

A Thesis

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Querying the Church: Christian Church Leaders' Perspectives on Homosexuality

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Sociology

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This thesis explores the perspectives of Christian church leaders on homosexuality. Sexual orientation, specifically homosexuality, is a highly controversial issue in Christianity. The denominations within Christianity maintain a variety of views which range from outright condemnation to complete acceptance. The purpose of this study was to identify the perspectives on homosexuality that exist among Christian church leaders in the Toledo area. A qualitative research methodology was utilized for this study. Two distinct bodies of literature - sexualities studies and Christian theology – were used as the theoretical frameworks to guide the research. Church leaders held a wide variety of views on the topic – but mainly they could be defined as the Religious Right, who consider homosexuality a sin, and the Welcoming and Affirming churches, which do not regard homosexuality as a sin and are explicitly inclusive towards homosexuality. Church leaders rely on combination of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience to formulate their perspectives on homosexuality.

For Madre.

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Brother- without you I would have never gotten this far. You have always been there for me and for that I am eternally grateful. Dad- you have never questioned my decisions or abilities, and for that I am thankful. Keri, White Chris, Black Chris, and Lisa- I am so proud of all of you and grateful that we were able to embark on this journey together. To my friends and loved ones who have listened to me talk about my research for hours on end, thank you for at least pretending to find it interesting.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Aim of This Research

This study explores the discourses used by Christian church leaders in Toledo, Ohio about “homosexuality” – both the Religious Right and Welcoming and Affirming churches. It examines the competing understandings of “homosexuality” in their churches and analyzes their interpretations in light of the literature on theological ethics and through research on sexualities. Further, by interviewing Christian church leaders, it is possible to get a sense of how broad national issues around acceptance, exclusion and sexual diversity are being played out at the local level in Toledo.

1.2 Rationale for This Study

There are many excellent reasons why a sociological analysis of sexuality, ethics and Christian theology can be a valuable contribution to knowledge. Sociology involves the study of power, including the power of institutions such as the church. Furthermore, the study of religion raises sociological concerns about the sacred and the profane, and likewise, the relationship between the state and civil society (in particular, arguments about the separation of church and state). As well, there is a desperate need for sociological investigations of the ways in which religious and sexual behaviors, identities

and communities are being constructed and reconstructed, as religious institutions respond to the power of competing discourses and the pressures of social change in contemporary society. At their core, differences between Welcoming and Affirming churches and the Religious Right are related to different epistemological and ontological frameworks - alternative sources of knowledge and experience which different sides rely on when they engage in these debates, including sources such as personal experience, Scripture, tradition, and so on (Tigert 1999).

As well, sociology has a long history of examining the social construction of reality, and in this case, such a sociological approach can examine the ways in which both religious and sexual identities are socially produced. Another rationale for a sociological analysis of this topic is that the debates between the Religious Right and the Welcoming and Affirming churches are not simply an issue for theology; they are also relevant to the sociological study of social movements. Indeed, these debates often come down to contested ideas about morality, ethics, personal responsibility, and individual/group choices, which are not simply theological issues, but also issues about power. Some of the concerns which are raised are prototypically sociological: issues of inclusion/exclusion/discrimination/prejudice. Finally, debates over sexual identities and practices raise issues of subjectification, power, and the body, which have been a bountiful area of sociological research for more than 30 years.

Furthermore, in recent years more research has been conducted surrounding the issue of homosexuality, specifically its relationship with religion. There remains an empirical void from the lack of extensive research that exists on the subject (Barton 2010; Cadge et al. 2008; McNeill 1993). There is a need for empirical studies in the social

sciences in order to realize the effects that this issue has on the Church and on society in general. Of the work that has been done, it is clear that religion is a strong predictor of attitudes about homosexuality (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Rosik et al. 2007; Whitehead 2010).

Two different (but sometimes overlapping) sets of literature will be reviewed in this research: the Christian literature on theology, ethics and homosexuality; and the literature on sexualities which has emerged in the last thirty years. The literature on Christian theology and sexuality is surprisingly diverse. Some of the theological knowledge relies on Scripture, while other knowledge relies on experience, principles of social justice, or church traditions. Underlying assumptions, such as the notion that humans deserve respect since they are born in the image of God, or the idea of a perpetual battle by humans against sin, or the belief that relationality is a foundational source of Christian ethics, all may lead to different positions on sexual tolerance, sexual expression, and sexual ethics.

1.3 Religious Attitudes toward Homosexuality

It is important to understand where the Christian Church obtains its views and ideas. Christians draw their beliefs from their faith in God, the Bible, tradition, reason, and experience (Farley 2008; Hodge 2005; McNeill 1993). A combination of these forms the basis for every Christian's beliefs about homosexuality. One might ask, then, why is there so much division in teachings about homosexuality? Many authors would argue that the difference comes from the individual's understanding and interpretation of the Bible (Barton 2010; Farley 2008; Marin 2009; McNeill 1993; Saarinen 2011; Stone 2007; Zahniser and Cagle 2007). The entire historical and cultural context of the Church is also

an important factor in the individual's interpretation of the Scriptures. Homosexuality has been the most condemned sexual orientation throughout Christian Church history because of a few specific scriptural references (Zahniser and Cagle 2001). These references have been interpreted in many different ways, but typically the Religious Right use them to justify their belief that homosexuality is a sin.

Although the Bible provides little insight into what churches should teach about homosexuality; many take a very harsh, condemning stance against same-sex relationships. This can have many consequences for homosexuals in the Church. The impact that the interpretation and application of the Bible in the Christian Church can have is very significant. "Scripture functions authoritatively in two ways; it is the primary source of the basic teachings of Christianity; and it serves as the norm for Christian thinking" (Zahniser and Cagle 2007:327). Therefore, the way that Scripture is interpreted is critical to understanding the (mis)treatment that homosexuals receive from the Church. There are multiple perspectives to the way that the Scriptures are interpreted and understood. There is debate among the Christian Church as to what the Scriptures that reference homosexuality actually mean. Biblical literalism has been prevalent among Christian churches for most of its history and those who choose to interpret the Bible literally typically have a negative view toward homosexuality (Whitehead 2010). Only a few references to homosexuality can be found in the Bible. A significant amount of importance is placed on Scriptures and if they are interpreted from a traditional, literal perspective this has negative consequences for homosexuals. Those who go against this foundational scriptural teaching are said to be subject to the punishment of damnation of their souls to Hell. Reliance on the Old Testament, which is riddled with discourses of

judgment and condemnation of particular behaviors, is characteristic of much of the Religious Right's approach.

One Scripture that is widely used among those in the Christian Church to condemn people of the queer community is found in Genesis 19. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has historically been interpreted as evidence of God's punishment of homosexual sex (Cheng 2011). The story is about two angelic visitors who stay the night with a man named Lot and his family. The men of Sodom demand that Lot hand the visitors over in order for them to "know" them. God later destroys the city because of their evil ways. The long held belief is that the biblical reference to "know" them is to engage in sexual relations. This is also referenced in many other biblical stories, including that of Adam and Eve. Also, it is a widely held belief that the angels in the story were male and therefore, the men of the city wanted to engage in homosexual sex, thus the cause of God's destruction of the city.

The term "homosexual" is the preferred language of the Religious Right. Almost always, homosexuality is reified by the Religious Right; it is considered a clear-cut practice where men have sexual relations with other men. The masculinist emphasis on men is not coincidental; religious conservatism has a long history of patriarchal attitudes (Tigert 1999). This discourse stems directly from traditional conservative interpretations of the Bible which bemoan the sin of homosexuality. The implication of the theology of the Religious Right is that people who have engaged in same-sex relations should join the 'ex-gay' movement which includes programs that consist of various techniques such as prayer and counseling to help people abstain from same-sex relations (Paulk and Paulk 1999). Testimonials from ex-gay people are seen as a key model for discouraging such

sexual activities (Dailey 2003). Interestingly, there is a degree of social constructionism in such arguments – being gay is not considered an essential identity category from which a person can never change; rather, it is considered a sinful activity from which one can refrain. Hence the phrase ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’. The expectation from the Religious Right is that these people can and should refrain from sexual relations with someone of the same sex. However, the Religious Right is generally silent on the dimensions of ‘sexual activities’ – what actually constitutes a sex act, and whether it extends to play, masquerade, phobias, projections, fantasies, and other performative practices.

“There is something about homophobia that arouses a deep religious fervor that extends across the more moderate spectrum of contemporary evangelical groups” (Cobb 2006:3). Cobb claims that the hyperbole provided by Fred Phelps’s notorious Westboro Baptist Church, known for picketing public events with signs that say things such as “God hates fags,” has many links to broader Christian organizations and to Republican activists who oppose homosexuality. Efforts to legalize same-sex marriage fuel a “conjoined religious and conservative opposition” which work together to uphold the narrow definition of family (Cobb 2006:6). In the discourse of the Religious Right, nationalism and religion are intertwined. They assert that there are Christian underpinnings to American lifestyles, and position homosexuality as sin and the heterosexual family as the only truly American lifestyle. These beliefs are reinforced by expressions of unity that suggests the United States is a nation blessed by God and it is the Religious Right’s duty to restore the Christian hegemony of a heterosexual nation.

With increased efforts to legalize same-sex marriage, the Religious Right fears the destruction of the family unit. The family acts as a key conservative symbol that is a religiously reinforced institution. The narrow conservative definition of family only allows for one expression of heteronormative love and forecloses all other sexual expressions. This is a simplistic approach not only to homosexuality, but also to the myriad of complex relationships between men and women that are far more fluid and contradictory than the homosexual/heterosexual binary suggests. Furthermore, as Warner (1999) has suggested, people often are not aware of (all) their sexual desires until they have an opportunity to explore them: the heterosexual/homosexual binary imposes false dichotomies and limitations on the politics of desire and pleasure.

On the other hand, many have argued that it is time for the Church to reevaluate its teachings. Many church leaders themselves have asked the Church to reform and have pledged to be open and willing to change (Hodge 2005; McNeill 1993; Zahniser and Cagle 2007). Some Christians have decided to help homosexuals reconcile their sexual orientation with their faith. The creation of Welcoming and Affirming churches has been a positive movement in the Church to prevent people from leaving their faith in spite of the historical teachings that condemn homosexuality. Inclusive churches are formed specifically to help people reconcile their homosexual identity with their Christian identity (Gross 2008). These churches are making real progress in the fight for equality for gays and lesbians. Finding a church to attend that accepts you for who you are may be life-saving for a gay man or lesbian woman because it will help them to integrate their identities (Gross 2008).

Many churches are making progress toward inclusion and equality for members of the gay community. As an example, the national Seventh Day Adventist Church is taking steps to change their policies on homosexuality and to implement them in churches across the country. This denomination has historically held a condemning view of homosexuality, and because of current research and the social climate of the country; they have decided to change their official policy (Adventist.org 2013). In 2004 they adopted a new statement on homosexuality. The denomination still maintains that homosexuality is a sin, but they also claim that “all people, no matter what their sexual orientation, are children of God. We do not condone singling out any group for scorn or derision, let alone abuse” (Adventist.org 2013). Also, *Seventh-Gay Adventists* is a documentary recently made by members of the denomination that seeks to “explore the intersection of faith, identity, and sexuality through the stories of LGBT Adventists who are struggling with the desire to belong to the church they know and love” (Adevntist.org 2013). Although this is an ongoing process for the denomination, it has already been widely received by many churches within the denomination.

In contrast to the opposition of the Religious Right to same-sex relations, literature from Welcoming and Affirming churches tends to foreground the trauma of homophobia which is faced by gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people on a daily basis. As a result of this “silencing, shaming, fear, isolation, frustration, powerlessness, and victimization” caused by heterosexism and homophobia, GLBT people may have feelings of rage (Tigert 1999:3). Tigert claims that a transformative method for moving on from oppression is what she calls “truth-telling” (52). This initially involves telling someone who is definitely a safe and supportive person about

one's sexual orientation. Eribon also contends that gay subjectivities are shaped by shame (2004). "Gays," to use Eribon's term, are minorities that are part of a group that is subjected to a particular place in the sexual order of society.

The terms "faggot" and "dyke" are verbal insults. Such widespread cultural insults are experienced as a threat of violence and abuse. Furthermore, insult is the starting place of psychological wounding for gays. This insult shapes gay subjectivity, and is institutionalized in discourses that render homosexuals inferior. Eribon calls this insult "a social structure of inferiorization" (2004:xviii). The threat of insult causes many gay men and lesbians to live in secrecy and silence. Eribon claims that the flight from "heterosexual interpellation" is associated with experiences of melancholy and a never-ending process of mourning (2004:31). Eribon further suggests that this mourning is experienced when homosexuals lose the privileges that are granted to heterosexuals, such as legalized marriage.

The literature on sexuality has an expanded approach towards sexual desire/behavior compared to conservative Christian churches. For instance, the literature on sexualities:

- Argues that 'homosexuality' is a cultural construct which is historically specific and discursively created;
- Emphasizes the performativity of sex, gender, sexual identity, and sexual desire;
- Highlights the complexities of gender/sex/sexualities;
- Positions the closet and shaming as central to the experience of homosexuality;

- Explores a range of behaviors which are traditionally excluded in discussions of homosexuality - e.g. fantasy, desire, and eros (which are rarely discussed by Christian churches);
- Often challenges the nature/nurture binary that underpins explanations for homosexuality by highlighting the ways in which sexualities are relational and not necessarily coherent.

This literature is clearly relevant to the theology of Christian churches. While the Religious Right is conjoined with American conservatism (Cobb 2006), the Welcoming and Affirming churches openly challenge stereotypes and exclusion. Nevertheless, they are not ‘queer’ in the sense that they do not deliberately seek to challenge heterosexual hegemony in all its forms. For instance, the Welcoming and Affirming churches:

- Tend not to regard ‘homosexuality’ as a cultural construct;
- Tend not to regard the ‘problem of homosexuality’ as one of heterosexism;
- Do not encourage people who have not identified as gay to come out of the closet; and
- Do not discuss the creative power of sexual fantasies, or encourage the exploration of non-dominant forms of sexual expression (e.g. BDSM).

These debates often come down to contested ideas about morality, ethics, personal responsibility, individual/group choices, and ideas about sexual expression, which are not simply theological issues, but also issues about power.

1.4 Key Research Question

What do Christian church leaders in Toledo believe about homosexuality?

1.4.1 Subsidiary Questions

- Are there important areas of agreement/disagreement among these Christian leaders? If so, what are they?
- Why do Christian church leaders hold these beliefs?
- What ethical principles do they base these beliefs upon?

1.5 Research Methods

Semi-structured qualitative interviews, which generally took around one hour, were conducted with 16 Christian church leaders in Toledo. Interviews were subsequently transcribed, coded for key themes using ATLAS.ti, and analyzed according to the key and subsidiary research questions outlined above. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Social, Behavioral, and Educational Institutional Review Board (SBE IRB) of The University of Toledo.

1.6 Definitions

The words used in discussing sexuality are often emotionally-laden and contested. It is therefore essential to have a clear understanding of the meanings attached to key terms and the following definitions are provided to assist in that process.

Christian Church refers to the totality of several denominations, or subgroups, including, but not limited to: Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and Pentecostal. Together they act as “a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to Scripture they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for preaching and worship, observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and Communion, are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined for holiness, and scatter to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as missionaries to the world for God’s glory and their joy” (Driscoll and Breshears 2008).

Ex-gay is “a term that describes individuals who once identified as gay and/or experience same-sex attractions but who do not claim a gay identity and are in the process of trying to change their sexual orientation. While some participants in ex-gay programs find the term problematic, preferring instead to be called heterosexual or not labeled at all, ex-gay is widely used by scholars, religious groups, the media, and both leaders and participants in ex-gay programs” (Barton 2012:116).

Ex-gay ministries “first began in the 1970s and have since grown into a loosely-affiliated network of organizations established and supported predominantly by various evangelical Protestant denominations and parachurch organizations... the individual programs share basic beliefs that the expression of same-sex desire is sinful, that disordered gender identity is evidence of same-sex desire, and that same-sex desire can be overcome by unearthing the root causes of homosexuality to awaken a dormant heterosexual desire, which is God’s wish for human beings” (Blevins 2007:119-120).

GLBTQ- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

Heteronormativity is “the presumption that all things heterosexual are the way things should be” (Siker 2007:188).

Heterosexism is “the institutionalization, or systematizing, of homophobic prejudice and discrimination... heterosexism is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual.” (Tigert 1999:11)

Heterosexuality is a concept that describes “people who have sexual relations with people of the opposite sex,” these people are called “straight” or “heterosexual” (Cadge 2007:19).

Homophobia is “a form and manifestation of prejudice, or prejudgment. It is a combination of beliefs, attitudes, and opinions that one has performed, based on myths, assumptions, and stereotypes” (Tigert 1999:11). Specifically, homophobia has been defined as “the fear of homosexuality” (Tigert 1999:11). However, it “is not just an attitude. Straight men’s hostility to gay men involves real social practice, ranging from job discrimination through media vilification to imprisonment and sometimes murder. The point of these practices is not just to abuse individuals. It is also to draw social boundaries, defining ‘real’ masculinity by its distance from the rejected” (Connell 1995:40).

Queer biblical interpretation “challenges a range of assumptions about sexual activity, sexual identity, and gender, particularly as those assumptions are related to the production and interpretation of biblical texts... the phrase is also used to refer to a reading of biblical texts that calls into question rigid normative assumptions about sex and gender, including for example binary distinctions between “male” and “female,” “heterosexual” and “homosexual,” or “normal” and “abnormal” sexualities” (Stone 2007:184).

Queer theology is” a short-hand term for theology that is done by and for LGBT people” and “can be understood as a theological method that is self-consciously transgressive, especially by challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender” (Cheng 2011:9). *Queer theory* “basically approaches any discipline of study and asks questions from a queer perspective, subverting traditional responses in the process in order to create and claim space for GLBTQ persons. Queer theory and queer theology both criticize heteronormativity and construct new understandings of human interrelatedness as well as

human-divine relations that take seriously the experiences of GLBTQ realities. To “queer” something is to challenge and interfere with presumed meanings; it is resistance to normativity” (Siker 2007:188).

