

THE CASE FOR INTEGRATING

SEX UAL ITY AND RELI GION

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE BY STEVEN ANDERSON

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FOREWORD

Our communities, peers, politics, and religions all lay claims on the expression of sexuality. They do this through rigid expectations and entrenched behavioral norms, each having its own agendas for the use of personal bodies, be it social order via uniformity or general moral direction. If we accept the notion that sexuality is an innate bodily trait that cannot be removed from the person or resolutely ignored by action/inaction, and that our sexuality, like our bodies, is given to us by God in our creation, then we conclude that varying sexualities are something to accept and cherish as a part of ourselves. Likewise when we recognize the importance of community politics concerning our bodily needs as well as the importance of organized religion with regard to individual and community spiritual needs then we must work toward building a life dynamic that integrates the needs of the body, the spirit, and community in ways that build strong a strong yet diverse community.¹ To that effect, I propose that faith is the key to detangling the religious understanding of sexuality and that through examining the cornerstone of the Christian religion, Jesus Christ, we can move past divisive dogma and toward positive work integrating the faith of LGBTQ+ Christians into our religious communities.

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Created May 22, 2020, Steven Nathan Anderson

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STUMBLING BLOCKS TO INTEGRATION

When it comes to Christianity the global culture of Christians has drawn collective lines in the sand for centuries about the regulation of bodies, including slavery, fashion, diet, and sex. In some respects, the regulation of bodies is one of the central tenants of Christianity as a form of religion (the entire book of Leviticus rings a bell). Likewise, the regulation of bodies is what has given the church in this world it's power.² It's arguable however that the regulation of bodies as a tool for creating a spiritually uniform community is what sets apart the idea of "religion" from personal faith. This is somewhat ironic in the sense that Christianity is heavily entrenched in the idea that personal faith and the actions brought about by faith are its absolute tenants.³

In the past, the unity of the church has been approached steadfastly as our faith in Christ, however when it comes to creating uniform outward expressions of faith the church has focused on enforcing "moral" spiritual laws, including those governing sexual practice and expression. In the United States where the church and state are symbolically separate, freedom of expression is guaranteed but not always protected when it comes to the cries of popular culture which has historically often seen LGBTQ+ sexualities as undesirable. That being said, popular culture in the United States continues a turn toward the acceptance of freer sexual expression concerning relationship types, gender roles, gender expression, and other aspects of

sexuality.⁴ The integration of freer sexuality in a social sense is taking place day-by-day.

On the other hand community dynamics involving religion, that have long outlasted any singular political power, have spent much longer contemplating the change of their stances when it comes to long-held beliefs, but they are changing.⁵ For the most part, however, Christianity in the last several centuries typically refuses to asses the physical and spiritual needs of believers who's innate sexualities fit outside of prescribed norms when it comes to celebrating a wider range of sexualities outside of traditional heteropatriarchal norms, more often they fight back.⁶ While some sexual mores have broadened over time, such as allowances for divorce and the easing of punishments for fornication and masturbation which had been historically seen as sinful alongside stances on homosexuality and gender performance, the LGBTQ+ community continues to be set apart from the religious community without regard for their faith.⁷ Sometimes there are individual exceptions for "token queers" but other times like exemplified by the 2019 UMC General conference, the decisions of religious communities are carefully examined, and unfortunately for those who identify as LGBTQ+, are continually left out of the faith community as a whole.⁸ To that end, I urge a continued thoughtful appeal to the methodology of integration to create a fulfilling vision of Christian community for those who wish to worship together. Overall it's our similarities that bind us together, and our differences that make us strong.

FAITH AS RESPECT

To the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr, fighting racial prejudices and integrating the African American community with the larger social, political, and spiritual communities of the United States was based on the notion of respect.⁹ It is not the person who was creating oppression that he was fighting, instead, he was fighting a negative ideology espoused by other persons. The ideology behind racial prejudice and segregation focused on dehumanizing African Americans, but King Challenged this by demonstrating their shared and equal humanity with respect.¹⁰ When respect of the person is given to an enemy or challenger, there is a double-action at work. The civility created by respect brings awareness to the oppressor of their victim's humanity, it also creates the initial bridge to common ground and discourse through their shared traits.

