasses our understanding *follows* love. This kind of peace is not just about absence of conflict, it is the presence of God—a presence which includes the people of God and therefore, short of the End, also includes our conflicting beliefs and ideas. Where a unity based on agreement attempts to remove differences, a peace for its own sake attempts to remove the *significance* of those differences. Both are efforts to derive unity from the absence or denial of otherness. Love, on the other hand, *requires* otherness. And this is one reason why the line about *agree-to-disagree* feels so cold—it’s a quenching of the difference between *I* and *Thou* and so a missed opportunity for love. To say that the {170} Spirit is our *bond* means he binds us to one another and to the Bible we read together in ways that are often against our own desires or interests. This is his “authority,” and it is a loving bond, but as such involves a sometimes painful laying aside of ourselves, an experience incompatible with expectations of peace as an absence of conflict.

SOME PROPOSALS

A number of practical suggestions emerge from this. First, disagreements among us should garner less concern than they often do. When unity is derived from agreement, the bond is tenuous and church leaders have good reason to worry. But if our unity *is* God, anxiety about the strength of our cohesion is foolish. Church is less fragile and in need of less protection and control than we are led to believe. With the Spirit as our bond, there is solid warrant for courage and vulnerability, even with difficult conversations about how to understand LGBTQ sexuality.

Second, at a time when even the most conservative in this conversation are admitting the church ought to love LGBTQ persons, the simplest and most straightforward expression of love is too often overlooked: listening. Genuine, open, vulnerable to unknown possibilities—*listening*.²¹ If we insist on hearing or reading only what confirms what we already confess, we’ve set a course for Spirit-quenching, soul-crushing ideological homogeneity. Opening real space for voices and persons who want to question or disagree with our stated beliefs is an act of faith. Oliver O’Donovan explains the merit of this:

The only thing I concede in committing myself to such a process is that if I could discuss the matter through with an opponent sincerely committed to the church’s authorities, Scripture chief among them, the Holy Spirit would open up perspectives that are not immediately apparent, and that patient and scrupulous pursuit of these could lead at least to giving the problem a different shape—a shape I presume will be compatible with, though not precisely identical to, the views I now hold, but which may also be compatible with some of the views my opponent now holds, even if I cannot see how.²²

Third, this direction of thought allows us to realize that church unity is a reality that theologically *precedes* agreement, not the other way around. Final every-tongue-confess unanimity will be a feature of our consummated unity, but that's an eschatological end and not a soteriological means of our Christian life together. To expect or demand total agreement any sooner risks treading on the future, which is God's territory. Disagreement in the meantime can and should be charitable and {171} kind, indeed it can even be an expression of respect. To say, however, I do *and will* disagree with you is closer to the opposite of respect, both for the one with whom we disagree and for God. Such a posture effectively stakes claim to the future, closes it off, and so is both a violation of interpersonal freedom and a type of eschatological blasphemy.

Fourth, charitable listening may be messy and risky, but it needn't lead to total hermeneutical chaos.²³ O'Donovan again:

[T]o hold a question open with real existential commitment, and not merely to bedazzle the conversation with interrogatives darting round like bats in daylight, one must purposefully look to the source from which an answer is sought, an answer not already contained in the question, which is therefore capable of reforming and refining the question. And that is precisely what is meant by the authority of Scripture in Christian ethics.²⁴

A community hermeneutic cannot fully exclude the possibility that some within the church will from time to time offer absurd or even abominable biblical interpretations, and do so with enthusiasm and conviction. This is annoying and frustrating and often destructive. But this possibility cannot be eliminated without either unraveling the enterprise altogether or reducing it to a façade, a shadow-play of manufactured consent where nothing really is at stake. A faithful embrace of biblical authority is therefore not the distant, impossibly neutral *evangelical gaze*—the finding of “an answer already contained in the question”—but the deliberate commitment of membership in the same history-spanning hermeneutical community in which the text was created and transmitted.²⁵ We are committed to the Bible because we trust the God who creates us through it. This is our corporate growth into him who is the Truth, an interdependence among the members, past and present, through whom the Spirit inspired and now illuminates the Bible. By reading it *together*, we trust the Spirit to free us from our own and one another's mistakes, biases, filters, echoes, and so on.²⁶