Religious Right is commonly used to describe dominant Christian approaches to a range of social issues, including homosexuality, which are fundamentally conservative. The Religious Right asserts that the only proper sexual connection involves heteronormative sex between a married man and woman (Cobb, 2006).

Welcoming congregations movement is” an ecumenical program of several Protestant denominations that facilitates local churches in publicly declaring their Welcoming and Affirming stance toward gay and lesbian people in all aspects of church life and leadership.” (Tigert 1999:144)

Welcoming and Affirming faith communities “are dedicated both to offering a haven for GLBTQ persons of faith and to seeking changes within their respective faith communities so that GLBTQ people will feel welcomed within the mainstream of their respective religious traditions” (Siker 2007:225).

1.7 Delimitations of the Research

This research has several delimitations. First, it is a study of Christian church leaders and, therefore, cannot make any claims about non-Christian denominations or religions. It would be unwise to even estimate the similarities or differences between these groups and the ones analyzed in this study. Next, the focus of this research is on the Christian leaders’ understanding of “homosexuality” and therefore, it cannot be assumed that the evidence will provide any comprehensive guidelines for other forms of sexual expression, such as bisexuality or lesbianism. Individual research participants

may offer information about lesbians during the interviews, for example, but it cannot be assumed that such comments are representative of all the leaders being interviewed in this study.

1.8 Chapter Outline

Chapter One of this thesis is the Introduction. It outlines the research problem, discusses the key and subsidiary questions, and outlines the methodology to be adopted in this thesis. Chapter Two examines recent literature which frames sexual identities such as “homosexuality” as historically-specific cultural constructs. Chapter Three analyzes Christian theology about ethics and homosexuality, providing a summary of the positions adopted by the Religious Right and Welcoming and Affirming communities. Next, Chapter Four explains the methodology to be adopted in this research. Chapter Five is the results and analysis chapter, describing and analyzing the findings of the original research conducted on Christian church leaders in Toledo. The analysis is guided by the literature review, and the research questions, which have been provided earlier in the thesis. Finally, Chapter Six is the Conclusion, which explores the theoretical, theological, and practical implications of this study, and identifies areas for further study.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter has set the foundations for this research. It has defined the research problem in broad terms (namely, the understanding of homosexuality by Christian church leaders in Toledo). It has described the key research question and subsidiary research questions which will be explored in the study. It has also outlined the research methods used – semi-structured interviews with 16 church leaders. It has then provided definitions of many of the key terms to be discussed in the thesis. It is the purpose of the

next chapter to review some of the contemporary literature on sexualities, and homosexuality in particular, in order to highlight its changing and contested cultural meanings.

Chapter 2

Sexualities

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the recent literature on sexualities, in order to better inform the analysis of homosexuality by Christian church leaders in Toledo. Part of the purpose of the literature review is to identify key themes which deserve careful attention in the later analysis of the research data. The chapter will review the work of Connell (1995) in order to highlight the importance of sex and gender in sexualities; it will examine the work of Foucault (1978) and Katz (2007) to explore the social construction of sexuality (including efforts to destabilize categories such as ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’); and it will utilize the work of Butler (1990) to underscore the importance of performativity, essentialism and social constructionism in debates about homosexuality. Next, Sullivan’s (2003) work on queer, assimilationist and liberationist discourses of sexuality will be discussed, followed by Eribon’s (2004) arguments about the importance of insult, shame, and trauma in various sexual experiences and Sedgwick’s (1990) work on minoritizing and universalizing discourses about sexuality.

2.2 Connell’s Theory of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

In our culture, sex is centrally related to gender (Connell 1995). In fact, a large amount of people are unable to recognize the difference between the two, they fail to see that embodiment plays a crucial role in the engendering process. While Connell does not say it explicitly, this engendering and embodiment connection is also invoked in reductionist approaches to sexualities. Gender and masculinities are not necessarily coherent. Hegemonic forms of masculinity are maintained in many different ways and they foreclose diverse meanings of masculinity, causing problems for men who experience such things as male impotency and the choice of an asexual lifestyle. Hegemonic masculinity arises out of a system of gender relations (Connell 1995) and is then solidified through various social practices which influence the body, personality and culture.

“The concept of ‘hegemony’ refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted” (Connell 1995:77). Hegemonic forms of masculinity are exalted by various institutions, cultural practices and relationships, including religion, uphold a particular masculinity that is exclusionary of some other masculinities. Among men, there are relationships of dominance and submission. In our society, there are some versions of masculinity that are subordinated. For example, the dominance of heterosexual men over homosexual men has a long history and is materialized through various forms of cultural exclusion. Other forms of masculinity that are subordinated include effeminate or sexually-abstinent males.

Connell argues that the cultural marginalization of subordinate masculinities is relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group.

Connell defines gender practice as “onto-formative” (81). This means that it is a product of the social world. It is created and upheld through social interaction and, because the two are so closely related, sexuality is also onto-formative.

The relationship between straight and gay men is a very symbolic one. Patriarchal culture would lead us to believe that opposites attract and therefore, men who are attracted to other men must be feminine in some way. Neither this idea nor homophobic beliefs are particularly coherent, but they are widely accepted.

Connell claims that the men he studied had a moment of engagement with hegemonic masculinity in their lives. Actually they and others have many moments of engagement on a day to day basis. People craft their own masculinities based on these moments of engagement. Conventional definitions of gender are sustained through various groups and organizations creating a masculinized public culture. The homosexual men that Connell studied also made decisions based on their sexual experiences. They made a discovery about sexuality as opposed to claiming an identity. Many people come to a realization about their own sexuality when they are engaging in a sexual act and decide whether or not they find pleasure in what they are doing. Homosexuality is, therefore, a complex social process. Connell further suggests that men learn about their own bodies through homosexual sex.

Homosexuality is reified in our society and this is problematic for those individuals who are discovering their sexuality. This cultural narrative is so powerful that some people believe that one homosexual act makes them gay – despite the fact that sexuality is socially negotiated and constantly changing. The sexual binary that exists makes heterosexual violence against homosexuals a real threat in our society.

Homosexual men may live in fear that if they reveal too much about themselves that they may suffer at the hands of men who do not agree with their sexual choices. This may contribute to Connell's idea that most gay men are "very straight" (143). By this he means that gay men engage in forms of masculinities that are in line with heterosexual men. Thus, they are also impacted by the hegemonic form of masculinity.

Positions of power assumed by men in our society have a negative impact on women, but also marginalize many different forms of masculinity as well. Gender and sexualities are closely related. Gender norms, specifically masculine norms, are upheld within the heterosexual hegemony of our society. Connell (1995) claims that masculinities are historically changing, difficult to define, and that they also involve competing discourses and sources of knowledge. There are numerous forms of masculinity, all associated with different positions of power.

Dominant forms of masculinity in society are maintained through various power dynamics. Masculine ideals are produced and reproduced by many of society's institutions (Connell 1995). Connell further argues that masculinities are racialized and classed, but that even within one form of masculinity there are many variations. In many ways the different forms of masculinities interact with each other. Although a gay man's masculinity may be different from another type of masculinity, they share common denominators. There are always relations of domination between various forms of masculinities.

Masculinities may change over time and the dominant form of masculinity also will possibly change, which is why masculinities may be thought of as projects (Connell 1995). Gender and sexualities can also be considered projects because all of these

aspects are closely related, although some may assume that gender and sexuality are fixed categories.

To claim that homophobia is an ideology rather than a practice is a reductionist approach. It is more appropriate to regard homophobia as something that is acted out. Homophobia may take shape in acts of marginalization, exclusion, or discrimination. Masculinities are acted out in relationships of domination and submission. Not only do different forms of masculinity have relationships with each other, they also have relationships with forms of femininity. Connell argues that there is a hegemonic assumption that masculinity is in a cultural opposition to femininity. In reality, all of the diverse ways to be a man or a woman are in a constant power struggle. Although Connell does not explicitly state this, the argument could be extended to homosexuality and heterosexuality. Hegemonic masculinity suggests that heterosexuality and homosexuality are in opposition to each other and has established positions of power between the two.

2.3 Foucault and Katz on the Social Construction of Sexuality

Foucault's (1978) *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* is an examination of the ways in which history and society have shaped the discourse around sexuality. Established scholarship on the Victorian era prior to Foucault's work suggests that repression of sexual discourse resulted in silence and secrecy about sex. Foucault begins with explaining how the beliefs about the Victorian era and its influence on discourses of restraint, sexual purity, and sexual silence continue to affect us today. During this time, it was often assumed that talk about sexuality was "restrained, mute, and hypocritical" (3). Foucault refers to this as his "repressive hypothesis" (10). This

continues today as what Foucault would call “modern puritanism,” it was assumed that this resulted in “taboo, nonexistence, and silence” (4-5).

Foucault argues that we actually talk about sex in a multitude of ways and that it is hypocritical to say otherwise. He raises three concerns around the repressive hypothesis. First, he asks whether sexual repression was a historical fact beginning in the seventeenth century. Next, he asked if the workings of power are really oppressive. Finally, he questions whether discussions around the need to move away from repression actually stem from the same discourse and assumptions that those who suggest repression occurred share. Foucault believes that rather than asking why we are repressed, we should be asking whether or not we are repressed at all.

From the outset, Foucault suggests that heterosexual privileges, imperatives, and practices stem from the discourses of the Victorian era and are involved in the process of normalization, truth claims (privileged relationships in which people claim to be speaking the truth), and a position of easily speaking about their experiences while reinforcing secrecy. His interest is in our drive for a particular kind of knowledge about a person and the power that is found in that knowledge. Foucault suggests that power is crucial to the way we talk about sex, who speaks about it, and the processes by which it is regulated through societal institutions. Prior to *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, it was commonly assumed that knowledge gives you power. Foucault claims that the opposite is true, and that power creates certain forms of recognized knowledge and diminishes others. He says that there is a discourse of “power-knowledge-pleasure” that influences and sustains how sexuality is discussed (11). Foucault’s complex theorizing of power is that it operates through various forms, not through repression, but rather “refusal, blockage, and

invalidation, but also incitement and intensification” (11). He connects power, the circulation of discourse, and knowledge claims.

Rather than being “repressed” around sexuality, there has been a multiplication of discourse which has affected people’s desires and Foucault suggests that this is worked through “displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself” (23). There are apparatuses of power which are involved in the multiplication of sexual discourses and desires. Foucault claims that there have been economic, pedagogical, medical, and judicial mechanisms which “incite, extract, distribute, and institutionalize” sexual discourse (33). These various forces have continued to regulate the discourse since the birth of homosexuality in 1870. Foucault asserts that at this time, “homosexuality” was considered a form of sexuality when it was altered from the practice of sodomy and thus became a master identity. These new forms of governance over sexuality (such as medical examinations, psychiatric reports, and family controls) all have a dual function – they simultaneously indicate power and pleasure.

The relationships of power to sex and pleasure do not just operate in a heterosexual framework; they branch out to other expressions and behaviors. Foucault claims that throughout the 19th Century, sex has been incorporated into two distinct orders of knowledge: a biology of reproduction and a medicine of sex. During this time, truth was given a special relationship to sex in this new science of sexuality: to know something about someone’s sexuality was to know something profound, dangerous, or useful about them. Foucault argues that in the emerging “science of sexuality” when someone listened to another’s confession they pathologized it through normalization. Hearing the confession is deeply influenced by power and knowledge which gives them the

ability to pathologize it. Foucault does not claim to have developed an entire theory of power; rather he is providing some analytical tools that can be used to understand how discourse around sexuality is formed by relations of power.

In *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Katz (2007) challenges the notion that the concept of heterosexuality has always been present. Rather, he argues that the term has only been around since the early 20th Century. It is crucial to understand the history of the term and its implications. Language is the main method of communication for humans and, in turn, it creates the reality in which we live. In other words, discourse produces what it names, even terms that refer to different sexualities. Christianity is one of the leading institutions that creates and promotes various ideas throughout society. In regards to sexuality, reductionist Christianity sets up an overt heterosexual and homosexual binary. This binary makes it impossible to recognize that sexuality is actually a fluid and socially-constructed concept. Within Christianity, the Bible acts as the Truth source for all knowledge. What most modern Christians do not recognize is that the Bible was written well before the invention of both the terms heterosexual and homosexual.

The idea that heterosexuality was a socially-constructed term that has not always been in existence is not yet a widely accepted concept. Katz (2007) attempts to show the significance of this and how the creation of the term was sought to establish a hierarchy among other sexualities. Thinking about sexuality in terms of a politics of pleasure and feeling, rather than as an identity, also widens our understanding of homosexuality as something that is fluid and socially-constructed. It allows us to realize that sexuality is tied to sexual pleasure and we, therefore, set up a spectrum of sexualities as opposed to

the familiar binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality that is represented in society. Feelings and emotions broaden the idea that sexuality can change over time, no matter with which sexuality you identify.

Heterosexuality has had an “unmarked and unremarked” history (Katz 2007:9). The heterosexual normativity and hegemony that have permeated American society have established a clearly-defined position of power. The discourse around heterosexuality itself commonly asserts the idea that living a straight life is superior to any other forms of sexuality. American history has long promoted this idea, just as it has promoted the dominance of the white race. Whiteness has also been an unremarked part of American history. “That dominant racial category and power structure continues to be privileged, normalized, naturalized, and forgotten, like heterosexuality” (Katz 2007:15-16). The hierarchy of sexuality continues to be upheld without question. The invention of heterosexuality effectively marginalizes and disadvantages those who do not conform to (monogamous) heterosexual ideals, and, society continues to operate in this way today, Katz argues.

Katz’s main argument is that “the terms heterosexuality and homosexuality signify historically specific ways of naming, thinking about, valuing, and socially organizing the sexes and their pleasures” (Katz 2007:12). There is power attached to heterosexuality, which also has implications for gender. Sex is not regarded as a politics of pleasure, but as a politics of procreation, especially within the Christian Church. Those who claim that sex is intended for procreation suggest that non-reproductive sex is pathological or immoral. The binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality is enforced through this accepted notion that sex is intended to be used for reproducing,

which is a widely-held belief within the Christian Church. This binary is problematic for many reasons; one of those is that it is assumed to be “natural” for a person to be heterosexual. It seems that there are two dominant approaches to sexuality: to regard it as fixed and unchanging, or as fluid and socially-constructed. If the former is true how can a person change from homosexual to heterosexual? It is a contradiction to promote the conversion of a person’s identity from homosexual to heterosexual if sexuality is fixed; but this fluid notion of sexuality is problematic for those who assume particular forms of sexual expression as “natural”.

2.4 Butler: Essentialism, Social Constructionism, and Performativity

Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble* is an intervention against the essentialist idea behind feminism that women are a separate category of people with common interests. She suggests that feminism grew out of the idea that sex is comprised of males and females and gender equates to masculine and feminine. Butler argues that the binary discourse categories of male and female support a gender hierarchy and also compulsory heterosexuality. She also claims that it is not enough to look at how “women” might become more fully represented in language and politics, which is one of the main goals of feminism, but that feminist critique should understand how the category of “women” is provided and restrained by the very power structures through which it is sought.

Butler suggests that the sex binary has been based on a “heterosexual matrix” that narrows the way we think about gender and desire (viii). She claims that gender trouble, or the indeterminacy of one’s gender identity, is a vital contemporary dynamic. Butler pleads for everyone to make gender trouble “through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep

gender in its place” (34). People should create trouble because gender acts as an incredibly confining experience of power. She believes that the best way to trouble the gender categories is to challenge sex categories as well because they are the effects of power structures. According to Butler, a position which deconstructs all fixed identities questions the boundaries of the subject “woman” seems problematic for many feminists. She claims that feminism conforms to representational politics and creates a subject of “woman,” which then causes a misinterpretation of the goals of feminism. Butler further argues that the “production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender” (7). Thus, sex and gender are equally culturally-constructed concepts.

Sex, gender, and desire are the effects of power, not the sources of power. Power also produces institutions which uphold these hierarchies. However, there are always political and cultural intersections that complicate our ways of thinking or talking about gender. Butler says that “gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (3). The complexity of identity does not allow for the extent of unity among women called for by feminists. The idea of the unified “woman” forecloses the idea that there are cultural, political and social differences among them. Butler suggests that you decontextualize and separate all of the multiple identities that people have when you attempt to unify all women, and this only creates and recreates a particular form of power that privileges some and excludes others.

To assume a sexual binary suppresses multiple sexualities and can trouble uncritically accepted ideas about homosexuality and reproduction, which are reinforced through various social institutions. Even within homosexual contexts, binary gender

categories are reinforced by the heterosexual matrix. The categories of butch and femme within the lesbian relationships are examples of the production of binary gender identities. Butler asserts that the hegemonic sex and gender binaries act as “regulatory fictions” which reinforce heterosexist and masculine power in society (33). Butler describes gender as performative, or the citation of an existing discourse that people engage with. In this sense gender does not act as a noun. Rather, gender is a doing in which people act out what they perceive to be appropriate behavior for someone in a particular gender category. The performativity of gender involves the operation of power that creates particular identities. Although the discourses around sex and gender pre-exist us, we have the capacity to change the current binary discourse around sex and gender. While gender is not performed willfully or consciously, we are only approximating the ideal forms of gender; we will never perfectly conform to gender norms. Drag, on the other hand, is a performance which “plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (137). Butler claims that there are three contingent dimension of significant corporeality at work when someone is performing drag: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.

2.5 Sullivan: Queer Theory and Assimilationist and Liberationist Discourses

Sullivan (2003) identifies the job of queer theory as continually destabilizing identity categories. This includes, but is not limited to, questioning notions around sexuality and sexual practices. Sullivan’s definition of “queer” can help us better understand the purpose of queer theorists in general. She suggests that “to queer” is “to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize, to camp up-heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by

them and that (in)form them” (Sullivan 2003:vi). She deliberately uses queer as a verb to emphasize that it is an act and not an identity. Queering involves making heteronormativity seem strange, and is usually done through humor or mockery and by camping up; there is a strategic attempt to invoke exaggeration around particular sexual practices. It is also meant to frustrate those who engage in identity politics, including the Religious Right, and to delegitimize the conservative discourse around heterosexual normativity and the threat of homosexuality.