When it comes to integrating modern understandings of biblical sexuality we can follow the same example of respect. This work does not tear down an "old religion" or injure its followers to build a new one in its place. It is also not done out of revenge or a superiority complex on the part of the LGBTQ+ community that views Christianity as it stands as inferior. Instead, it continues to offer reverence to the core of its beliefs (through faith in Christ) while offering reconciliation with one another for centuries of abuses, misinterpretations, and enforcement of hurtful public policy.¹¹

The faithful LGBTQ+ community seeks

to forgive their oppressors by asking to be a part of a unified community rather than necessitate the foundation of an altogether new religion that would continue to divide the body of Christ. For King's work on integration, the commonality between oppressor and oppressed was their shared humanity, to integrate free sexual expression and the church, we too find commonality in our humanity but we also appeal to the commonality that we share in our faith in Christ.¹² Therefore our respect for one another as being made in the image of Christ, given the gift of varying sexuality traits (just as we are given a range of other diverse traits) is still something to celebrate and pursue.¹³ Respect flows from the centering of our faith in our love and reverence for Christ outwardly beyond the image of Christ himself but overflows into the world and to all those who bear his name in faith.

FAITH AS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

Typically interpretation of scripture is the end-all and when it comes to the acceptance or disqualification of a person's faith and their ability to integrate as an individual into the larger community of Christ. Often well-informed attempts by theologians to justify changes in spiritual thought are seen as "mental gymnastics" or an attack meant to undermine orthodoxy.¹⁴ For many theologians it has been their life's work, determining the true singular meaning of scripture, they ask continuously "What is the definitive letter of the Law?" Unironically this was a problem in Christ's time for the Hebrews as well who had split into factions that interpreted scriptures differently and absolutely.¹⁵ Their inability to agree on how the law should be honored and fulfilled kept them from having a unified community and the problem of absolutist views remains today as we struggle to fulfill the law and create community also (as evidenced by the many thousands of different Christian denominations today).¹⁶

The solution to the people of Judea came to them through Christ's rejection of "religious" absolutes and a pattern of behavior that continually interpreted the spirit of the law as most important (religion being different from faith on a fundamental level).¹⁷ Even when confronted by religious authority Christ's interpretation the law challenged long-held beliefs.¹⁸ This shouldn't be surprising considering Christ is the spiritual author of the law (by being one with God who gave the laws to

humanity), but in any case, his divinity was not recognized and his guidance on the law was not taken to heart. By openly interpreting the Jewish attempts at adherence to religious law repeatedly as misguided he became a pariah, yet with Christ's interpretation, he offered the world an opportunity to create community through faith. His life, death, and resurrection sanctifies us and atones for our sins if we believe in the truth of this redeeming work. Jesus fulfilled the law in our stead and bound us to the new covenant of faith which holds us individually accountable to God for how we act in faith toward one another rather than imposing strict adherence to laws for the sake of the community that ultimately illustrate human inability and desperate need for saving grace.¹⁹



FAITH IN AS TRANSFORMATION

The absolute faith placed in Christ by the people whom He interacted with was the catalyst for their unique blessings. Christ continuously transformed Hellenistic Hebrew attitudes on everything from scripture to social order. Through faith the blind were healed, the dead rose again, social outcasts were met with dignity, and the landscape was transformed.^{20, 21, 22, 23} Why should our faith in God, not also transform us? As we interact with Christ, making His will our goal, we continually are being transformed by his radical spirit. When we follow Jesus we make His desires our own, and we know His desires by following His words and actions. By emulating Christ we are changed from the self-serving ideologies of pride and idolatry, wanting only good for our own bodies, but instead focus on the health of the body of Christ (which we are a part of), our spiritual and physical community.

Arguably, most Christians wouldn't deny the potential for personal transformation through faith in Christ. Many have suggested that "unnatural" or immoral forms of sexual expression can be changed through our faith in Christ. However, these calls to faith often fall flat. To be a Christian people choose to follow Christ and are subsequently transformed, they are not called to change their behaviors first to become Christian. If God transforms our sexual desires as a part of our relationship with Him then we are blessed, but we are equally blessed if Christ changes our desires to serve one another without judgment and leaves our sexual desires as they are.

Aside from personal transformation, there is also great potential through Christ in the transformation of community. Saul, an individual, a persecutor of early Christians was transformed.²⁴ After his encounter with Christ, he dedicated his life to building and strengthening a community based on faith. That Community of faith has grown and has brought communal joy and the fruits of the spirit to countless people. If the Spirit of Christ could change the lives of fledgling followers in Jesus Clubs during the first century and become a strong web of interconnected, global believers that support one another throughout multiple reformations and spiritual enlightenment periods, then it can continue to transform the church as it is now.