Finally, an idea to bring all this lovey-openness into tension: if our unity is the Spirit of God, we should behave more carefully with it/him. As Mollie Hemingway has recently said about sociopolitical conversation, we must recover the ability to *dislike something without seeking its utter destruction*.²⁷ The same is true of churchy discussions: we must find a way to disagree with one another without implying or desiring each other's eternal damnation. And this basic charity needs to go both ways. I should neither wish your exit from grace nor suggest I'll take mine with it. No faithful conversation, in other

words, can include the threat, stated or implied, of ecclesial dismemberment. ²⁸ The only sound {172} theological reason for leaving a church is the belief that the Holy Spirit has also left it, the belief that the group being departed is in fact no longer a church—not that it *will no longer be*, or *could stop being if it keeps this up*, but that the community has somehow evacuated the Spirit and therefore *is* no longer a church. Anathema is a difficult concept for Canadians, we're so polite, but Christian faithfulness means there are no nice exits; it means persevering together through everything short of the absence of God.

A friend of mine recently paraphrased a comment he heard from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams: “Heresy is choosing the company you keep, not the company God has given you.”²⁹ This is an alien thought for a culture founded on the sanctity of personal choice, but, as I see it, it's a simple consequence of living according to the even stranger law of fulfilling the love of Christ.

And the same holds in the other direction, too. Some of the rationale beneath claims to gender fluidity today are often hard to distinguish from base consumerism; as if a person can simply choose what kind of body suits them best. This is an almost perfect mirroring of the hyper-Protestant individualism so characteristic in evangelical churches today—as *if a person can simply choose what kind of body suits them best*. Both elevate the desires of the individual over their embodied connectedness to the others with and among whom we all find our being.

AMBIVALENCE AND CERTAINTY

Now I'd like to offer a few personal comments, however unsurprising they may be at this point. Our stance on LGBTQ sexuality does not feel right to me most of the time. For me to be persuaded that something is wrong I'd have to understand how that behavior harms those who do it and the rest of us among whom they do it. What I have not found with respect to LGBTQ sexuality is a way of explaining to myself and others how these sexual forms of relation undermine rather than boost relations among us and with God, how they're in line with the reversed goodness of creation that led to the crucifixion of the Creator. So far, all I've come up with are directions of thought that still seem incomplete. I feel like we're missing a crucial piece in this conversation and I don't know what it is.³⁰ As far as I am aware, we are so far inadequate. Like all important inadequacies, this is painful. First of all, painful for the many gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other non-cisgender people near or within the church. This pain is immense and at times, as we are lately aware, painful enough to be lethal. And there is a second kind of pain too, and without diminishing the significance of the first, although perhaps tellingly, this pain is likely more pressing for most readers of this {173} essay. Heterosexual Christians are upset, afraid, confused, and even angry about this seeming inadequacy. The spectrum of hurt at this end is broad. On one side are those for whom even raising the question is contemptuous, a blatant exit from orthodoxy; despair and indignation abound. On the other, quieter side

are those who would like to better understand or embrace LGBTQ persons but are unsure how or afraid to try.

I'd also like to say that in contrast to how I often feel among people with confident conservative opinions about sexuality, I find my gay friends and family consistently likable. Gay people, in my experience, are uncommonly loving, joyful, peaceful, forbearing, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. These are traits I find attractive.³¹ Of course this is a purely anecdotal observation based only on my limited sphere of relations, but I find it compelling.³²

On top of this, I have this nauseating suspicion that our party line about sexuality serves to reinforce my own privileged position over socially marginalized people³³ and so exposes me to Pharisaic blindness. I'm white. I'm male. On most days, I'm middle class in the most affluent society in history. I'm healthy and literate and employed. I speak English. I'm heterosexual. I'm a Christian after Constantine of settler-colonial heritage in a democracy fueled by institutionalized individualism. I find myself, in other words, within a set of relational forms in which my identity has been shaped from the center rather than from the margins of our world, a world so backward the epitome of divine love for it included the death of Jesus. All this means I feel some serious cognitive dissonance knowing it was to other similarly central figures that he said, *because you claim you can see, your guilt remains*.