Sexuality is socially-constructed. Sullivan relies on Foucault’s genealogical analysis of sexuality to look at crucial moments in history that signify change around ideas about sexuality, as opposed to assuming that there is always gradual social progress. Sullivan then explores “assimilationist” and “liberationist” discourses on the exclusion/inclusion of homosexual people. Assimilationist discourse revolves around acceptance and the belief that both heterosexuals and homosexuals are part of humanity, and further assumes that tolerance can be achieved through normalizing sameness. However, normalizing politics implies power relationships. Assimilationists also promote the distinction between the public and private. This divide places sexuality outside of the domain of the law and makes it a private issue (Sullivan 2003). This is problematic because laws against homosexual marriage need to be politicized in order for them to change. Queers would suggest that sex is a political issue and needs to be treated as such. Liberationists on the other hand, promote the idea that homosexuality is something that is positive. Sullivan identifies the four key concerns of liberationists as Pride, Choice, Coming Out, and Liberation (2003). The act of coming out as a gay person is believed to be transformative, but it is problematic because it assumes fixed

identity categories. Rather than recognizing sexuality as a fluid social construction, coming out emphasizes an either/or categorization of sexuality.

Within the assimilationist framework, there is no need for heterosexuals to change who they are, but for queers, the social structure of heterosexual normativity is what needs to change, not homosexuals. The queer attempt to destabilize heterosexual normativity could act as a solution to the problems of inequality, discrimination and marginalization that exist in our society that promotes dichotomous gender and sexuality identities. The liberationist discourse is also problematic because it suggests that people who are liberated are free from power, ignoring the way that power acts as a complex system of relationships.

2.6 Eribon: Insult, Shame, and Trauma

Eribon (2004) draws on the work of Foucault for his discussion of gay subjectivity, and provides a critical French importation of American queer theory. He acknowledges that Foucault's life and the historical context of his work are very important components of his own analysis. The fact that Foucault himself was gay and had to deal with questioning whether or not he should base his ethical and political analysis upon this identity led, in part, to his argument that the process of normalization reduces multiple forms of sexualities towards fixed identity categories. Foucault believed that the operation of power within the framework of normalization was reinforced by multiple institutions, and that the discourses that were produced from those power relations marginalized different groups, including gays. Eribon contends that gay "subjectivation," or the process of being subjected to a certain power and made an object, is incredibly shaped by shame (2004). Homosexuals are impelled to take the language of

insult and acts of shaming and re-signify them in ways that allow them to live. This “cultural filiation,” or inheritance of subjectification, has to be discussed on a collective level rather than an individual one, in order for the process of reconstructing one’s identity with new meaning to begin. Eribon calls this process of reclaiming an identity “re-subjection”. In re-subjection, gays are able to recreate their identities through the process of re-appropriation.

Individual subjectivity should be considered a collective struggle because of the process of socialization in which those individuals are socialized within a realm of power hierarchies. “Gays,” to use Eribon’s term, are minorities that are part of a group that is subjected to a particular place in the sexual order of society. By using the word “gay” in his analysis, Eribon is recognizing that it is the word people use to designate themselves. He says that “language is never neutral: acts of naming have social effects: they provide definition for images and representations” (xviii). Words carry meanings and have the ability to cause serious social and psychological damage. The terms “faggot” and “dyke” are verbal attacks that act as the insult that gay men and lesbians can hear at any time. These insults shape people’s relationships with one another and thereby, shape the personality or the very being of an individual that is insulted. Insults carry power. They can cause a person to change their behavior. For example, a gay couple has to be aware of their surroundings and decide whether or not they can show affection. If this couple makes a mistake about their surroundings, there may be serious consequences. Widespread cultural insults are experienced as a threat of violence and abuse.

It is important to recognize that there is a large group of people with same-sex relationships who deal with being named and shamed. This shame acts as an insult that

these groups deal with on many levels. The key argument of Eribon's book is that insult in the lives of gay men and lesbians acts as the starting place of psychological wounding, psychoanalytical action that only acts on an individual level. Before any analysis can begin, this insult has to be recognized as shaping gay subjectivity, which makes it a problem of institutions and discourses that render homosexuals inferior. Eribon calls this insult "a social structure of inferiorization" (2004: xviii). This is why he claims that it is necessary to avoid individualistic psychoanalysis and focus instead on the social structure.

Eribon argues that internalized loathing occurs with the necessity of self-concealment and the disassociation within gay lives that occurs because of the way homosexuality is discursively created and reproduced in society. This self-hatred has negative effects on people, and may result in a hostile and oppressive attitude toward other homosexuals. Eribon's book has two aims: first, to talk about the way that gays have been subjectified; and second, to look at the changes it has made, but also to recognize that it is still ongoing. Gays are subject to power, shame and insult, but they are always resisting it through the production of a "gay world" (Eribon 2004:7).

Many gays flee to cities and their social networks because they find them more hospitable and a place to escape from insult. Large cities have "enclaves" which act as a safe place from homophobia (Eribon 2004:19). A mythology of the city developed within the gay culture because of the invisibility offered to gays and the hopes of becoming another face in the crowd. However, gay subculture is becoming more visible and affirmed in relation to the city as a whole. This has allowed for a gay visibility whereby gay pride marches and gay neighborhoods are part of a culture that interacts

with the rest of the city and the world. Eribon reduces LGBT groups to the explicit “gay,” without critical analysis, potentially ignoring major experiential, sexual, and gender differences in these groups. Gay people continue to move to the city to escape the pervasiveness of insult and to carefully choose friends within a “concentric circle” (Eribon 2004:26). Gay enclaves are very important to the development of relationships between gay people because they allow them to be themselves. The rise of gay culture has been a massive challenge not only to “the sexual and social order, but also the epistemological order” of social life (Eribon 2004:28).

Many gay men and lesbians live in secrecy and silence because of the threat of insult. Eribon claims that the flight from “heterosexual interpellation” to the city leads to rising educational and social trajectories (2004:31). Other benefits of moving to the city include intergenerational solidarity between young and old. Gay culture has helped to create and sustain lasting friendships and many of those friendships replace familial ties. Creating these non-biological families, may involve a rejection of heteronormativity, but nevertheless associated with the experience of melancholy, or a never-ending process of mourning. Eribon further suggests that this mourning is experienced when homosexuals lose the privileges that are granted to heterosexuals. One of these privileges is marriage. “The desacralization of marriage is what makes possible the claim that it should be open to same-sex couples” (Eribon 2004:39). This argument seems to suggest that the only reason gay people have been able to demand the right to marry is because the institution of marriage itself has changed, away from all of its strict, sacred foundations.

2.7 Minoritizing and Universalizing Discourses about Sexuality

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick claims that 20th Century Western culture is structured by a homosexual/heterosexual binary that exists in our current discourse around sexuality. She argues that limiting sexuality to oppositional categories of homosexuality or heterosexuality is too simplistic. Sedgwick explains that there are two tendencies internal to discussions of sexuality, particularly homosexuality. The first is the minoritizing view which sees specific sexual practices as only relative to a small number of people. The second, or universalizing view, suggests that the homosexual/heterosexual distinction determines outcomes for people across a wide range of sexual practices. Sedgwick does not choose between the minoritizing view and universalizing view; rather, she believes that it is essential to recognize the consistent interplay of each perspective. 20th Century Western culture has been shaped by a sexual binary discourse, and deconstructing the homo/heterosexual binary relies on the understanding that power and sexuality are in constant flux. Although sexuality and gender are not the same thing, they are intricately connected. Sedgwick also argues that Western culture privileges heterosexuality in “identity, truth, and knowledge” (3). All other forms of sexual desire and expression are marginalized.

Western culture would be quite different were it not for the definitions of homosexual and heterosexual that have shaped knowledge and understanding. Sedgwick asserts that various discourses have created and recreated these definitions which reinforce a sexual binary. In terms of knowledge and understanding, the homosexual and heterosexual definitions establish many other binaries in society that are regulated by various institutions. She suggests that this binary establishes inequality which leads to the structuring of same-sex relations and intersects “virtually every issue of power and

gender” (2-3). Inequalities exist among same-sex relations and also between genders because of the regulations that are established through the binary. Sedgwick claims that the “gay closet” is a social function for homosexual people. On a daily basis gay and lesbian people have to deal with the impact of the closet on their lives. For Sedgwick this means that “the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (71). The public and private divide at the institutional level has encouraged homosexuals to stay in the closet.

Sedgwick provides seven axioms, or recognized truths, for understanding sexuality and gender. Her words deserve to be quoted, since they have had a profound effect on subsequent work:

1. People are different from each other (22).
2. The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can't know in advance how they will be different (27).
3. There can't be an a priori decision about how far it will make sense to conceptualize lesbian and gay male identities together. Or separately (36).
4. The immemorial, seemingly ritualized debates on nature versus nurture take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies about both nature and nurture (40).
5. The historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity (44).
6. The relation of gay studies to debates on the literary canon is, and had best be, tortuous (48).
7. The paths of allo-identification are likely to be strange and recalcitrant. So are the paths of auto-identification (59).

As part of the first axiom that everyone is different, Sedgwick identifies 13 areas that differentiate people, even if they have identical identities. These differences have the potential to “disrupt many forms of the available thinking about sexuality” (25). Again, her words deserve to be quoted directly since they have been so influential in queer theory:

1. Sex acts mean different things to different people.
2. For some, “the sexual” only refers to sex acts. Others embody it or not at all.
3. For some, sexuality is part of their identity. For others it is not.
4. Some people think about sex all the time and some do not.
5. Some people like to have a lot of sex while others little or none.
6. Many people have mental or emotional involvement in sex acts they do not do, or even want to do.
7. Some people want their sexuality to be connected to other aspects of their lives and others do not.
8. Some people believe that their sexual pleasure has biological ties, others believe it is tied to circumstance.
9. Some people avoid sex altogether out of fear that it will be bad.
10. Sexuality could provide self-discovery or a routine habit.
11. Some people like predictable sex while others want it to be spontaneous.
12. Some people’s sexual orientation is more connected to their masturbation practices than their attraction. For others, it has nothing to do with their sexual orientation.
13. People from various sexual orientations experience their sexuality as intertwined with their gender and some do not.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter examined literature on sexualities, as a background to the study of homosexuality in the discourse of Christian church leaders in Toledo. It examined themes which included the importance of sex and gender in the social construction of “sexualities”. It also discussed the important effects of both essentialism and social constructionism in current understandings of sexualities, and their parallel influence in assimilationist and liberationist discourses. The chapter also examined the importance of performativity in gender and sexuality, following on from the work of Judith Butler in particular. The chapter also discussed the influence of insult, shame and trauma in various sexual experiences. Finally, examining the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, it analyzed the influence of minoritizing and universalizing discourses about sexuality.

This literature review has raised many issues which will be examined during the analysis of the interview transcripts later in this thesis. For example, the following questions will be asked of the replies by research participants:

- Do they recognize the complex intersections of sex, gender and sexuality?
- Do they regard “homosexuality” as a clear-cut, fixed identity (as an essentialist approach would suggest), or do they recognize it as a fluid and socially-constructed phenomena (as a social constructionist approach would imply)?
- Do they promote an assimilationist approach to sexual diversity, a liberationist one, or a transgressive one?
- Do they recognize the importance of performativity in the establishment of sexual identities and identifications?
- Do they recognize the vital role of shame, trauma, and insult in shaping gay subjectivities?
- Do they adopt a minoritizing or a universalizing approach to sexualities?

The following chapter will examine the ways in which the literature on Christianity addresses the complexities of sexual behavior.

Chapter 3

Christianity and Sexuality

3.1 Introduction

The gay liberation movement in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s has led to many significant changes in American society among the opinions and mindsets of the public regarding homosexuality (McNeill 1993; Bruner 2010). Despite these changes, there is still a long road to equality for homosexuals. Many disparities still exist between heterosexuals and homosexuals in regards to rights and treatment. One institution of society where homosexuals face inequality and maltreatment is in the Christian Church.

Sexual orientation, specifically homosexuality, is a highly controversial issue in the Christian Church and the experiences of gays and lesbians are unique (Cadge et al. 2008; Djupe et al. 2008; Zahniser and Cagle, 2007). There are a variety of opinions about homosexuality in the Church. The denominations within Christianity maintain a variety of views which range from outright condemnation to complete acceptance and support. Many have an opposition to homosexuality based on their interpretation of the Bible. On the other hand, there are many churches that are Welcoming and Affirming of homosexuality. Many denominations and churches fall somewhere in between this

spectrum with a wide range of beliefs about where homosexuality fits into Christianity (Levy and Reeves 2011).

Christianity has had an influential role in shaping American society. It has provided Americans with morals and ethics for a strict standard of living for many years. As the dominant Church in the United States it is important to understand the impact that it has on all areas of life. The Christian Church is filled with a history of controversy in regards to its teachings and treatment of homosexuals. Stone argues that the Church's past is filled with mistreatment and has caused homosexuals to be hostile and suspicious of the Church (2007). Religion has a significant effect on attitudes about homosexuality (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Whitehead 2010). Christianity is distinctive amongst the world's religions because of the differing views among its members in regards to this issue, especially in the United States. This phenomenon has created great contention in the Church and therefore, widespread attention has been brought to the issue.

There have been divisions among Christian denominations because of the debate over homosexuality. The Episcopal Church experienced a major split because of the controversy that arose after Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, was appointed as a bishop in the Church in 2004 (Armour 2010; Bruner 2010; Cadge et al. 2008; Djupe et al. 2008; Zahniser and Cagle 2007). A church member or leader may adhere to a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, or they may embrace a sort of gay theology (Levy and Reese 2011; Lowe 2009; Marin 2009; McNeill 1993; Stone 2007). Gay theology also takes into consideration a historical and cultural context. It embraces homosexuality rather than condemning it.

This chapter will compare and contrast the perspectives of the Religious Right with those of Welcoming and Affirming Churches. It will summarize the literature on both of these perspectives regarding homosexuality, and will highlight epistemological, ontological, theological and practical dimensions of their belief systems.

3.2 The Perspective of the Religious Right

The Religious Right believes that homosexuality is a “lifestyle” and an “abnormal attraction”, as opposed to an innate sexual orientation (Dailey 2003: 6). Indeed, it suggests that such a lifestyle is usually the result of certain risk factors, including: alienation from fathers; over-protective mothers; improper parenting; sex abuse; social phobias; and experiences of bullying or teasing (Dailey 2003: 6-7). The approach that Christian churches use to understand the Bible has strong implications for the doctrine they adhere to and the policies that they make. Many churches adhere to a fundamentalist doctrine that teaches that homosexuals are bad, diseased, perverse, sinful, other, and inferior (Barton 2010). Although the Bible provides little insight into what churches should teach about homosexuality, many take a very harsh, condemning stance against same-sex relationships.

Homosexuals promote a notion of “sexual orientation”, according to Dailey, to justify their sexual tendencies and to obtain special privileges, by positioning it as something over which they have no control. Dailey argues that they engage in a three-tiered strategy to undermine orthodox Christian teachings:

1. Exegetical arguments that suggest the Bible does not discuss or condemn homosexuality.

2. Arguments that the condemnation of homosexual acts in biblical times was historically and culturally specific to that time.

3. Theological arguments that attempt to justify homosexual relationships on the basis of notions of love, commitment and mutuality.

One of the most common ways in which the Religious Right directs its homosexual members to behave is to join the ‘ex-gay’ movement. This ‘ex-gay’ movement has been described as one in which ex-gay people are bombarded “up to their eyeballs with ‘cures’ and ‘solutions’ to their problems” (Rix 2010:14). In the ex-gay movement, homosexual Christian men are considered to have a “skewed straight identity” (p. 34) – implying that they are essentially straight men, even if they have fallen into unhealthy, sinful habits. These messages operate at many levels – educational, moral, behavioral, and theological. Many Christians believe that with prayer and counseling, conversion therapies can be effective in turning a homosexual person into a heterosexual (Barton 2010:468). In an effort to change a person’s identity, ex-gay programs use an informant’s own Christian belief system as the foundation for their attempts for conversion (Barton 2010).

Most Christian denominations take the stance that homosexuality is a choice rather than biologically determined (Armour 2010; McNeill 1993; Whitehead 2010). However, this assumption implicitly sends a mixed message to homosexuals and to society as a whole. If a person can choose their sexual orientation, then sexual orientation is not innate and fixed, but, rather, is fluid (an assumption ironically parallel to the sexuality studies literature). However, the idea that sexuality is not innate raises the issue of whether one form of sexual expression can therefore be said to be ‘natural’.

As a result of this fluid notion of sexuality, many Christians believe that with prayer and counseling, conversion therapies can be effective in turning a person into a heterosexual, or at least allow people to control their same-sex desires (Barton 2010; Harrison 2009; Zahniser and Cagle 2007). Zahniser and Cagle claim that “Christians reject the idea that God has created people as homosexual because of the available biblical teachings and the interpretations of them” (2007:345). This is yet another example of how Christians use the Bible to gain their knowledge and justify a particular position on sexual morality. When Christians decide that a person has the ability to choose their sexual orientation, it makes it much easier to condemn homosexuals and those that do not fit into their heteronormative culture.

The teachings of the Religious Right put some people in a difficult position of choosing between their own identities. There is a void in the literature in regards to the specific experiences of those who identify as both homosexual and Christian face. Barton argues that gay people are often talked about, but seldom listened to, and rarely are they asked about their oppression and which institutions are oppressing them (2010). It is crucial to recognize and understand the major challenges that gay and lesbian Christians have to deal with and how it relates to their identity formation.

It may be difficult for gays and lesbians who grew up in Christian families to reconcile both their Christian faith and their homosexual identity. The teachings of the Church may cause gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing to experience conflict between religion and sexual identity (Levy and Reeves 2011). These two aspects of a person’s life may be considered dueling identities that create internal and external problems. One of the participants in Gross’s study stated that, “I could not integrate my

faith and my homosexuality” (2008:87). Some will have to make difficult decisions that will impact all areas of their lives. Levy and Reeves identify five strategies for dealing with identity conflict: rejecting sexual identity; rejecting Christian identity; integrating these two identities; compartmentalizing; or living with the conflict (2011).