FAITH AS UNITY

Through Christ, the Hebrews and gentiles were unified into the new Church, and through faith in Jesus, we are all offered eternal unification with the Divine instead of eternal separation.²⁵ To the Jews, this was a miracle. Some would say that it would be a miracle if conservative fundamental Christians would accept a gay man into their church, or further accept him and his male partner together as justified by faith into their congregation. However, by approaching Christ without having faith in His redemptive ability to unify us over differing interpretations of scripture we remain divided and unable to jointly minister to the world the incredibility of the Gospel as we are commanded.²⁶ Instead, we are seen as outwardly hypocritical, distracted, and disjointed focusing not on the way that Christ has transformed us in spirit (and is continuing to do so), but instead as being legislative and coercive.²⁷

C.S. Lewis even handily noted in his work of spiritual fiction "The Screwtape Letters" that our religiosity is not the cure for spiritual enlightenment.²⁸ In other words, the outward appearance of "Christianity" is not proof of faith. If instead of allowing ourselves to be distracted from the cross we dedicate our personal lives to emulating Christ, we will find not only unity with Him but also unity with each other as we are all being transformed to being Christ-like.²⁹ Our faith then is what unifies us. Even Paul rebuked the early churches for being too divisive and losing sight of the big picture view of Christ's redeeming work.³⁰ When they began to suggest

strict rules on celibacy and marriage to be Christ-like (considering Jesus was unmarried), Paul redirected that energy toward healthy sexual expression (one that is not at the forefront of our identities but is still part of a whole) in numerous ways that would reorder their attentions toward healthy and unified community.³¹ After all, as Calaway puts it “The lifelong process of directing and disciplining our sexual desires is not about finding an “appropriate” Christian expression for one’s sexuality. It’s about cultivating a generative space in which we routinely set aside our desires so that the other might thrive.”³² That is, we as Christians are called to create a community that empowers one another in all aspects of life rather than enforcing stumbling blocks that cause division.

FAITH AS LOVE

Perhaps most important of all when it comes to the integration of LGBTQ+ sexualities and the Christian religion is love. Not only in the fact that Queer Christians wish to represent their sexualities through romantic love, marriage, and sexual intimacy but through the fact that at the very center of our understanding of faith is love. The Bible says a lot about love. Perhaps over quoted and misquoted regularly, John 3:16 points to God’s love and ultimate sacrifice, and 1 Corinthians 16:14 tells us to “do everything with love.”^{33, 34} But why should love matter to our faith? It matters because our faith is a divine gift given freely from the ultimate source of love; God IS love.³⁵ Therefore our faith in Him is centered on our obligation to love.³⁶

Christ’s summary of the greatest commandment to include “love thy neighbor” is striking and continues to echo loudly as foreign in a modern self-serving society like that of the United States. More often the statement evokes caveats that bend the meaning of neighbor to only mean “love other Christians” or “love people who are like me.” Also statements like “tough love” and “love the sinner, hate the sin” emerge as justification for the mistreatment of others, including the ex-communication of LGBTQ+ individuals or at the least a begrudging social acceptance and simultaneous spiritual denial of queer faith.³⁷ Denying the faith of others instead of rejoicing in it is not love, it is a condemnation and rejection of the common principles they share in Christ with presumably what a

Christian anti-gay marriage supporter also shares with Christ.³⁸ By rejecting a lesbian’s faith the church rejects the love of the Spirit that lives in her. Moreover, as we understand Christ to be the fulfillment of the law, we simultaneously point to love as the fulfillment of the law reinforcing our understanding that our faith in Christ originates from the love of the Divine.³⁹

FAITH FOR INTEGRATION

As we see here faith is the core concept that allows for the power of the Gospel to flourish around the world. Without faith, there would be no Christianity. Faith is evidenced through love, and mutual love is the core of community, religion as a spiritual community is no exception. The mutual love of sports, theatre, music, and even political opinion bring together the secular world, but for Christians who believe they have more than this temporal life to live, their faith in Christ binds them to a community that passes beyond time and space. By accepting Christ we have the unique opportunity of being accepted as we are and being continuously transformed by the spirit to fulfill the needs of the community of God, and in this time and place the needs of the Christian community are the same as they have always been, and their remedy continues to be a love for Christ, and the love of our neighbors.⁴⁰

LGBTQ+ folk who wish to be a part of the Christian community are not blocked from joining the kingdom. Regardless of church policies that shut their physical doors on teens who comes out as trans, gay, or bisexual, or congregants who shun a couple that divorces over sexual difference. The continued faith in Christ that those Queer believers share redeems them despite unwelcoming attitudes.⁴¹ However, the spiritual path of Christians who actively deny the offering of Christ's loving community to others are in peril of losing their faith by producing bitter fruit. The fruit of their arrogance runs the risk of damaging the faith of others, leading them astray, and worse leads the speaker to lose faith as

well. Just as Christ cursed a fig tree for not bearing fruit, the Christian community is also in danger for not yielding to Christ what is His and believing in faith that through God all can be done.⁴² Since this is the case, let us be thoughtful as to the grounding of our faith in Christ and not limit our faith in the potential of God's power and instead rejoice in what has been given to us as the great community in Christ.



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