Finally, although I hope this is already clear from what I've said about being-in-relation and community hermeneutics, I will finish by being explicit: I am committed to this conference of churches and I recognize our *Confession of Faith* as the terms of that commitment. Although I may not yet be able to explain how the church should understand persons with an exclusive or predominant attraction to others of the same gender, or persons born with ostensibly male genitalia and apparently female psyches, or vice versa, or persons with some other related variation or ambiguity, I am nonetheless clear about how the church should try to understand all difficult questions: *together*. I may not feel especially confident about some of the phrases in our document but I am committed to it because I am committed to the people it represents.³⁴

In my experience, this blend of ambivalence and commitment is normal.³⁵ In different ways, it's true of all my relationships. Otherwise, the notion of commitment would be meaningless and I'd become as isolated {174} and self-absorbed as a soggy Cheerio, blown and tossed by the wind and waves of my own independent ideas.

LOVE IS PATIENT

I was married young and was, despite some effort to the contrary, a virgin. To prepare me for the conjugal inevitable, my pastor did what all good pastors do at crucial junctures—he gave me a book. It was a small, soft-covered volume, modestly illustrated. I recall nothing from it except one

foreboding nugget from the chapter for men, paraphrased from memory: *Whatever is your maximum capacity for patience, double it, and you'll be halfway patient enough.* I did not find this an especially helpful tip. But, sex aside, it's great advice for heterosexual Christians interested in the conversation about LGBTQ sexuality. Right at that moment when we're most swept up, most certain that everything is blazingly, obviously bound for our conclusion, right when our passion and enthusiasm are at their strongest, we must get over ourselves, be gentle, double our capacity for patience, twice.

NOTES

1. Three immensely sweeping claims in just two sentences! For a lucid primer, see Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God according to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).
2. I was tempted in these and the following paragraphs to bother you constantly with qualifications like *broadly speaking; generally; in short; to be brief, etc., etc.*, but, really, it's pretty obvious that I've decided to be slap-dash with all this. For more careful work, see my *Christ at the Cruc*—especially the first third of it. Or, better yet, see the sources and scholars I reference there.
3. For those unfamiliar with the acronym, LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning.—Ed.
4. The seminal piece is Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, n.3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7. For two examples of the recent boom in attention to this problem see *Creation at Risk? Religion, Science and Environmentalism*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) and Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace: Writing on Ecology, Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). My personal favorite in this genre is just about anything by Wendell Berry, e.g., his critical rebuttal, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," now available in *The Art of the Common Place: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2002), 305–20.
5. This may be a good time to point out that heresies are not just incorrect ideas in some cold, abstract sense. These beliefs should be rejected because they produce hurtful, destructive behavior—wrong theology is morally bad.
6. Modern theologians all have their favorite heroes but most (e.g., John Zizioulas, T. F. Torrance, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, Colin Gunton, et al.) point to the Cappadocian Fathers as the primary players here. For an {175} overview, see Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 93ff.
7. At the risk of overplaying the breakfast analogy: instead of a substantialist Cheerio-ontology presented to us by the aptly-named General Mills, we are here tasting an ontology in which the boundaries between beings overlap, something more like the Honeycomb cereal made by Post—an also eerily apt name.
8. Regarding "us," see the previous paragraph.
9. That God reveals himself in nature isn't in question; that knowledge from there can provide theological rationale which isn't also more fully available *Christologically* is. Arguments from natural theology without a specifically Christological counter-point may be sound and interesting but warrant no *faith* from Christians.
10. It would be flattery to refer to *Fwd: fwd: fwd: The Gays Want To Destroy Your Marriage !!* as a theological argument but somewhere beneath this kind of noise is the relatively safe conviction that as a species, survival-wise, heterosexual activity is key. Barring a Malthusian renaissance or robot

apocalypse, this fact is unlikely to change and warrants pretty much zero “protection.” I’ve also recently been made aware that some in this discussion are worried about the potential health hazards associated with anal sex. Even if this was a genuine concern for the well-being of others, it would be part of a discussion about *how* gay men should love one another, not *if* they should, which is why it’s an example of the way pragmatics are beside the point of the discussion here.