Some people are faced with the choice of whether they would rather recognize their Christian faith or their sexual orientation (Harrison 2009; Levy and Reese 2011; Zahniser and Cagle 2007). Many face the fear of rejection if they come out to people in their church, and others do not feel that their gay or lesbian friends would embrace their Christian faith. Fear of going to hell; depression; low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness; isolation; abuse and self-loathing are only some of the consequences that homosexuals must cope with (Barton 2010). It is a dilemma for many people and there are consequences for their decision to come out. Many face terrible treatment from family and friends that are unwilling to accept them (Barton 2010).

All participants in Levy and Reeve’s study who attended church “worked tirelessly to keep their sexual desires a secret” (2011:59). Many that come out of the closet face terrible treatment from family and friends who are unwilling to accept them for who they are (Barton 2010). If a person faces rejection and isolation from family and friends because they reveal their sexual orientation, the chances of them approving of marriage are slim. The Church teachings influence people’s opinions about gay marriage based on the teaching that homosexuality is chosen and not biological. “Individuals who believe homosexuality is a choice are almost 67% less likely to support homosexual marriage compared to those who don’t” (Whitehead 2010:71).

There have been many methods embraced by the Church in an effort to rid people of the sin of homosexuality. One of these methods is implementing the ideology that there is a difference between a person and their behavior, or their sexual orientation. This difference implies that it is possible to be a homosexual that is not a sinner. This is why many churches teach that homosexuals, along with other people who engage in sinful acts, should be loved as an individual, but their sin should be hated. The belief that you should “love the sinner and hate the sin” is prevalent among the Christian Church (Bruner 2010; Harrison 2009; Marin 2009; Rosik et al. 2007; Zahniser and Cagle 2007). It is nearly impossible for a gay person to embrace this belief because of the fact that sexual orientation is so closely tied to one’s identity. Jodi O’Brien explains:

Within Christianity, active homosexuals are also aware that in addition to their being social cast-offs, their souls have been cast off as well. This predicament poses a tremendous existential crisis. To experience homosexual desires, and certainly to pursue fulfillment of those desires, will result in being cast out from the cosmology through which one makes sense of one’s life... Abandoning Christianity may mean losing a sense of meaning and purpose, yet keeping this particular religion means facing the prospect of damnation (as cited in Barton 2012:64).

This insight is significant because of its recognition that the concept of “homosexuality” is not self-evident. It adds an additional layer to the issue: desires which are not necessarily acted upon now need to be included in the analysis of Christianity and its relationship to homosexuality. This is a layer of the debate which is sometimes overlooked: the concept of “homosexuality” may, or may not, be understood to include desires which are not acted upon. Furthermore, this opens the door to analyses of disavowed desire – desire which is present, but which is denied in a context of a religion that regards all same-sex attractions, impulses, feelings, and fantasies as unnatural.

In addition to understanding the theological power of the Religious Right, it is important to recognize its political power. For many years, religious politicians have played a large role in the political system of the United States, which has led to many influential decisions for the country as a whole (Layman 2001). Republican conservatism has been influenced by Christianity for many years. Particularly younger, conservative Christians are leading the opposition to same-sex marriage. Rick Warren (a popular conservative Christian televangelist minister) has become the spokesperson for the Christian Right, and as a self-professed moderate, continues to oppose the legal recognition of same-sex marriage (Sherkat et al. 2011). The Religious Right is a group of leaders in the Church that make it their job to promote social conservative policies; many which have negative repercussions for the gay community. This is a clear indication of the intersection between religion and politics. Long-time pastors Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson will be widely remembered as attributing the September 11th terrorist attacks to the presence of homosexuals in the United States (Barton 2010). Some of the most influential leaders of the Christian Church make it very clear that they disapprove of homosexuality through their teachings and their treatment of homosexuals in their churches. As late as 1996 the Presbyterian Church adopted a rule that prevents the ordination of gay or lesbian ministers (Ford et al. 2009).

Cobb (2006) argues that the message of Fred Phelps's church, "God hates fags," is a profound theological statement and that many people in the Religious Right agree with this statement concerning queer sexuality (2). Phelps and others believe that this message is important and that the whole world needs to hear it. The only holy sexual connection is heteronormative sex between a married man and woman. Those who go

against this foundational scriptural teaching are subject to the punishment of damnation of their souls to Hell. This would suggest that those who believe this rely on the Old Testament which is riddled with the discourse of judgment and condemnation of particular behaviors. All sexual activity that does not align with this heteronormative idea of lawful sex is subject to God's hate.

While many would consider Phelps an extremist because of the message of hate that he spreads, Cobb argues that the intolerance of homosexuality is widely accepted by many fundamentalist and evangelical groups. These groups have received powerful gains in many areas through the message of hate against homosexuals. Efforts to legalize same-sex marriage fuel a "conjoined religious and conservative opposition" which work together to uphold the narrow definition of family (Cobb 2006:6). Through the message of hate against homosexuals, we learn that nationalism and religion are intertwined. The religious rhetoric around God's hate for homosexuals appeals to a national citizenry and the idea that we live in a heterosexual nation. There are Christian underpinnings to the American psyche that relate to the rhetoric of homosexuality as sin and the heterosexual family as American.

Many groups, such as Focus on the Family, use fear tactics to motivate Christian conservatives to act against homosexuals. They believe it is their duty to promote their public and biblical policies which many times meet in the arena of politics. Cobb argues that although they are quick to condemn, "the Religious Right" claim that they act out of love according to their beliefs which is motivated by faith (2006:5). There is an unintended irony in the calling these conservatives "the Religious Right" because it is linked to a conception of rights, but only for heterosexuals. This group also believes that

homosexuality itself is evil and responsible for making the world less holy. Many think that by working against homosexuals and fighting to uphold the conservative idea of family, conservative fundamentalists are serving God.

Barton (2012) argues that there is a homophobic status quo in the Bible Belt, maintained by formal and informal practices - from the churches to social interactions. Growing up in (as opposed to moving into) the Bible Belt has been an important source of socialization about the sinfulness of homosexuality. There is an intense scrutiny, which she (following Foucault) calls a “panopticon,” in the Bible Belt (24). There are so many signs and symbols of Christianity throughout the Bible Belt that some gays find it unsafe to come out when they see these signs. The community is encouraged by religious leaders to patrol for signs of homosexuality and sinfulness. This is a major mechanism involved in the power of the Religious Right. Rejection and shame can be placed on a whole family, not just the gay person in it. Bigotry is normalized and a politics of domination operates where people are silent even if they disagree.

Barton suggests that leaders in schools, churches, and politics have a homophobic script, which community members follow, that excludes and shames gay family members. This harms other heterosexual family members too – they lose their familial strength in return for following the religious script. Homosexuals are blamed for this, since their behavior damages the family unit, and other family members are encouraged to prioritize God’s law over their family. As a result, gays and lesbians stay in the “toxic closet” to avoid the negative consequences of coming out. Family rejection is therefore a result of institutionalized homophobia (Barton 2012:91). But many Christians do not see themselves as prejudiced or homophobic – they feel they are just doing God’s work.

Gays and lesbians often feel a crisis of faith and identity because of the homophobia that is present in the Bible Belt. Some struggle with thoughts of suicide and self-harm, while others think that they have to reveal their sinful thoughts or behaviors to the Church, because its leaders' special relationship to God means that they would know anyway. Because of the toxic closet, gays and lesbians are not given the opportunity to fully emotionally communicate about themselves. Their opportunities for self-expression (in a safe way) are limited and this creates long-term emotional problems. Barton calls this trauma a result of the "inarticulation of the gay self" (88).

Relying on her own ethnographic field trip to the 2009 Exodus Conference, Barton explores the messages, gender dynamics, and effectiveness of the ex-gay movement. The ex-gay movement promises love and salvation to those who abandon their homosexual ways. It further suggests that homosexuality and lesbianism is a response to underdeveloped gender socialization. This is more complicated for women than men, since women's gender and sexuality is more fluid than men's. According to one of the speakers at Exodus, this is because women were made out of another human being, which is in reference to the biblical account of the creation of Adam and Eve. It is more socially acceptable for women to exhibit masculine traits or behaviors than it is for a man to act feminine. The Exodus Conference teaches that one of the causes of lesbianism is inappropriate gender identification. However, most studies find the ex-gay conversion method is ineffective and harmful, since the underlying message is that gays/lesbians can't 'be' who they really are. "Struggling" gays who may "fall" are welcomed to the ex-gay movement; active homosexuals are discouraged from acting on their sins or even thinking homosexual thoughts.

3.3 The Perspective of the Welcoming and Affirming Churches

The previous chapter highlighted the development of queer theory as a radical intervention into debates about sexual orientation, which sought to destabilize essentialist notions of sex and sexuality. One of the options for Welcoming and Affirming churches is to adopt a queer theology and to destabilize sexual binaries and to make a commitment to undermining the power of heteronormativity. Another, far less radical (and more common) approach involves accepting sexual binaries, by simply welcoming ‘homosexual’ men (and other “sexual minorities”) into the congregation. This section of the chapter will analyze these two perspectives within Welcoming and Affirming theology.

3.3.1 One Perspective: Queer Theology

Cheng (2011) identifies the four relevant sources for queer theology as Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Each of these aspects acts a filter for understanding how God, Christianity, and queer sexualities can be interpreted. By citing the Bible as the source for Scripture, Cheng implies that queer theology has Christian roots as opposed to any other religious tradition. Rather than creating a new religion altogether, queer theologians look to the teachings of the Bible and the Christian Church for inspiration. Those teachings are then reframed to question or eliminate boundaries that exist around gender and sexuality. In fact, queer theology is created by and for people of the queer community. This idea that the theology is made for a particular group of people also acts as one of the definitions of queer theology.

Queer theology can also be regarded a method that is “self-consciously transgressive” (Cheng 20011:10). By this, Cheng means that it challenges societal norms

and affirms those of the queer community who have had a long history of being condemned by the Christian Church. Another important aspect of queer theology is its reliance on queer theory. Their theology takes on the efforts of queer theory in critiquing the binary categories of both gender and sexuality. In fact, they wish to erase these boundaries which have been considered “natural”. Queer theorists would argue that traditional Christian theology holds essentialist views in these areas which are fundamentally problematic for those of the queer community.

One of the main aims of queer theology is to draw upon the Bible for affirmation of the queer lifestyle. They do this by reading the Bible in its entirety in a way that affirms queer lifestyles, as opposed to appropriating particular verses of Scripture that have been traditionally used to condemn. Therefore, the Bible is interpreted positively and constructively from their own perspectives (Cheng 2011). One Scripture that is widely used among those in the Christian Church to condemn people of the queer community is found in Genesis 19. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has historically been interpreted as evidence of God’s punishment of homosexual sex. Queer biblical scholars have argued that the story is actually a condemnation of the sin of inhospitality (Cheng 2011).

Only within recent years has the traditional interpretation been questioned. Many have also claimed that there needs to be a retelling of this story. Caldwell (2010) argues that even Jesus himself referred to Sodom as the city with the sin of inhospitality. While this is becoming a more widely recognized interpretation of this Scripture, there is still a need to critically analyze this Scripture and its long history within the Church as being

used to condemn the queer community. The teaching of Sodom and Gomorrah should not be completely dismissed, as Caldwell would suggest.

According to queer theology, if Christians are to better understand the Bible and the way that non-heterosexual sexualities fit within its confines, there needs to be an evaluation of not only Scriptures that are believed to reference homosexuality, but also the entire context of Christian teaching. The Bible and the way that it is interpreted are imperative to a Christian's understanding and beliefs. Whether a person identifies as queer or not, if they are a Christian, the way that they understand God is influenced by the Bible. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has had a long history of the same interpretation by biblical scholars for a reason. To say that the reference to "know" someone does not have to do with having sex could have implications for many other references or stories in the Bible. These interpretations need to be carefully assessed when constructing any kind of theology that strays from traditional Christian teachings.

Tigert (1999), another queer theologian, relies on various sources of knowledge including the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* and the *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*. Tigert (1999) argues that the trauma of both heterosexism and homophobia are faced by gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people on a daily basis. As a result of this "silencing, shaming, fear, isolation, frustration, powerlessness, and victimization" caused by heterosexism and homophobia, people of the GLBT community have feelings of rage (3). She claims that homophobia is a manifestation of "evil" (40). Despite increased visibility of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people in the Church, in society, and various forms of protective legislation and Welcoming Congregations, there is still evil enacted on GLBT people. Hate crimes still act as a symbol of violent

suppression for naming a sexual identity. Claiming an identity as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, “places one in a position of perpetual traumatization and cultural victimization” (10).

According to Tigert, there is power in sharing your own story of being a sexual minority. Tigert draws on her own life experiences and claims that in the Christian Church, she did not hear a message of acceptance. Rather, they were telling her, “Fit our needs, our wants, our expectations and projections. Sacrifice yourself for us in silence, or suffer the consequences if you speak” (4). She later discusses her own symptoms of trauma as a result of being harassed for her sexual orientation.

Tigert emphasizes fire as a metaphor in the Bible. Fire can symbolize the presence of evil or a sacred presence. She believes that for GLBT people, fire represents a transformative power for those who have experienced trauma, abuse, or oppression. She claims that a transformative method for moving on from oppression is what she calls “truth-telling” (52). It is important to recognize the connection between sexuality and subjectivity. Tigert asserts that being shamed for your sexual orientation is being shamed for your very self. This is why it is an absurdity to use the phrase “love the sinner, but hate the sin” (58). Often times this phrase is used by Christians as a way to say that you are accepted as long as you do not practice your sexual orientation. This is problematic because so many people’s sexual orientation is part of their identity or core sense of themselves. Hearing this phrase can be traumatic for someone of the GLBT community because it means that if they do not choose to change their sexual identity, or do not believe that it can be changed, they will never be fully accepted.

Throughout her pastoral ministry and psychotherapy practice, Tigert hears many people's personal narratives and she claims that they are experiencing symptoms and traits of survivors of trauma. However, Tigert implicitly adopts an individualistic approach (through psychotherapy) which does not call for changes to the institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia that these people are experiencing.

3.4 The Less Radical Welcoming Tradition

Those who do not fully embrace queer theory, and who do not see the problem as one of heterosexism, instead simply seek to remove homophobia from their spiritual practices. A classic example can be found in Marin (2009), who argues that "evangelicals know gay people only in a narrowly focused, two dimensional light" (21). Marin accepts the homosexual/heterosexual binary, but challenges Christians to make a conscious commitment to the LGBT community rather than neglecting it. Marin claims that there are nine main questions that LGBT people have for evangelical churches:

1. How can I possibly relate to Christians in a church environment?
2. Will Christians always look at me as just gay?
3. Will I be able to be like everyone else in church activities and groups?
4. Do they think that homosexuality is a special sin?
5. Do they believe that I chose to be like this?
6. Do they think that I'm going to hit on them?
7. Do they think that I'm going to abuse their children?
8. Are they scared that I'm going to infect them with an STD or HIV/AIDS?
9. When will I be rejected and kicked out?

Marin argues that the Christian Church has caused harm to people in the LGBT community and they must apologize for their behavior. He claims that Christians should learn to listen to people in the LGBT community and to "validate the reality of their stories" (35). However, what regularly happens is that Christians feel morally superior to gay and lesbian people because the Bible allows three options for connecting faith and

sexuality: be a heterosexual, be celibate, or live in sin. If an LGBT person is presented these options by a Christian they may perceive their entire identity as being under attack because there is a strong connection between sexual behavior and identity. This is why Marin claims that Christians should remove the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” from their vocabularies in order for Christianity to become more accessible to the LGBT community (47).

Although Marin does not argue that every church should implement gay theology, he asks the reader to learn from its perspective. He breaks gay theology down into seven sections: “general beliefs; general biblical thoughts; an Old Testament gay apologetic, a new Testament gay apologetic; a social apologetic; an intertwined social and biblical apologetic; and eight premises... on what the Bible says and doesn’t say about homosexuality” (73). First, the LGBT community sees objections to homosexuality as a form of religious bigotry. Gay theology also suggests that the Bible does not condemn long-term, committed monogamous relationships between same-sex couples and that the overall biblical principle is to love one another. Likewise, gay theology regards the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament as being focused on rape, and that it specifically related to the “hospitality” laws of the time. Another common source of religious Scripture for the Religious Right is the discussion of the Holiness Code in Leviticus, but gay theology suggests that this code is less relevant because it was washed over with “Jesus’ redemptive blood” (74). They further emphasize that Jesus is silent on the issue of homosexuality in the New Testament.

Gay apologetics claim that homosexuality is genetic and that LGBT people used to live in fear because of the Christian Church’s oppression, but there is now an

increasing number of people who are coming out and being recognized by the mainstream culture. They further suggest that the Bible has been used to justify homophobia which leads to the cultural stigma and shame that LGBT people feel, but sexual orientation cannot be changed and it is a God-ordained way of life. The following premises, from Dr. Mel White, are used in explaining gay theology:

1. Most people have not carefully and prayerfully researched the biblical texts often used to condemn GLBT children.
2. Historically, people's misinterpretation of the Bible has left a trail of suffering, bloodshed and death.
3. Christians must be open to new truth from Scripture. Even heroes of the Christian faith have changed their minds about the meaning of various biblical texts.
4. The Bible is a book about God- not about human sexuality: it condemns sexual practices we accept and we accept sexual practices it condemns.
5. We miss what the passages say about God when we spend so much time debating what it says about sex.
6. The biblical authors are silent about GLBT orientation as we know it today. They neither approve it or condemn it.
7. Although the prophets, Jesus and other biblical authors say nothing about GLBT orientation as we understand it today, they are clear about one thing - as we search for truth, we are to "love one another."
8. Whatever some people believe the Bible says about homosexuality, they must not use that belief to deny the GLBT community their basic civil rights. To discriminate against sexual or gender minorities is unjust and un-American.

Helminiak (2000) argues that condemning homosexuality is wrong because God created homosexual people. He claims that the mistake of believing that gays and lesbians are inherently flawed comes from how the Bible is being read. Helminiak explains that there are two major approaches to interpreting the Bible: "literal reading" and the "historical-critical" reading (33). Literal reading, also referred to as biblical Fundamentalism, claims to read the text of the Bible as it stands. On the other hand, the historical- critical reading approach says that you have to understand a text in its original situation before you can apply the meaning to a present day situation.

While both approaches agree that the Bible is God's word and that it is without error, they differ significantly in their approach to understanding the Bible. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach, and Helminiak claims that the literal approach is easy because there are no elaborate guidelines to follow; however one of its major disadvantages is that "popularity decides what the Bible means" because people want to believe what makes them more comfortable and secure (36). Also, the approach tends to over-emphasize certain texts and ignore others. There are many issues that are never addressed in the Bible and, therefore, people using the literal approach may not be able to address new issues in our postmodern, industrialist society.

Helminiak argues that an historical-critical approach, on the other hand, offers clear guidelines to objectively understand the Bible – and accordingly, most Catholic and Protestant Bible scholars generally agree about the meaning of biblical texts. The difference between these Christian churches comes from their chosen interpretation of the Bible. Another advantage of the historical-critical approach is that it takes history and its context seriously, but this also makes studying the Bible difficult because of its in-depth analysis. Some biblical texts will never be explained because of their lost historical context. Over time, there are changes to culture and society, thus it becomes more difficult to find answers to our contemporary questions, including the issue of homosexuality.

Helminiak aims to analyze various passages of the Bible that have been historically used to condemn homosexuality from an historical-critical perspective. When the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, found in Genesis 19, is understood in its own historical context, for instance, it does not condemn same-sex behaviors, but rather the

inhospitality and insult that the visitors experienced. Passages in Leviticus chapters 18 and 20 that address male sexual relations are not addressing whether or not gay sex is right or wrong. Leviticus was concerned with social and religious taboos and the uncleanness of male-male sex. Helminiak claims that the first chapter of Romans is significant because it is found in the New Testament and is the only Scripture that addresses lesbian sex. He argues that Paul, the author of Romans, teaches that homosexual acts are ethically neutral. He believes that that three major consideration support this conclusion. First, Paul uses the word impure to refer to homosexual acts and they are therefore subject to social disapproval, but are not ethically wrong. Second, the passage separates the social disapproval of homosexual acts from sin. Also, the overall plan of the book of Romans was to emphasize that the concerns of the Old Law do not matter and that they should not divide the Christian community. Other passages in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians chapter 6 and 1 Timothy chapter 1, use the two Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* to describe male-male sex. Helminiak argues that there are a variety of translations for these words, and that it is dishonest and unfair to use them to condemn homosexuality.

Helminiak also suggests that there are passages found in the Bible that endorse homosexual relationships, rather than condemning them. One example he offers is that of the love between Jonathan and David found in the book of 1 Samuel. This passage implies that there is a deep emotional connection between the two men. Chapter 18 contains an account of their first meeting

The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul... Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

Another example is found in the book of Ruth. Although there is very little evidence about the nature of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, Helminiak argues the possibility that they engaged in a sexual relationship is good because of what we know about the women's world in antiquity. The unusual commitment between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth is described in Ruth 1:16-17. Contrary to the customs of the time, widowed Ruth decides to remain with Naomi and proclaimed, "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die- there I will be buried". While the Bible says a significant amount on the issue of homosexual acts, Helminiak claims that it does not tell us whether gay or lesbian sex is good or evil. He argues that the Bible never addresses that question and that is generally unconcerned about it.

Myers (1999) cites three reasons why gay rights do not pose a threat to family values and have become increasingly accepted by both social scientists and conservatives.

1. The Bible has little to say about homosexuality
2. Today's greater tolerance seems not to have amplified homosexuality.
3. Sexual orientation appears not to be a choice.

The widely-recognized references to homosexuality in the Bible only contain seven mentions of same-sex behavior. Their meanings and historical relevance are still debated even though it appears to have not been a big issue for biblical writers. Myers claims that the gay and lesbian population remains a small minority (2 or 3 percent) despite the concern that gay role models would entice people to become homosexuals. He strongly suggests that sexual orientation is not a choice, arguing that neither parental

nor psychological influences affect a person's sexual orientation and that most efforts to change a person's sexual orientation fail. (A person may remain celibate, but they will continue to have same-sex attractions). Biological factors are increasingly being considered as foundational to sexual orientation, Myers suggests.

Cobb (1999) believes that gay people are the most oppressed group in society. He claims that many Christians' support of full civil rights for gays and lesbians should be celebrated. However, there is disagreement as to whether "all physical expressions of same-sex love, even if legally permitted, should be morally condemned" (90). Cobb further suggests that this disagreement may be rooted in the sense of revulsion felt by many heterosexuals at the thought of physical intimacy with people of the same sex. This revulsion turns into a desire to "maintain the moral prohibition", but many Christians believe that there is no reason to believe that homosexual acts are "inherently immoral" (91). Instead, Christians should be addressing this question: "What does it recommend as a lifestyle to those whose sexual attractions are for members of their own sex?" (91). Cobb claims that the Christian Church should be concerned with the greater good of society and the total well-being of gays and lesbians, rather than with condemning and denying rights.

Sapienza (2009) was inspired to write a book of encouragement for gay and lesbian people, specifically gay Christians, about their special "Gay Gift" (13). He decided to write the book after viewing an episode of the Oprah Winfrey show in which Reverend Ed Bacon told an audience member that "Being gay is a gift from God"(15). Sapienza explains that part of being gay means that you have the gift of creativity and that every gay person should embrace their gift and use it to help others. He argues that

gay people have an important job in society to “help open hearts and minds to new ideas and ways of seeing” and help demonstrate more inclusive concepts of love and family (30). Ellen DeGeneres is described as an example of someone who uses their “gift of playfulness” to help others challenge their long-established beliefs and religious convictions about homosexuality (30).

Many gay people reject or hide their gift because of the negative thoughts they have told themselves – or have been told by others. Sapienza offers a strategy for people use in order to embrace their Gay Gift and he promises that if applied it will bring you more peace. He uses the acronym G.I.F.T.S. (Gratitude, Inspiration, Forgiveness, Trust and Service) to explain what gay people should do every day to make their lives easier. Gratitude means being thankful for your gift and recognizing that you have been given this gift out of appreciation. Inspiration on how to use your gift comes from spending time with God in prayer. Sapienza claims that forgiveness is the most difficult step for gay people because they “have a lot of hurt to overcome” (57). He challenges gay people to forgive everyone who has ever hurt them because there is wisdom to be gained when you let go of the past and live in the present. You should, he argues, also trust your gift and overcome your ego in order to become more enlightened. Finally, service to others helps you to uncover more of your Gay Gift so you should also attempt to help people every day, no matter how seemingly insignificant your act. Sapienza aims to help people understand and utilize their Gay Gift because he believes that “our nature as gay people is not a curse, but a Divine blessing” (93).

Wink (1999) claims that the issue of homosexuality is just as divisive as slavery was 150 years ago in the Christian Church. He emphasizes the importance of biblical

interpretation in understanding how Scripture is used to inform our lives today, specifically in regard to the issue of homosexuality. Wink claims that if interpreted literally, the passages in chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus state that “persons committing homosexual acts are to be executed” (35). If a person chooses to live by the commands of the Old Testament, then they must support the extreme idea that all homosexuals should receive the death penalty. Another interpretation of the Bible would suggest that Paul’s description of sexual behavior between two women or two men found in the book of Romans was referring to people who were straight and engaging in behavior that was unnatural to them. Wink believes, that at the time, Paul thought that everyone was straight because he has no concept of homosexual orientation. The relationships he describes are not long-term, committed relationships between consenting adults and therefore do not apply to people with a homosexual orientation.

Even if the Bible takes a negative view toward same-sex sexual relations, it does not solve the problem of how we are to interpret the Bible’s meaning for today. Wink provides a list of 14 other sexual attitudes, practices, and restrictions that were normative in biblical times, but that we no longer accept as normative. These include norms such as forbidding sex during a woman’s menstrual period, the acceptance of polygamy and concubinage, and the abnormality of celibacy. Wink claims that the Bible has no sexual ethic but, rather, a love ethic. Instead, it exhibits a number of cultural mores, or “unreflective customs accepted by a given community” (44). He challenges Christians to apply Jesus’ love ethic to our understanding of how sexual mores are prevalent in a given culture. Wink believes that here is no consensus on the issue of homosexuality, but it is clear that it is far more important to love one another.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the competing perspectives of the Religious Right and Welcoming and Affirming churches. It has summarized the literature from these perspectives, and has raised a number of issues for the later analysis of the interviews with the church leaders. In particular, the following issues need to be examined in the analysis of their responses to the research questions:

- Which combination of Scripture, reason, and tradition do they rely on for their approach to homosexuality?
- Do they regard sexuality as innate or changeable?
- Do they include issues such as desire, attraction, and feelings which are not acted upon in their discussion of homosexuality?
- Do they believe in conversion therapy and support the ex-gay movement?
- Do they recognize homophobia within their congregation?
- Have they made steps towards making their congregation Welcoming and Affirming?
- Do they regard the problem as one of homophobia and/or one of heteronormativity?
- Do they explicitly engage with queer theory and queer theology?

Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methods which were used to conduct this research on the perspectives of Christian church leaders on homosexuality. A qualitative approach was utilized and 16 Christian church leaders in Toledo were interviewed. Data was coded using the qualitative software program ATLAS.ti. Ethical issues associated with the interviews are also discussed in this chapter.

4.2 A Qualitative Approach

This thesis uses a qualitative approach. The purpose of such a qualitative approach was to get an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of Christian leaders in Toledo about homosexuality and Christianity. The broad aim of a qualitative approach is to understand the patterns and themes which emerge from the data. The approach was guided by the theoretical framework set out in chapters Two and Three. According to Babbie, (2011:340)

Unlike a survey, a qualitative interview is an interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry including the topics to be covered, but not a set of questions that must be asked with particular words and in a particular order. At the same time, the qualitative interviewer, like the survey interviewer, must be fully familiar with the questions to be asked. This allows the interview to proceed smoothly and naturally.

Scott and Garner (2013) add that it is crucial for qualitative researchers to listen to people and their world views, as opposed to imposing the researcher's own assumptions and beliefs. They further add "qualitative researchers want to 'get into the heads' of their research subjects" (2013:11).

4.2.1 Description of Procedures

Subjects were asked to participate in a face-to-face interview, which usually took 45 minutes. They were told that the purpose of the research was "to explore the varying attitudes of Toledo church leaders (pastors, priests, and bishops) towards homosexuals in general, and in their congregations in particular." With the participant's permission, each interview was recorded and notes were taken during the duration of the discussion.

The interview focused on their perspectives based on these three research questions:

1. What are your attitudes towards homosexuality in general?
2. What are your attitudes towards homosexuals in your congregation?
3. Which part of the Bible do you rely on to find inspiration for these ideas?

4.2.2 Potential Risks

There were minimal risks to participation in this study, including loss of confidentiality. However, there was some risk of loss of confidentiality, as there was only a small group of Christian church leaders who participated in this study.

4.2.3 Potential Benefits

The only direct benefit for research participants may be that they learned about how sociology research is conducted and may have learned more about their own views on homosexuality and Christianity. Others may benefit by learning about the results of this research.

4.2.4 Confidentiality

Participants were assured that the researcher would make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing who provided which particular parts of the interview material. They were also informed that although the researcher would make every effort to protect their confidentiality, because of the small number of church leaders in the Toledo area who were asked to participate, there was a moderate risk that this might be breached. The consent forms with signatures were kept separate from responses, which did not include names and which will be presented to others only when combined with other responses.

To minimize confidentiality risks,

- Each interviewee will be referred to by their position as a church leader only, and not by their name or church name;
- No individual will be specifically identified;
- All files were kept in a password-encrypted computer.

In addition, research participants were assured that this research was conducted as part of the requirements for a graduate degree at The University of Toledo and was not being conducted in association with any specific religious faith.

4.2.5 Voluntary Participation

The research participants were assured that their refusal to participate in this study would involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled and would not affect their relationship with The University of Toledo or any current or future classes they may take there. In addition, they were informed that they could discontinue participation at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits.

4.2.6 Informed Consent

Informed consent forms were signed at the church or location of interview before the interviews began. The interviewees were given the consent form before interviews began, asked to read over it, given time to reflect on it, and encouraged to discuss it with others if they cared to. Then they were given the opportunity to sign the consent form. A copy of the informed consent document can be found in Appendix A.

4.2.7 Interview Questions

Each interviewee was asked the following questions (as well as individualized follow-up questions):

- What are your attitudes towards homosexuality in general?
- Do you think homosexuality is a choice or genetic?
- Do you think homosexuality is controllable?
- Do you think homosexuality is a sin?
- Do you think that people can be converted from one sexual orientation to another?
How?
- What are your attitudes towards homosexuals in your congregation? How have you helped them?
- How do you think a gay person would feel if they attended a worship service?
- What kinds of things does your church do to reach out to the gay community, if any?
- Which part of the Bible do you rely on to find inspiration for these ideas?
- Do you think that Scriptures are open to different interpretations?

These interview questions can also be found in Appendix B

4.2.8 Coding Process

As suggested by Benaquisito (2008), initial coding processes were done by a close line by line reading of the data before a focused coding process sought to identify broad themes in the data. Following Lofland et al. (cited in Babbie 2011:420), there were six key methods of analysis which were central to the focused coding process: frequencies, magnitudes, structures, processes, causes, and consequences. That is to say, the coding process sought to identify how often certain themes were mentioned by research participants, how significant they believed these themes were, what their relationships were to each other, and what their causes and consequences were.

The qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti was used to code the transcripts of each interview. Each transcript was uploaded into the program and codes were identified via the process of the line reading. A total of 26 codes were used to identify reoccurring categories of data in the transcripts. A list of the codes and their definitions can be found in Appendix C. ATLAS.ti allowed me to identify key themes in the data and make connections between them. Themes were chosen based on the frequency with which they appeared in the data and the relevance to the main research question: What do Christian church leaders in Toledo believe about homosexuality?

4.2.9 Sampling

Purposive and convenience sampling methods were chosen for recruiting participants. Although I knew that I wanted to have church leaders from as many different denominations as possible, I did not set a quota of how many leaders from each denomination that I would interview. As suggested by Bernard (2006), there is “no overall sampling design that tells you how many of each type of informant you need for a

study. You take what you can get (190)”. This type of initial-stage purposeful sampling and second-stage convenience sampling works well with qualitative research on special populations, in my case Christian church leaders in Toledo. Churches were contacted via email or by phone call. Messages for those with accessible email addresses were either sent to the church secretary or to specific church leaders. Typically, correspondence occurred with the interview subject. Churches that were contacted were chosen from several denominations, and those who agreed to participate in the research were interviewed, no matter which denomination they were from. I contacted multiple churches from several of the major Christian denominations, in order to ensure as much variety in my final sample as possible.

4.2.10 Sample Size

Sixteen Christian church leaders were interviewed in the course of this research. To obtain this sample, I utilized existing social networks (i.e. friends and family), or churches were identified through the Yellow Pages of the phone book. This represented the vast majority of Christian church leaders in the Toledo area, which included non-denominational churches and ones from denominations such as Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Seventh Day Adventist. They acted as my specialized informants who “have particular competence in some cultural domain” (Bernard 2006). There were an additional three research participants who were provided with the informed consent materials and, upon reflection, decided not to participate in the research. One participant chose not to have their interview tape recorded. Due to the nature of my sampling framework, this study is not generalizable to all Christian church

leaders in the Toledo area, nor to all church leaders. This research aims only to analyze the experiences of the particular subjects involved.

4.2.11 Demographics

Among the 16 participants, 12 were male and 4 were female. All the females were from Welcoming and Affirming churches. One woman was African American, one man was Latino, and the rest were Caucasian. Part of the reason for the underrepresentation of people of color among this sample was the large number of refusals from the African American churches. The youngest person was in his mid-30s, and the oldest was in his early 60s. The rest were aged in their 40s. One woman identified as a “partnered” lesbian and ten participants identified as straight, heterosexual, or married to someone of the opposite sex. The remaining participants did not make any reference to their sexual orientation.

4.2.12 Field Research Sites

Of the sixteen interviews, fourteen of them were conducted in the particular church or place of worship where the participants act as leaders. Two of the interviews were conducted at a local coffee shop, and the remaining interview took place in an office on the University of Toledo campus.

4.2.13 Barriers to Access

Obtaining subjects for this research proved to be difficult for several reasons. Homosexuality is a very controversial and divisive issue in the Christian church, and this had a significant impact on the number of individuals who agreed to participate in this study. In recent years the issue of homosexuality has been particularly salient among churches in Toledo because of the very public displays that a few churches have made.

Most of the churches were first contacted through email, and if there was no response within several days they received a phone call to their office. Approximately half of the churches that were contacted did not respond to the email or the phone call. A handful of church leaders did respond, then were given more information about the research, and chose not to participate. Three people agreed to participate and set up interview times, but ended up cancelling them. I was faced with skepticism by a few church leaders who expressed concerns of being “outed” to local media outlets. One person said that their church secretary called me a “brave young lady” after hearing about my research and I was also told that I “picked a hard subject”. Despite all of this, I was able to obtain 16 willing participants.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology which was adopted for this thesis. It has discussed topics such as sampling frame, recruitment of participants, informed consent, the coding process, and the methods which were used in the analysis of the data. The next chapter will provide the results of these interviews in detail.

Chapter 5

Results and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes the results of the research, in particular, noting the wide range of attitudes toward the nature of homosexuality, and addressing the issues which were raised in the literature reviews such as whether sexuality is innate or changeable, whether homosexuality is a sin, and the complex interaction of sex and gender in the social construction of sexuality. Furthermore, the chapter will explore whether these representatives of Christianity recognize the importance of trauma, shame and insult in the experience of homosexuality.

5.2 Attitudes towards Homosexuality

This section of the Chapter will outline the major findings of the research, identifying two major perspectives – the Religious Right (whose perspective was outlined in the literature review in Chapter Three) and a Welcoming and Affirming approach, which contains a more fluid and complex analysis of homosexuality and which has significant similarities to the literature discussed in Chapter Two.

5.2.1 The Religious Right

5.2.1.1 Homosexuality as a Sin, a Disorder, Unnatural

Chapter Three highlighted the perspectives of the Religious Right, and this perspective was certainly evident in the comments of the following research participant. He believed that homosexuality was a sin, which is unnatural, in the same way as bestiality. This positioning of homosexuality as a disorder was a key rhetorical device in his arguments, as the following comments demonstrate.