11. E.g., one explained to me by Bruxy Cavey in a phone conversation after he *tweeted his cell number (!)*. In sum, hetero-sex is like the divine economy: the male [God/the Son/the Spirit] enters the female [world/believer/church]; the female receives the male; the male leaves inside the female his seed; the female receives and nurtures that seed; the result is new life. As a homiletic metaphor, this has potential for clarity and may be, gnostic-paternalistic effects notwithstanding, sound enough. But if it’s to carry ethical imperatives and prohibitions, it requires navigating ontological questions about the analogy of being which, as far as I can tell, lead back to a natural theology with no Christological center.
12. Karl Barth: “In its basic form humanity is fellow-humanity....Man is in fact fellow-human.... This is true even though he may contradict it both in theory and in practice; even though he may pretend to be man in isolation and produce anthropologies to match.... In so doing he merely proves that he is contradicting himself, not that he can divest himself of this basic form of humanity. He has no choice to be fellow-human or something else. His being has this basic form. That this is the case it is brought before us by the fact that we cannot say man without having to say male or female and also male and female.” *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Creation* III.2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 285f. See also Robert Jenson: “It is sexuality that rescues the communal character of human being from being a mere ideal or demand laid upon us and makes it a *fact* about us.” Jenson, *The Works of God*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 89.
13. If celibacy is a form of sexuality that is morally beyond reproach, then it {176} seems to me that gender difference would be the embodiment of a truth which is *larger than* sexual activity. The question then becomes, how far does the principle transcend the form? Can our structural orientation to relation with others be fulfilled in non-hetero forms of sexual activity? To be “oriented” to relations with others is, of course, not in question—it’s to *which* others, and *how*? In any case, it’s not clear to me whether this line of reasoning is yet another open backdoor for Platonic idealism, whether it’s not after all a rationale with little or no relation to the divine economy revealed in Christ.
14. The analogs in view here are not as straightforward as is sometimes suggested. The Bible is not human and divine in a similar or even analogous way to how Jesus is human and divine. For starters, the Bible is not at all divine. Only persons can be divine, and only three in particular are; everything else is a creature. It’s a simple point: the Bible is the word *of* God, not God *per se*, while Jesus is the Word of God *and* God *per se*. This Creator/creature distinction is fundamental to Christian theology—an *infinite qualitative difference* across which even analogy should fear to tread. That said, biblical hermeneutics should, like anything among the *all things* that hold together in Jesus, cohere in a specifically Christological way.
15. “[M]uch of the history of the doctrine of inspiration is in large measure an attempt to equate inspiration and revelation in such a way that the text in some way or other replaces or renders redundant the mediating work of the Spirit.” Colin Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 66.
16. A mistake exemplified by the frequent misappropriation of a soundbite from Luke Timothy Johnson: “The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says,