Jesus affirmed the original plan and he was saying that everything else is wrong. All adultery is wrong, everything outside of that relationship is wrong. And so he didn't haven't to enumerate, he didn't have to go through and say transgenders, transsexuals, transvestites, child molestation, homosexual behavior, bisexual behavior, bestiality and so forth, he didn't have to go through the whole list and just name all the wrongs, but what he said was that it's like it was in the beginning with male and female and the two are going to be one flesh, everything else is adultery. So he stated it probably more powerfully than he could have in any other way and yet the homosexual community, homosexual ministers, it was brought up in that debate that I was in, they were saying that there's nothing in the New Testament, nonsense. They're not being honest, they're not using the Bible, they have another agenda.

In Sodom and Gomorrah there were all kinds of sexual sins going on, not just homosexuality. And then it says "and going after strange flesh." That is a reference to homosexuality. Strange flesh is a reference to flesh that is not the one flesh that God designed in Genesis chapter 2. Strange flesh has to do with something that is strange to the natural design. Sodomy is strange flesh...Ok, physiologically, anatomically, the union between two males doesn't work, between two females it doesn't work. Crossing over into science now, because science and the Bible agree. Science and the Bible are not at odds with each other they totally agree and males and females if I could say it this way fit together. It works out well, it's by design.

Another research participant emphasized that homosexuality is a sin, but not an unforgivable one. He used personal experience to guide his teachings, indicating that he has known many homosexual people who have influenced his life. Interestingly, he felt the catchphrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" is a "tired statement".

So, you know, I still have people that even though distance-wise they're not close, you know, just still have a very tender place in my heart, that you know, had chosen a homosexual lifestyle. Um, so I don't perceive in reading the Scriptures that homosexuality is an unforgivable sin. Um, you know the standard statement

is love the sinner, hate the sin, but I know that's a very tired statement in the gay community and I find it ironic that it was actually Mahatma Gandhi who actually coined the term, you know, so I just find that funny.

On the other hand, a pastor from a different denomination emphasized that while homosexuality is a sin, everyone is sinful.

So we believe that all people are sinful and I think that's a core, doctrine theological foundation of every Christian. Now from there that's where things diverge a little bit, like what's a sin, what's not a sin and I think that's where we get into the topic of homosexuality is some Christians would see it not as a sin and some would see it as a sin. Our belief, our church and my belief would be that homosexuality is a sin but I think the contention with that is that a lot of people view Christians and churches that we have established this as the sin of all sins and so our hope as a church and my hope as an individual with the people that I interact with is that they wouldn't see it that way, that we wouldn't treat them that way, I think we have just as much of a problem, and you'll hear us speak about this, just as much of a problem more with the church is sexuality in general.... That comes from the core beliefs that I mentioned at the beginning, I can look at someone who is homosexual and say, you are still created with dignity, love, and care and that you are beautiful, you know you just have a sin that needs to be dealt with just like I have sin that needs to be dealt with and so it comes from that core belief and also from a biblical standpoint as Christians we hold Scripture to be true, we can trust it because we believe they are the very words of God and you know, I just don't see how we can jump to not read that when we open up the Scriptures.

Another church leader positioned homosexuality as a disorder.

If you ask me personally you know, people are born with different disorders, some people are mentally retarded, some people are blind, some people are deaf, so I regard, this also comes under one of those categories you know, people have disorders, I mean homosexuality, I consider it as a disorder, as an intrinsic disorder, because to me the natural order is an attraction men toward women, and women toward man. If anything happens other than that I would call it a kind of disorder. So naturally that's what I find in nature, you know, that's the correct way, if there is not a male, female union, the next generation does not come. The order in the plan, everywhere that's what happens, so to me this is what I consider a kind of disorder and what's my attitude towards that, okay, uhhhh just because of the reason a person has a disorder, I don't consider him as a, he or she, as a sinner, no. She has some issues in her life, so my attitude is that of sympathy, because you know when I think about my brother, when he was born he was not able to speak at all until the age of 4, even now he has some disorders in his life. He couldn't go to school and he doesn't have a kind of stability in things, so I

have sympathy for him, you know he is my brother and he has some issues in his life and I am concerned for him. So, that's my attitude toward homosexuality.

Another participant went further, arguing that this "disorder" was a sin which required treatment, such as psychological counseling. This was one of the issues raised in the literature review of Christian teachings about homosexuality.

There was another incident if you read the gospel of St. Mark chapter 2 where we see there is a paralytic man, four men brought this paralytic man before Jesus and what Jesus did was seeing the faith of those people who brought him before him, Jesus told him you get up and go, so how can this be healed? If I have the power I can do it, if I have faith, the Christian can be controlled, well there are psychological techniques we can use it and I get my faith... So, is it controllable, through different ways; by raising my faith I can bring about healing in the life of a person and if I feel myself I can have a homosexual tendency and I feel it's a uncontrollable disorder in my life, if I think about having healing in my life or having the right order in my life, well I can raise my faith and again if I use some psychological techniques, I can, by giving (inaudible) to myself I can, I believe, I can completely control that, because every person has that much capability, it's amazing capability, the power of the subconscious mind and by using that ability we can correct anything in our life, anything, same thing with homosexuality. The question is do you really want healing in your life, if it is yes, what are the next steps, well here are the different steps, there are psychological techniques, those are not bad because it is talking about what are your internal abilities, you don't have to bring it from somewhere else, it's there, you have to use it. You have to correct your conscious mind with the subconscious mind and you can give, you can autocorrect your disorders and live a happy and healthy good life. If you are not able to do that you can seek the help of somebody else, seek their help, that's how it is, I am not able to treat myself I go to the doctor, he helps me. If I think about the someday even doctor and medication and techniques he uses can fail. Well then I know God is there, use your faith, go to seek religion, seek the help of God, God is there. There are a hundred different ways out there provided a person uses it.

This research participant was one (among many) church leaders who consider homosexuality an "unnatural" practice as well as a sin. It is considered a "disorder" which goes against "the natural order". This discourse is very different to the literature discussed in Chapter Two, which regarded sexuality as a fluid social construction:

First, the first thing is that what church does about homosexuality, is that the church considers this as a sin because it is a disorder, that is not the right natural

order. The right, natural order is man toward woman and woman towards man. Well there are a lot of disorders happening, but the church doesn't call this disorder as sin, it tells like this, this is a disorder and you should not yield to this disorder, you have to try to correct, you have to change it. So if a person doesn't do anything and if you deliberately yield to his inclinations and the church would say it is sin, it is sinful.

Another research participant also emphasized the “unnatural” nature of homosexuality. For this research participant, the Church separates the sex act from the person, and the sex act is unnatural. Further, the Church believes in the discourse of “love the sinner, hate the sin”, a discourse which was discussed at length in Chapter Three.

So that's where the whole act of homosexual act versus the homosexual person. You know the homosexual person falls into that first area of conversation that I started, that sacred, reverent, respectful, you'll find that the Church works very hard to respect the rights of all people no matter what their orientation is, because that's what's due to every human being. They will talk about homosexual acts in a different way. That those, the Church will use words like disordered, unnatural, outside, because it's outside the act of marriage it would condemn any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage, so that's how we need to talk about those things in two different ways... The Church always says, first of all, that we hate the sin and love the sinner, that's a phrase that we use often. No matter what the sin is, if I'm a thief and I'm stealing things, the Church would say you still need to love the person and you need to hate the choice or the act, so that's how we would speak about a sexual relationship outside of marriage, whether it be heterosexual or homosexual. We would say we love the person, but hate the act. Love the sinner, hate the sin.

For one research participant, homosexuality is a sin even though he offered no specific biblical support for such an argument. He simply regarded it as a sinful lifestyle choice. For him, homosexuality is based on choices, just like alcoholism.

This is my definition of sin, is anything that separates us from God, which is painting it broader than most people do... Um, in regards to anything that separate me from God, there are a ton of decisions that are made before something becomes a choice. Case in point, my dad was an alcoholic, there were different social norms that helped that and encouraged that, there were developmental things in my dad's relationship with his parents with people around him that supported and helped that... And so, in regards to being a sin, as I read the Old

Testament, and the New Testament I don't... you know, my casual statement, if I'm casually talking about this, I don't find anything in the Old Testament or New Testament that says yay, yay, let's all be gay. You know, I just, I don't find that. Um, so I would still in a sense classify the lifestyle as a sin.

5.2.1.2 Old and New Testament

While the literature review on the Religious Right in Chapter Three suggested that Christian church leaders rely very heavily on the Old Testament, an interesting aspect of the interviews was that these Christian leaders relied on both the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as other sources (such as the Catechism for one of the Catholic priests).

One Catholic Church leader added that all life is sacred, but emphasized that the Church's teachings rely on the Old Testament, where homosexuality was associated with paganism. (This is an interesting contradiction, since it tends to position homosexuality – and the responses to it as a fluid social construction – but it was not an insight which the research participant formally recognized). Like many other religious authorities, this research participant espoused the “love the sinner, hate the sin” perspective which was discussed in Chapter Three.

Okay well let me talk about it in two different ways, um, and it happens to be the two different ways that the Church talks about homosexuality, one is the church always makes distinctions between acts and people. it makes it in every area of life and so we talk about them in two different ways because we believe and hold very sacred, the individual, the person, because we believe in Catholic theology, that the person is always made in the image and likeness of God and so, and that in the human family by Jesus becoming, bringing his divinity down to humanity, he put us all in relationship with each other, so we look at everybody, every human person as a brother or sister. So that's the initial starting point, that we look at all human beings as brothers and sisters, no matter what other, you know, what color they are, what gender they are, any other choices that they make and they're first a brother or sister, and because they're made in the image and likeness of God, we hold them in high reverence, you know, it's the reflection of the person of God in the world through our created being that we reflect to other people. So we hold them sacred, life in all forms, we believe is very sacred. So

that's how you talk about any person, no matter what the sexual orientation is, they are individuals, they are sacred, we hold them in high reverence, and very high respect, that's an automatic given.

This church leader emphasized the importance of the teachings of the Old Testament when it came to homosexuality; a practice which Chapter Three indicated was very common among the Religious Right.

Then to talk about our tradition, our tradition is very, very old in the whole dealing with homosexuality. It stems back to the Old Testament, so you'll get some of this, obviously the Catholic faith was born out of the Jewish tradition, so the whole Old Testament would be very reflective of the Jewish tradition, which we were born out of, and the Jewish tradition in the Old Testament is very harsh about homosexuality for a number of reasons, not just for the orientation issue, but the Jewish community in the Old Testament stood in opposition to the pagan community, and the pagan community often had as part of its religious rituals, had all kinds of sexual activity which they participated in, in the pagan rituals, so the Jewish people, the Hebrew people, stood in opposition to that, anything that was a part of pagan ritual, they did not have as part of their ritual, so that's part of the very harsh way, like the book of Leviticus talks about homosexuality in the Old Testament, in the Pentateuch, the Torah, so it's very harsh in that manner, but born out of that traditions and in the Christian tradition, is also a sense of what is very natural.

The literature review of Christian teachings about homosexuality in Chapter Three emphasized the different sources of Christian teachings about homosexuality, such as Scripture, reason, tradition and practical experience. In one case, another Catholic priest said he was basing his arguments on the Catechism, and that such sources regard homosexuality as a form of "depravity".

The Catholic Church does teach us, basing itself on sacred Scripture, which present homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity; tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law, they close the sexual act to the gift of life, they do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. That is from the catechism of the Catholic Church. The other one is that again homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and

resolutely approach Christian perfection. That means it can be corrected, changed, that's what it teaches.

This priest further argued that the only institution authorized to interpret the Bible was the Catholic Church, and that it is not open to different interpretations.

...so the Scripture is given so far as I understand and believe, it's a divinely revealed, Scripture is divinely revealed and the same God who gave the Scripture through different people in writings and everything, he has authorized some people to interpret it. The Church has been authorized, so the Church should interpret and tell this is the meaning... Finally the Church is authorized to interpret it. So is it open to different interpretation, I would say no. it should be from whoever is authorized, whoever is authorized.

Another pastor did not provide any specific biblical references besides the Sodom and Gomorrah story, and admits that he has not studied it and does not preach on it "often".

You know there are obviously some very strong and dramatic ones in the Old Testament and you know, Sodom and Gomorrah is the easiest, quickest grab. Um... you know New Testament I'm pretty sure its Romans one, the reality is that I don't preach on it often, my, just in regards to ministry, um, it is my purpose to talk to people not about them and so I don't casually have these conversations in public settings, um, because I know there's always a measure of people in the congregation that are either working through sexual identity or have been exposed to some sort of sexual violence that I'm just very tender, gentle with that topic. So, I really don't preach on it, I think it, I don't know if I find it unique that Jesus didn't speak on the topic, and I know that's used at times, but I don't see it as an argument from silence I think it was more the conversations that he was having and the people he was having it with...

Another research participant emphasized the importance of 'loving the sinner' but condemning the practice of homosexuality, relying on the New Testament to justify his position.

....maybe if we're attracted to the opposite sex and we don't want to be and we have to rely on God to act out on that or to practice homosexuality, which is really what I think those prohibitions, you may have heard in Timothy and 1 Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy 1 are talking about, they're condemning the practice of homosexuality, in my understanding they're not condemning homosexuals, and there's a big difference, God loves everybody like crazy, I keep telling people this

and I don't know if we believe it or not. I don't know if we do, cuz if we did you know we would love fornicators and adulterers and homosexuals the same, but we accept the first two into church leadership and we ban the first one from even becoming a member.

The discussion of Tigert's (1999) work in Chapter Two emphasized the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia are often linked – and this participant's comments reflect that discourse, where the heterosexual family is considered 'ideal'. The practice of homosexuality is further linked to other practices outside marriage which are not monogamous – an interesting contradiction given that homosexual people can have monogamous relationships. Moreover, heterosexuality is positioned as the “best place” for children to be raised – again ignoring the growing number of homosexuals who are themselves raising children.

So, that leads us to in our tradition, always holding up as the ideal, the marriage, procreation within marriage, because it's always open to marriage and you have the kind of relationship that could then support and not only physically support, but emotionally support, spiritually support life after that so the giving of birth, the family being the best place to be able to raise children and nourish children and those kinds of things, so that's always held up as the ideal. So you'll find in Christian, or Catholic, teaching that things that stand against that the Church would not support, even any kind of sexuality outside of marriage is something that the Church does not support, stands away from, drives its members away from that, to the marriage state.

5.2.1.3 Homosexuality could be Genetic or Environmental

There was a wide range of perspectives among research participants as to whether homosexuality was genetic or environmental, but all the Religious Right leaders still emphasized that it was a sin. They debated whether being homosexual was a choice or not.

I know a lot of people are convinced it's a choice. I know Dobson and Focus on the Family in conservative Christianity will say that you know, it's all a completely cultural product of your environment, I'm one of those Christians personally that can just respectfully disagree with that conclusion just based on

you know, common sense really... I mean it just seems to me that we live in an incredibly broken, evil world and it's completely possible in my mind that they could be born, wired differently and um, that's different than the vast majority of Judeo-Christian principles that we've taught for hundreds, thousands of years, but you know the earth is thousands of years old and there are still a lot of things that we don't understand. So I'm just not entirely convinced with that argument or train of thought. I don't know if you can prove it or disprove it.

Another leader commented that homosexuality was a "predisposition". He did not allow the interview to be taped, but my field notes recorded his words in as much detail as possible. When asked whether homosexuality was a choice or genetic, he said "Both". Then he told what he called "the classic story" of a homosexual – a man who had a domineering mother and no affirmation from his father. He liked the arts. His brother was in sports, but he experienced homosexuality "as a predisposition".

One research participant believed that it does not matter whether the source of homosexuality is genetic or environmental/experiential - even if research showed that there are genetic underpinnings to homosexuality, the Church would still call it outside of the "natural order". This suggests that even if a person was genetically predisposed to homosexuality, they would still have the ability to utilize their "gift of free choice" and not engage in homosexual sex acts.

Now, it is true that I am sure that we have not, we don't completely understand yet, I'm sure the research continues to be ongoing and I do not profess to be a very expert in the research area of sexual tendencies or choices, but I do know a bit about what the Church would say about any of that, because it is outside of what they would call the natural order, sexuality active outside of marriage, they would say that um, Christians and all people of good will need to avoid that kind of activity... even though you're predisposed in your nature to be one way, you can still choose. So it would always leave the gift of free choice as primary in the person's life.

Again, the Old Testament was the main source of teachings about homosexuality for the Religious Right, and this participant particularly relied on verses from the books

of Romans and 1 Corinthians, and emphasized the “lust” and “dishonorable passions” associated with homosexual acts:

...Romans 1 starting in verse 22, claiming to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. So Paul’s just talking about how they created other Gods to worship, therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever, amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions, for their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. That went all the way to verse 27. And in verse 26 it says for this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions, now I know that some people would say well God did that, God made them feel that way, I think it’s actually just recognizing, I think it’s just recognizing the fact that God is giving them what they want, he’s allowing them to go about and pursue the desires that they have, even though they are sinful, God is not going to come in and say you know and just take control of the matter, he’s going to allow them to do what they want to do. So I really feel like that’s a clear example of where Scripture talks about you know that women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature. Pretty clear verbiage and wording there by Paul. Then 1 Corinthians chapter 6 in what Paul is talking about here a lot in his letter to the Corinthians, he’s talking about sexual sin throughout this whole book because the Church there for some reason thought that what he had taught before was there really was no sexual standard but he’s trying to clear this up.

What is particularly interesting about this research participant’s perspectives is that he then recognized the dominant heterosexism within the church – a power dynamic which was raised in Chapter Three as a major influence on the experiences of homosexuals. He even suggested that people are too afraid to admit their homosexuality in the “heterosexual environment” of the Church. (Nevertheless, this did not mean that he challenged church orthodoxy to recognize the links between heterosexism and homophobia).