through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says.” In sermons (including *both* of the “models” BC Mennonite Brethren pastors gathered to hear in the spring of 2015) and on the internet (e.g., Rob Schwarzwald on patheos.com), this line is frequently used in arguments against openness to LGBTQ sexuality. But the very next sentence in Johnson’s essay is this: “But what are we to do with what the text says? We must state our grounds for standing in tension with the clear commands of Scripture, and include in those grounds some basis in Scripture itself.” Later, Johnson summarizes his intent: “In what way are we to take seriously the authority of Scripture? What I find most important of all is not the authority found in specific commands, which are fallible, conflicting, and often culturally conditioned, but rather the way Scripture creates the mind of Christ in its readers, authorizing them to reinterpret written texts in light of God’s Holy Spirit active in human lives.” Johnson’s opening line is plain enough and perhaps accurate (the exegesis of his exegesis is, to use his word, “straightforward,” and so not in question) but what he *meant* is that exegesis alone is entirely insufficient for the development of a biblical theology of sexuality, and the fact that his opponents on the matter seem quite comfortable using him in the process of behaving exactly contrary to this point is either baffling or outrageous. Not only is their hermeneutic at odds with Johnson’s, they are *exegeting Johnson himself* at odds with his intentions *about exegetical intentions*. At {177} best, this is a case of negligence on the part of hurried apologists who have apparently copied and pasted without reading even one or two lines of context. At worst, it’s conscious misrepresentation. Either way, it is a case in point about the crucial difference between exegesis and hermeneutics. Luke Timothy Johnson, “Homosexuality and the Church: Scripture and Experience,” *Commonweal*, June 11, 2007, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1>.

17. Yes, this person also happens to be Truth incarnate in whom all things hold together but that exciting detail should be borne gently lest we spoil the event with a return to epistemic hubris. Cf. Alan Torrance: “theology knows no discipleship of an idea or an Ideal...nor does theology translate to a system of values...rather theology offers correspondence to the Truth.” From “Polanyi’s Theory of Moral Inversion,” a paper delivered at the “King’s College London / Gospel and Our Culture” day conference on Michael Polanyi in London, UK, May 2003.
18. Ah, *uncertainty*—that great bugbear of modernity. Leslie Newbigin: “There is no way of arriving at the truth except by being willing to take the risk of being mistaken. We must recover the confidence to affirm what can be doubted as a step on the way to contact with reality.” Cited in Drusilla Scott, *Michael Polanyi* (London: SPCK, 1996), v. And see Polanyi himself: “We may firmly believe what we might conceivably doubt; and may hold to be true what might conceivably be false.” This is simply the nature of *personal* knowledge. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University Press, 1958), 312.
19. “Scripture is not self-interpreting. Much of the work of theology involves helping us to develop and remember the reading skills necessary to avoid isolating one part of Scripture from the rest.” Stanley Hauerwas, *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 17.
20. Robert Jenson, *The Triune God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 156. The agent in view here is the Holy Spirit, bringing to mind a question from David Foster Wallace and, after him, the same question in rhetorical form from the Apostle Paul: “Is it possible really to love other people? If I’m lonely and in pain, everyone outside me is potential relief—I need them. But can you really love what you need so badly? Isn’t a big part of love caring more about what the other person needs? How am I supposed to subordinate my own overwhelming need to somebody else’s

needs that I can't even feel directly? And yet if I can't do this, I'm damned to loneliness, which I definitely don't want...so I'm back trying to overcome my selfishness for self-interested reasons. Is there any way out of this bind?" in "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2006), 265–66. Cf. Romans 7:24 NIV: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

21. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The first service one owes to the other in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love for God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them... [we] forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking." *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: Harper, {178} 1954), 97.
22. Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 33.
23. North American Mennonite Brethren (MBs) have largely decided and behaved as if non-ethnic MBs are both welcome and affirmed. This was (and is) a conscious choice made by a community to allow previously marginal voices space to be heard. It was (and is), in other words, a deliberate disempowering of a formerly privileged group. This has created some problems: e.g., we now wonder about things formerly taken for granted, like commitment to nonviolence, the separation of church and state, congregational authority, and so on. This has also led to some arguably good consequences. One is that I have a job. There was a point in MB history in which some of our ecclesial forebearers decided to love the outsider enough to include us, despite the risk and mess. As C. Arnold Snyder writes, "The baptizing movement was a spontaneous, decentralized, grass-roots, underground movement of spiritual renewal and biblical reform, carried forward by 'common people' of no particular theological expertise. In its beginnings there were no governing church authorities, defining theological or political patrons. The baptisers therefore were an unusually heterogeneous lot, especially in their first generation...[A] contemporary observer...who knew individual Anabaptists well...complained that 'almost no one agrees with anyone else in all matters.'" *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 17.
24. O'Donovan, 63.
25. See Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), esp. 37ff.
26. On this problem in biblical hermeneutics, see Anthony Thiselton, "What seem to us to be merely 'natural' meanings, they [twentieth-century semioticians] argue, may seem to be plain and natural meanings only because our own subculture (whether Christian orthodoxy or of gay rights) has repeated them so often that they form habituated patterns of judgment which readily match our prior horizons of expectation." Thiselton, "Can Hermeneutics Ease the Deadlock? Some Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutical Models," in *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 155.
27. Cited in Alan Jacobs, "The Value of Disagreement," *The American Conservative*, July 9, 2015, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-value-of-disagreement/>.
28. I recently heard a senior MB leader say that endorsing homosexual union would be a "deal breaker" for him. Tellingly, moments later, "And I don't really understand this whole 'community hermeneutic' thing." These comments were made extemporaneously, and since I say regrettable things off the cuff all the time, I'll apply the golden rule and leave them unattributed. I note them here because they were offered in a mood of *assurance* to a group of concerned pastors. This suggests the trajectory of our ecclesiology is off by

those critical few degrees.

29. Lincoln Harvey (@LincolnHarvey), Twitter post, August 17, 2015, 11:18 PM, <http://tinyurl.com/hzgufrx>. (I knew this time would come sooner or later that I'd have to cite a tweet. I gratefully acknowledge @LincolnHarvey {179} as constitutive to my—and now your—being-in-relation.)
30. To the demand that we have “clear teaching” to offer our churches: *Why?* Why accept this? Life is complicated. Following Jesus is often complex. The impulse to produce clarity on an issue that is clearly complex only produces simplistic, narrow answers, and, more importantly, concession to such a demand too often produces simplistic, narrow followers of Jesus. I can't help but feel churches who foist this upon their leaders are repeating the Israelites' request to Aaron when Moses left their field of vision on Sinai. In any case, the demand for clarity typically is made most loudly by those seeking a reaffirmation of what is already believed. And since whatever is already believed is more easily understood and made clear, than whatever is not, calls for clear teaching feel suspiciously like a concern from those who hold the dominant hermeneutic to preserve the status quo. As Marilynne Robinson writes, “Unauthorized views are in effect punished by incomprehension, not intentionally and not to anyone's benefit, but simply as a consequence of a hypertrophic instinct for consensus.” In “Puritans and Prigs,” *The Death of Adam* (New York: Picador, 1988), 153.
31. My undergraduate theology was dispensational so I am literally trained in hermeneutical stretches, but I can't even imagine the flexibility required to read Romans 1:29–32 as though it has in view any of the LGBTQ persons—Christian or otherwise—with whom I'm familiar.
32. Personal affection is usually considered irrelevant for theological analysis—a belief is either correct or mistaken regardless of how much the responsible theologian likes or dislikes the person holding it. Or so I have somehow come to believe. But maybe we aren't meant to conduct such important conversations, make our theological judgments, in cold disregard for our affections. “Empiricism,” said Oliver Sacks, “takes no account of the soul.” Obituary, *The Economist*, 5-11 September 2015, 90.
33. Despite the notoriously sudden change in public opinion, LGBTQ persons have a recent history of social exclusion and still sometimes experience only tentative acceptance. By contrast, some of the most difficult religious people I know revel in stiflingly unexamined ideological stability and take for granted immense social and cultural privilege, then manage to wrap it neatly in a myth of persecution and pious self-congratulation. I'm not sure what to do with this.
34. An arrangement we sometimes call *covenant*, a term I like, despite the way it is sometimes reduced to a synonym for agreement.
35. This normalcy leaves space for some odd possibilities. I have in mind the way an increasing number of MBs are apparently less than persuaded by our traditional commitment to nonviolence and that many of these same people are among those most committed to a traditional view of sexuality. Combined, these beliefs suggest it may occasionally be okay to put a bullet in a man but never a penis.

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