So the Church has in its past and still in many place clings to this idea that we have to determine right and wrong and practicing, you know heterosexual

environment, so you know because of the prohibitions against homosexuality reflected under statements in the vast majority of Christian literature, even if it's a small amount of it, there just hasn't been that level of interest to decide whether or not practicing or not was really taking place, you know most of the time it's been such a cloak of secrecy that you know people are too afraid to even admit that that they are, and then if they were I don't know if churches would know what to do with it at least the Adventist Church is I'm sure they would just kick them out and then call it good, you know there's no investigation into it or anything, and I think that's too bad, that they treat them in that way, but at the same time that's how they've treated heterosexuals for a very long time and I don't think that was right either but that's what they do. So all I can tell you is based on the principles of what I understand the Bible says about homosexuality is my understanding, my personal understanding of it, you know that God loves all of us like crazy, but he doesn't um, condone all of our behaviors and homosexuality is one of the things that he doesn't condone.

Again, this research participant seems to have been influenced by the social constructionist approach to homosexuality... regarding it not as innate, or genetic, but as a choice. This perspective, following the work of Foucault (1978), Katz (2007), and Butler (1990), as seen in Chapter Two, opens up the possibility of regarding homosexuality as one of many options available to people, without necessarily condemning it, but that is not part of his approach. He simply suggests that the Bible supports that homosexuality is a choice.

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:12 talks about how it's really the practice of it you know not necessarily the person or their actual attractions, whether they're born that way or a product of their environment, either way. It's really just their choices about it, you can choose to do something that way or you can choose to acknowledge that that's who you are and what you're attracted to, but you don't have to act on it. You don't have to in the same way that a heterosexual chooses not to have adultery. So yeah that's how I look at those verses.

Furthermore, he believes that God has the ability to change people's sexuality, even if they struggle against 'sinful' attractions throughout their life.

So when I think about like that in terms of human sexuality, can God convert somebody, not convert, but maybe change somebody who has an attraction to the opposite sex? Sure he can. Does he always do that? I don't know, I'm not entirely convinced of that either. Maybe sometimes you're gonna live your whole life

lusting after the same sex if you're on a heterosexual marriage and you're not happy, lots of people are in those kinds of situations or if you're in a homosexual attraction thing, maybe you're gonna battle that your whole life.

This pastor seems to rely on an environmental, rather than a genetic, explanation of the origins of homosexuality – believing that people who have had “instability in their upbringing” are more likely to adopt homosexuality as a “lifestyle choice”.

I would say this, that my position is that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice. I know that there is a lot of debate in regards to nature verse nurture. I don't say that definitely or authoritatively say that in regards to every, I can't say every, the majority of people that have chosen that lifestyle have either experienced significant instability in their upbringing, having experienced a significant, I don't know how to say, like a significant and early sexual experience. Um, either that's through media, or that's just through circumstance, or that's, or through abuse, you know, I definitely, just even in my own upbringing saw that sexuality shifted from um, what I would call purely more of like a response to sexual abuse, or some sort of sexual advance or confusion, to curiosity, I saw that in my high school days. Where different people would just be like, well I don't know why not you know, and so (clears throat) but I still, the majority of people that I know that have chosen that lifestyle still fall back into the category of something happened or there was an exposure, meaning that maybe it didn't happen to them, but they were in a sense forced to witness, forced to play some sort of role, and its impact on them, um, so in regards to homosexuality specifically, that's where I fall.

One of the interesting dynamics which presented itself in the interviews, which was not evident in the literature review of Christian approaches in Chapter Three, was that even some people among the Religious Right – and others who adopt a very conservative position towards homosexuality – called themselves “Welcoming”. In this case, this church leader – who still positioned homosexuality as a sin – still recognized the mistreatment of homosexuals by other church leaders.

...my approach to them was, I would see other you know spiritual leaders and male leaders become very apprehensive, become, you know, very discomforted, and for whatever reason I never felt that discomfort, um it was very intentional on my part to greet those people with hugs, that they would feel, you know, what I would just call healthy. You know, affirmation, physical affirmation, as opposed to distance... They don't have to jump through any hoops for me to befriend them

and just to recognize them as a human, which that's where I think that the church has failed miserably.

While the above Christian church leaders tended to regard homosexuality as a sin, there were other leaders who had different interpretations. These church leaders may themselves disagree on some points (for instance, whether homosexuality is innate or not) but they generally provided a far less critical attitude towards homosexuality, and homosexuals in their congregations.

5.2.2 Welcoming and Affirming Approaches to Homosexuality

5.2.2.1 Homosexuals are Equal in God's Eyes

Virtually all the comments from leaders who identified themselves and "Welcoming and Affirming" fit into the less radical approach discussed in Chapter Three. One Welcoming and Affirming leader began by emphasizing that homosexuals are equal to heterosexuals in God's eyes. This was a part of a dominant assimilationist discourse within Welcoming and Affirming churches towards sexual diversity.

I am persuaded that God sees about as much moral, ethical, spiritual difference between gay people and straight people as between right handed people and left handed people, or people with blue eyes and people with brown eyes...

He also emphasized that homosexuals are God's people, and that people read the Bible with preconceived notions about what it means.

When John the Baptist, in the gospel of John, sees Jesus approaching he says here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he doesn't say here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of straight people, or who takes away the sin of the world as long as, or unless, we become God's people, not because of the right orientation or the right behavior given the wrong orientation, we are God's people... I think that the anti-gay persons, crowd, had their minds made up when they approach those texts. I came out of seminary thinking that gayness was some combination of sinfulness and pathology and it was something I didn't want to have to deal with...

However, he now belongs to a church which is Welcoming, and he is “enthusiastic” about the gay people he knows, even though homosexuality is seen as a “non-issue” within the denomination (because homosexuals are considered to be assimilated into the congregation).

Of the congregation of which I am a member, (church name), I am enthusiastic about the gay people I know, whom I know to be gay, most are glad to have a place where they can worship and not have to pretend um, no member of (church name) has come out to me.... I’ve let it slip a bunch of times that I don’t think that being gay is sinful or in any way inferior to being straight but it’s very much a non-issue here.

Another church leader stressed the Welcoming statement from their church as a sign that they were very pleased to have homosexuals in their congregation.

We have a statement, what we call our Affirmation of Welcome here, which says, in accord with the gospel of Jesus Christ, (church name) welcomes you regardless of your age, ability, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, economic level, mental health status, or previous religious experience to participate in the sacramental life and work of the congregation. So gay and lesbian people would be invited and expected to participate in the life and work of the congregation like anybody else who’s a part of it.

Another pastor was also very supportive of assimilating homosexuals in the church. He believed that, through studying the Bible, one finds that people in the LGBTQ community can be Christians. Moreover, it is essential that people be “authentic to who they are”. This was an interesting combination of what Sedgwick (1990) called the “minoritizing” and “universalizing” tendencies within identity politics. He argued that God loves everyone and that everyone must be authentic to themselves (a universalizing view) but that the Church must be open to homosexuals to practicing their own unique forms of sexual expression (a minoritizing view).

...as I developed as a person of faith in light of what is I suppose the cultural norm for mainline Christianity, as I deepened in my faith it was thrown in my face that Christians ought to have a very particular attitude toward homosexuality, and

by golly this is rooted in Scripture, and so I wrestled with that intellectually for probably a decade or more and um, most of that time I was in professional ministry whether full or part time and even then when I was saying okay I guess Scripture doesn't entirely condone homosexuality, Scripture is also pretty clear that one, it is not anyone's place to judge, two, that folks in the LGBTQ community can indeed be faithful Christians and the Scriptures testify to that because we're told that none can call upon Jesus as Lord and Savior without the power of the Holy Spirit and no one can have the outpouring of the Holy Spirit until they have made a confession in their heart... So, being a theologian, being a philosopher, I delved into the text, I did my word studies, I did historical-critical interpretation, I looked at the history etc., and over time I came to the place where I am now.

People need to be authentic to whatever sexuality they are... which is my attitude toward human sexuality in light of my faith is that people need to be authentic to who they are, and if someone is being inauthentic, then that is sin, but not sin in the sense that the word gets thrown around in our culture. More in ancient Hebrew understanding of sin, which is disordered, out of sync, less than perfect, and so that period of studying and reflection brought me to that intellectual, theological conclusion and contiguously with that I was fortunate enough to have numerous personal experiences with people in the queer community who were rabid persons of faith who had wrestled with their orientation and I have been in Christian fellowship with people who pretended to be straight and did damage to themselves and others until they came out and then they started being whole and healthy and holy.

Another Christian church leader interviewed for this research indicated that cultural changes about homosexuality have influenced people's opinions about homosexuality.

...The other thing is attitudes towards homosexuality, towards gays and lesbians has changed pretty dramatically over nine years, culturally, which probably has also has an effect where most people are probably supportive or at the place now where they're just like eh alright, old news.

This research participant was from the Episcopal Church and noted the way it had changed its blessing liturgy to include same-sex couples.

Yeah I think that you know there's kind of a mix, in the Episcopal Church for example there's a mix of, we still have to do the work, but most people have moved on so for example when these blessing liturgy come out there are going to be some people that have an issue with it that it just the case, that's definitely gonna happen. In the General Convention, I can pretty much, I feel very confident

that with the exception of if people have, if the people who don't think the poetry is beautiful enough, that will be the one issue, then it will pass easily because most of the Episcopal Church is like alright, we've done this for a while let's do something else... Episcopal Church considers budget cuts, they might say oh they're gonna do gay marriages, but it's coming because now we see, this seems like this is the time, there are a number of states that have legal gay marriage, same-sex marriage, and there should be a pastoral response and the debate in the church is should this be modification of our current marriage rite or should there be something different? And what they're proposing is something different is what they're gonna play with right now, and although it's similar in a lot of ways to the basic marriage service in the book of common prayer, but that's the bigger issue right now for the Church.

He added that he does not understand the legal argument against same-sex marriage, or the comparison to people marrying animals, such as the one made by an earlier participant from the Religious Right.

Yeah, cuz when you think about it, separating it from a religious context, and folks can certainly make religious arguments here and there, but if you think about it, I don't understand the argument legally, divorce from a religious rhetoric, it does not make sense to me that any two consenting adults would not be able to marry. Like I can't figure out what the legal argument is, I mean I can figure out what a religious argument is, I know that there are certain Scriptures that folks would use, but it's hard for me to figure out the legal thing, I don't really understand. Especially when you know, elected officials will compare gay marriage to oh well, people get married to an animal, I don't even understand how that is even considered the same, if the animal really can consent to the marriage, I guess it could be the same, but I find it really hard to believe that an animal is gonna say listen I really do wanna get married if you need me to I can explain myself, I'll also sign off on this form.

Furthermore, this participant argued that homosexuality is not a sin, but there are sexual sins.

I would disagree with that, now I'll say that I was raised not as an Episcopalian, I was raised in a Pentecostal tradition, where homosexuality was definitely a sin and you know, but I think, though I know a lot of gay and lesbians do not think of this as being a very compassionate stance, I think a more compassionate stance than some people have in that they would say, well say it is a sin, but you still have to love the people... I think there are definitely sins, sexual ethics and so I think that there can be, I think that homosexual acts can be sinful, just like heterosexual acts can be sinful. That said, homosexuality and people who are having consensual sex in loving relationships I don't think of as sinful.

Finally, another Welcoming and Affirming leader suggested that many people from the LGBTQ community had experienced various forms of prejudice and discrimination from church communities, and were initially wary of their denomination's claim to be truly Welcoming and Affirming, and not secretly trying to change someone's sexual behaviors. This leader was clear about the vital role of trauma, shame, and insult in the shaping of gay subjectivities as suggested by the work of Eribon (2004) which is outlined in Chapter Two.

Our church is known publicly as a church that is completely welcoming and accepting of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, probably about half of the people who worship here would identify in one of those categories. Still when people come here for the first time if they identify in one of those ways, they're often still nervous and mistrustful because they often have had negative experiences, they've been kicked out of churches, they've been made to feel unwelcome they've heard the message in society that if you're any one of those things, you're gonna go to Hell. Sometimes they think even though we say that you're welcome and accepted it's just kind of a bait and switch and we're gonna try to tell them that they have to change, but once they realize that we really are a place that accepts them for who they are, um, and sometimes it happens as soon as they walk in the door because they see other people, they get a huge sense of relief, often you can just see it on their face, if they come with a partner they realize that they might just be able to, for the first time, just hold hands with their partner during worship like straight people take for granted and they come up to me and say I never thought I would be able to go to church again, I've had people join my church with tears in their eyes weeping because they thought that they would never be able to go back to church, they maybe grew up in church, they have a deep faith but they had been kicked out of church or left church thinking that they would have never been able to reconcile being gay or lesbian and being Christian. So often people come here and are just flabbergasted that they have found a place.

5.2.2.2 The Bible is Open to Different Interpretations

Another interesting element of the theology of many Welcoming and Affirming churches is that the Bible is open to interpretation – and specifically that it can be (and has been) interpreted to support one group's ideas. Many imply that the Religious Right

has used the Bible to support their own prejudices. As well, they suggest these interpretations seem to be influenced by cultural norms (a position which is similar to the sexuality literature on the social construction of homosexuality, discussed in Chapter Two).

I know that there are, I know that there are some challenges Scripturally, but I tend to think of those, I think that those are very much formed by cultural norms, I'm sure that not everyone would agree with this, I'm not even sure that Scripturally there's with a lot of things in the Bible, but certainly with issues of sexuality throughout the Bible, there's a lack of clarity being removed so many centuries from the original context. I do believe the Bible holds up an ethic of love, and that all things should be done for, should be inspired by love and should inspire love in others, and so not all sexual acts do that and so I think in those cases they're sinful. I think sexual acts that cause separation in relationships so abusive sexual acts, rape, things like that are always sinful. They violate human relationships, I think they also violate our covenant with God, and I think separate individuals from their true selves as well, and so thinking of sin as separation in our work as Christians, being ministers of reconciliation, I think that there are absolutely times when sex is sinful.

A Lutheran pastor made a similar argument about the ways in which the Bible can be interpreted to recognize homosexuality as legitimate and not sinful activity. He once thought that homosexuality was a sin, but claims a careful study of the Bible proved otherwise.

Well, I at one time myself thought that homosexuality was a sin, but, however, studying, you know looking at the biblical witness, which is what people are always, that the Bible says this that or the other thing. The Bible, a careful study of the passages in the Bible that are used to say that homosexuality is a sin, um, shows that indeed the Bible doesn't even really know about homosexuality it thinks that it know about homosexual rape (clears throat), it knows about homosexual behavior connected to um, worship of gods in certain Canaanite and Greek religions and it knows about, and so it considers anybody to be acting in that way, to be acting against their nature because it doesn't because as I understand that it wasn't even until Freud that there was a category of homosexuality. The Bible is conditioned by its time in that way.

His overall perspective was that homosexuality was a form of human variation.

Well, right now my attitude is that it is a God given variation within nature; creation seems to like diversity where there are minorities and majorities. Some you know like right handedness and left handedness, it's one more variation within creation.

Another research participant felt that the readings of the Gospels, the teachings of Jesus, the Beatitudes, and even some of the teachings that are in Romans need to be understood from a cultural context.

Well for me where as a lot of people who are in the faith community that want to challenge you know and, maintain that homosexuality is a sin and is an abomination, you know they use the Old Testament Scriptures and of course they use a couple of Paul's Scriptures from Romans and 1 Corinthians but for me I find that the Scriptures that bolster me in my faith come out of the Gospels and come out of, particularly the Beatitudes and it's about God's purpose for us as humans is to love God and love one another and to be peacemakers that um, that God is graceful and merciful and there are no things, there are no things, no barriers to coming to God, there isn't anything, you know I even in Romans there is nothing that will separate us from the love of God, so to me there is nothing that will separate us from the love of God, certainly being a homosexual is not going to separate us from the love of God. I look for Scriptures that affirm a God, if a God is a creator of humanity and loves humanity in all of its forms and sexual expressions and I find that you know I just don't get it that folks when they look at a person they want to define them by who they love or you know about their sexual expression.... I do not believe that there was an understanding that this was a biological, that people were born with sexual preferences. In fact I think a lot of, particularly in the New Testament, has to do with Greco-Roman you know culture that a lot of the homosexual behavior was forced. I mean slaves were forced to perform for men, older men could get, you know boys were forced into prostitution forced into those roles and then older men purposefully took advantage of that, that's part of the culture, well that's what they were talking about, that's not talking about someone who was born this way. It was a different context. So I'm just saying that okay so you take that, but there's a cultural context and so let's look at the bigger text, let's look at the text of Jesus who talks about the way we use our wealth, he has a lot to say about the way we use our wealth. He has nothing to say about homosexuals, you don't find it in the Gospels. So I look more at the Gospel texts for my understanding, to inform me how I should live out my life and I should live out my life to me, and love, and the Church should to, in love and (inaudible), notwithstanding the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, but you see what I think is that the transforming power of the Holy Spirit is to make me a better human whether I be heterosexual, or homosexual. That's my understanding; it's to make me a better human. I don't think that sexual orientation has anything to do with that, that God's love is for all.

This church leader felt that Church tradition still claims that homosexuality is “contrary to Christian teaching”.

That’s where I am and so you know that outs you, and that’s the tension in the church, particularly the United Methodist Church, because the United Methodist Church sort of takes the middle way, we in our polity and understanding, we affirm that all life is a gift from God, all life is sacred, heterosexual or homosexual, we affirm that. We even affirm that people I mean I think it implies that this is where people are and we say that homosexuals have sacred worth and that we should pray against any discrimination, against anybody’s sexual orientation and we should be open and affirming and you know, invite people to church, then we say, but the practice of homosexuality is contrary to Christian teaching, which if you look at Christian teaching it is. Because Christian teaching has been consistent so you have that tension, and that particular piece, that tension is what you know, um, brings up a lot of debate every time Methodists speak.

The way this research participant resolved this debate was to believe that differences in interpretation are just differences in opinion. She also recognized that even within her denomination there are people who disagree on biblical interpretation.

Well yes there’s people who are more literal in their interpretation but by and large almost all of the people that believe or state that homosexuality is a sin point to the Old Testament you know the Levitical purity laws, they point to what Paul has to say in Romans and Corinthians, and they point to the letter of Timothy, I mean there are these texts, that’s what people hang on and I’m just saying okay those are those texts, but there are all these other texts that affirm that God’s spirit pours out on men and women. I mean come on there are texts that also say that women shouldn’t be pastors okay, and there people that hang on to that... but that’s my interpretation and so it’s about the interpretation, it’s about texts people want to lift up and hang their hats on and so even within our denomination there are different varying opinions, even though we have this broad statement, you know they’re just differences in opinion.

Furthermore, this leader believes that people who call homosexuality a sin are interpreting Scriptures a certain way.

What I say is that those Scriptures have a particular cultural context, you know where they’re saying that homosexuality is a sin and really what those texts are saying is that the act of male-male, female-female relationship is something that is I don’t even know if they say it’s a sin as much as they say it’s not desired, it’s not natural, okay because there was presumption that the natural way, that God

created man and woman, was man for woman. I mean now part of our, it's all about interpretation because there are those that believe that the book of Genesis is of course a historical document and then there are those that don't, and I'm one of those that don't. It's not a historical document, it is a you know, it is a story, of the beginnings of the people and it was written after the people had come out of you know, Babylonian exile and it's like, the person who wrote Genesis was not there at the beginning.

While many of the Religious Right relied exclusively on biblical sources for their interpretation of homosexuality, this church leader also emphasized experience – in particular, the knowledge gained from having a homosexual family member.

Well in a general sense I don't have, I guess I would be considered having a liberal attitude in that I accept that that is a person's sexual orientation and that more than likely they were born that way and my and that comes out of my personal experience because I have family members that are homosexual, and, you know I just love them dearly and could recognize that they were different when they were little, when they were toddlers and you know the challenge to parents is to either accept that or to try to repress it and unfortunately, you know I've seen it happen both ways and so my position is you accept this is who the person is this is how they were wired and you know you just embrace them and love them.

5.2.2.3 Sodom and Gomorrah is About Inhospitallity

Many research participants contested the interpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah which is provided by the Religious Right, suggesting instead that it is a story about “inhospitallity”.

So take that ethic put it forward Genesis 19 Abram encounters God and the two angels who approach him as wandering strangers and we see, and again this is where Lot gets in trouble and so does Sodom and Gomorrah, um, we see Abram practices the law of the desert the law of hospitality those others could be scary, they're certainly unfamiliar, the text tells us they're strangers, but what does he do? He doesn't wait for them to stumble on his doorstep half dead from dehydration, heat exposure, exhaustion, the text tells us Abram ran to meet them while they were yet far off, and then he proceeds to not only meet and exceed their physical needs but he also offers them a gracious fellowship, an entrée into his own personal life. That theme is one of the most often repeated one of the most consistent themes throughout the entirety of Scripture.

Another leader from a Welcoming and Affirming church provided a similar response to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

To think that, some of the examples that are cited, for instance the Sodom and Gomorrah story, I think that has nothing to do with homosexuality, in fact I think that whole story in the context of Genesis is all about hospitality and how do we treat strangers. You know, if you look at it in the context. So, first Abraham greets these visitors and Abraham brings out food and drink and begs them to stay and watches over them as they eat in case they need anything, it's this lavish hospitality for these divine visitors, who are strangers, pose a risk, he doesn't know what their intentions are, but it doesn't matter because it's a form of hospitality. Then, you know some of the same visitors come to Sodom and Gomorrah and they're treated very badly, um where you know the people are going to rape them, you know that's the idea, they're going to rape them. I think it's probably more misogynist than anything about homosexuality because I think the idea was that they were gonna treat them like women who were less than men. It's not just about sexual appetite because Lot offers his own daughters, which is morally questionable as well, and they're not interested, it's all about these strangers, it's not just about, they're not having sex with each other, they're not trying to have sex with Lot's son in laws, the idea is that they're gonna rape these strangers who don't belong here, and they even ask him why are you protecting these men? You have no right to do that. So I think that that story gets held up and I think that Jesus does some work on it and makes it pretty clear when he talks about you know, these people if they don't treat you good and when you come in my name, they'll suffer a worse fate than even Sodom and Gomorrah, you know, I think the idea there is the same thing.

While some of the Religious Right use comparisons between homosexuality and bestiality to discredit homosexuality, this church leader actually suggested that humans are animals and are genetically predisposed to homosexuality. (This was not a theme which any other participant offered).

Human beings in my estimation, while divinely appointed, blessed, created in a peculiar way, human beings are animals, and throughout the animal kingdom, particularly throughout higher mammalian species, homosexuality occurs in every animal family. The reasons for it vary, but the most consistent research has shown that dominance, particularly among males, often plays a role, but it's also sometimes a population control measure, so you'll see rates of homosexuality increase markedly when the available food stuffs for the animal population had decreased and so I don't know that I rest on that any longer, but at one point in my journey that was a big thing, it was like oh my gosh homosexuality is God's plan because humans are locusts who are destroying God's creation. Increasingly

we know from science that while we haven't been able to deduce all the markers. It would appear that there is a genetic predisposition, number one. Number two, the way that we define human sexuality, even now, is very, very narrow. Generally in conventional dialogue when we talk about sexuality we're talking about who you want to have intercourse with. Sexuality is a much broader thing than that, sexuality includes gender identity... but I've also known other folks who regardless of their gender identity, their sexuality has been very confusing... now I don't know what to make of that but my point is that it is nowhere near cut and dry like we want it to be....

Interestingly, in 'number two' of his comments, this participant was one of the few respondents who specifically engaged in a discussion of the link between gender and sexuality more broadly, recognizing the complexity of this relationship. While his arguments about homosexuality in nature were not reflective of the beliefs of other church leaders (or the literature discussed in Chapters Two and Three), the theme of the complex and fluid relationship between sexuality and gender was certainly evident in the literature review of these topics which was provided earlier in the thesis.

5.2.2.4 Rejection of Conversion Therapy

A church leader commented that the practice of conversion therapy associated with the 'ex-gay' movement was not only unsuccessful, it actively harmed participants.

Ummm, I started checking into the ex-gay movement in 1984 or 1985 and even then um, the leaders of the most well-known organizations were backing off their claim that they could help people change their orientation. Those who didn't, the real changes that were taking place were in the leadership of the organizations because people who thought that they were ex-gay would meet other people who thought they were ex-gay and they would turn out not to be ex-gay. Then they had to recruit new leaders. Um, even in the mid-80s some of them were saying well we were over-selling when we said we could help you change your orientation, what we can do is help you be celibate with occasional lapses. Yeah. Interesting, but also tragic because there are people who buy into it who are, who wind up seriously victimized and for the organizations to promise what they have no reasonable ground to believe they can deliver may not be intentionally malicious, but in terms of human pain the affect is the same as if it were malicious.

This rejection of conversion therapy was common among Welcoming and Affirming church leaders.

I think and what I've read is that they've really perpetuated like a self-hate. And so, sorry in terms of the God whom I worship and whom I love, self-hate is not what I think that God, you know is condoning or even expressing in the literature, that it's not about self-hate it's about loving God and loving yourself and so I, I wouldn't be in support of that.

Another Welcoming and Affirming leader asserted that trying to change someone's sexual orientation was impossible if the person was "really gay" (sic).

I don't think, I really don't think that it is healthy for someone who says who really is gay to um just say well I'm not gonna be that way, um I, you know, I'm gonna choose to restrain because I've seen you know I've seen people try to do that and it's a real mess, um, the anger and the passive aggressive behavior that I've seen come out with people like that, is difficult now as far as can sexuality in general be controlled? Sure. We make choices about how we um, live out our sexuality every day, um and that's just like standard impulse control anywhere that's just choosing how to behave. You know, no someone is not just gonna, it's not appropriate for someone to just decide that he's gonna go, have sex in the middle of the street or something, I don't know. So as far as trying to control it to say I'm not going to be gay, I don't think that's healthy.

While this reference to "really gay" is underscored by a problematic notion of sexual identity, the quote is nevertheless useful in characterizing the belief of many Welcoming and Affirming church leaders that the conversion therapy of the "ex-gay" movement is futile.

5.2.2.5 Queer Theology

As the comments above demonstrate, almost all the Welcoming and Affirming church leaders interviewed for this thesis were from the less radical tradition. Only one research participant identified with queer theology. Her denomination specifically has outreach to the GLBTQ community, she has a transgender male in her church (who helped her recognize and challenge some of her own previous prejudices), and they have

a specific ministry for gays and lesbians. Interestingly, however, while her denomination is committed to challenging homophobia and transphobia, she did not specifically connect these forms of prejudice to heterosexism, in the way that some queer theology does. Such queer theology was supported by Cheng (2011), Caldwell (2010), and Tigert (1999) and was discussed in Chapter Three.

This research participant stressed that people are born with their sexual orientation, and that homosexuality is not sinful.

I think people are born gay or born straight or born you know bisexual or whatever, you know it's not, that it's really not a choice, folks just show up how they show up, um I think that it's not a, what does the Roman Catholic Church call it? An intrinsically disordered, is what I think it's referred to. I don't believe that, um, now I'm not exactly the most objective research guinea pig you have so...nor do I think that the Bible says thou shalt not be homosexual...

She suggested that Jesus actually acknowledged homosexuality in the gospel of Mark.

...the so called six verses that are used, that is such a house of cards because there are other passages that you look at and you think wow, you know, like David saying flat out your love surpasses the love of women to Jonathan, um, now this is, I have a parishioner who's been, she's pretty amazing, she speaks, I don't know five different languages, and I did not know this, she pointed this out to me in the Greek and she checked with a Greek Orthodox priest as well, um, there's a part in Mark where Jesus is saying, it's called, in the gospel of Mark the Little Apocalypse, and what's happening is that he's saying you know, here's what's gonna happen and you know, this is great, the English translation that we have says two people will be in bed, one will be taken and one will be left. Guess what the Greek says? Two men will be in bed. Okay? (laughs) Now it's very interesting how that is even scrubbed out by the later interlinear Greek text in like the 1975 edition of this it says two men, in the later edition it just says two will be in bed and I'm like oh come on. So it seems to me as though Jesus just might be acknowledging that that was present. I'm not saying that he was saying oh this is the better way to be or anything like that, but just you know, here we are.

She also questioned the nature of some relationships which are discussed in the Bible.

Um, I think I constantly find places where um, Christ is saying love and welcome, love and welcome. And there are stories of people binding themselves to each other, you know, Ruth and Naomi, look at the book of Ruth, look at the history of Samuel with David and Jonathan, now this is really gonna get, this is gonna, I

don't want this to cause your paper to burst into flames or anything, but and I'm not saying Jesus was gay, but I do find it interesting that there was this constant thing of the disciple who Jesus loved. That there was this closeness and I'm not saying that was sex, I'm not saying Jesus was gay, but there's a certain intimacy and companionship there that I um, I don't push it aside.

This research participant also argued that Scripture has to be culturally interpreted, it cannot be taken literally.

I think Scripture is always open to interpretation. First off, the minute you read it you're interpreting, I mean I could hand you my grocery list and you would be interpreting. Oh, is she a vegetarian, or does she have a freezer full of meat, oh gee I don't see this on here... I think Scriptures are always open to interpretation and that interpretation is holy work... But, I will say that the majority of Episcopalians and the majority of Episcopal clergy would say that Scripture is open to interpretation and the more that we study it and think about it and live through it and all of that, the more thoroughly we look at a story, the more of its truth comes out. And truth and fact are two different things with Scripture, I believe because historically you know, I've had a whole lot of rabbis say of course we don't take this stuff literally, the point is it's a story about, Adam and Eve, well where did sin start, if God is so good and God made us, where did this come from?... It doesn't pull you away from the really necessary truth, which is what the stories are pointing toward, so I'm a, and you know I'm sure I could wander off in all different kinds of directions, but you know, this is what you do in community...

She indicated that she has a transgender male in the church, and she recognizes and has worked on her own prejudice about transgender people.

Okay, um, the verger in this congregation... it's a volunteer position, it's just someone who makes sure everything is right on Sundays, is biologically female, identifies as transgender, was not able to have the surgery, because of heart issues, I honor CJ's name, CJ was born as Claudia, it took me awhile to just sort of understand it, and of course I don't understand it because I don't live in that body, but I didn't realize how ignorant I was, and without even realizing it, how prejudice I was, and it's like oooh, well you really taught me something there...

She added that the church has a specific ministry for gays and lesbians, and is very welcoming.

Let's see, we house, Rainbow Area Youth meets here, they meet here once a week and obviously it's really important, you know, for kids, we're also trying to figure out what more can we do, how can we support that group better? We will

be at Pride weekend; basically saying you're welcome here. If you've been, cuz there's so many gay people who just say Christianity: bleh...

Nevertheless, many people in her congregation still have a difficult time fully accepting CJ, the transgendered person.

...well for example in the Episcopal church it's Integrity, which is the gay and lesbian Episcopal group, or Dignity, which is the gay and lesbian Catholic group, this church was like post-Integrity probably 20 years ago, meaning, everyone is you know, people regard gay couples totally equal to straight couples and I can't imagine anyone ever saying I'm not going to work with that person because he's gay, I'm like wow, I would be like did you know about T when you signed up? There are a lot of people here who have been rejected by various religions, very denominations, by their own, not necessarily by their own families, but a few, um, or a few who may have been initially and kind of made some peace, um, it's just like it's not a big deal. No one would ever feel like oh I have something to tell you, I'm gay, well then it's like oh that's nice, pass the salt... So, it's like, in many ways it's a non-issue. But, what surprises me about them is, for example that's a non-issue, but they still have a problem, they still don't get CJ, they still refer to CJ as she, and I'm like constantly correcting that. At staff meetings I'm like okay let's clarify this one more time. This person identifies as male, therefore we'll use male pronouns.

CJ's experiences reveal the challenge for Welcoming and Affirming churches to move beyond a simple rejection of homophobia, and to actively challenge transphobia. However, a challenge to transphobia means that such churches need to engage in critical thinking about the performativity of sex and gender – an issue which the writings of Judith Butler explored in detail (see Chapter Two).

The literature review in Chapter Three stressed that even among denominations which label themselves as “Welcoming and Affirming,” there are some which are less “welcoming” than others. Unlike the research participant whose denomination had specific outreach to the LGBTQ community, another research participant simply suggested that they were welcome to attend the church, but the church would not do outreach towards that community. “Nothing beyond making it clear that people know

where I stand, that they're fully welcome to participate fully". This is an interesting social dynamic – the church recognizes that homosexuals have been treated poorly or excluded from the church historically, but it is not willing to initiate a conversation with the gay community or to reach out to it as a collective group in order to have a religious dialogue.

The issue of queer theology divided some research participants. Another leader from a Welcoming and Affirming church made it quite clear that he disagreed with queer theology or “pro-gay” material which is “silly”, but he does believe that “anti-gay” theology is also dishonest. The degree to which a denomination can be truly “Affirming” if it is not “pro-gay” was a contradiction he did not acknowledge.

The pro-gay stuff I read had some silliness in it claiming that Ruth and Naomi were, their relationship was primarily sexual and that's why they loved each other. I don't think you can make a good case for that, but the anti-gay stuff was just flat out dishonest. . Um, for instance, discussing the sin of Sodom... Ezekiel says this was the sin of Sodom, pride, surfativeness (sic) goods, prosperous heeds, failure to aid the poor and needy, haughtiness, doing abominable things which for Ezekiel includes things like collecting interest on savings. Um, not mentioned in the book, not in the index of biblical passages, it was evidence that did not support their view, so they left it out claiming that their view is biblical at the same time, mmm, doesn't work. Flat out of dishonest.

5.2.2.6 Sexuality Exists on a Continuum

The final research participant to be quoted in this chapter adopted a theme which was evident in the literature review in Chapter Two: that sexuality exists on a continuum. This complex, fluid notion of sexuality, which challenges the dominant homosexual/heterosexual binary, was one of the most progressive responses to this issue encountered during the research process.

Well I think that people are born either homosexual or heterosexual and some people are born bisexual, I think sexuality is a lot more fluid than we have previously believed and so my belief is pretty much that our sexual orientation is

sort of on a continuum, just based on my experience as a pastor and the way that people describe their own experience, some people experience themselves as, as really heterosexual, they don't have any homosexual feelings and some people really only experience themselves as homosexual and some people believe that everybody is bisexual and my hunch is that that's because they were born bisexual, that's just my take, I'm not a scientist, but my hunch is the people who think that everybody is bisexual it's because they are closer to the middle of the continuum and they're just projecting their experience on everyone. So I sort of, my opinion is that sexuality is kind of a continuum, but I believe that clearly there are some people that are born attracted to same gender, an orientation... Because I believe that sexuality is on a continuum my hunch would be that the people who are most successful at that would be the people who are close to the bisexuality position on the continuum - that would be my hunch.

Nevertheless, despite her seeming endorsement of arguments about the fluidity and omnipresence of various sexual dispositions, she reverted to a more traditional position that sexual orientation is genetic (and not a mixture of genetics and environment).

That's just the way they're created, it's not something anybody chooses, any more than heterosexual people choose to be heterosexual, we were born with certain predispositions, certain genetic traits, and um, it's not a learned behavior it's not something that is created out of our environment, it's not because we were abused or had some horrible experience, or a choice, maybe there was some experimentation that happens in certain stages of life because of certain experiences, but for the most part I think it's something we're born with.

This issue of the causes of homosexuality is a major issue in the debate within Christian churches, and deserves to be discussed in detail.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the evidence gathered in the course of the research – highlighting the strong differences between the Religious Right and Welcoming and Affirming approaches. It has emphasized the significant degree of variation within Christian churches about the issue of homosexuality. Many church leaders among the Religious Right consider homosexuality a “disorder” which is “unnatural” and a form of “depravity”. Nevertheless, most said that they “love the sinner, hate the sin” and

described their churches as “welcoming” – no matter how homophobic their attitudes, beliefs and practices may appear. (This suggests that homosexuals entering the church should be careful and critical in assessing how ‘accepting’ a church actually is before coming out in a congregation). Most of the Religious Right was quite clear and consistent in condemning homosexuality as a sinful practice. They did not address any links between heterosexism and homophobia – indeed, none of them recognized that homophobia was a problem. Most relied on the Old Testament as the source of their beliefs and teachings about homosexuality.

In contrast, Welcoming and Affirming church leaders challenged the Religious Right’s emphasis on the Old Testament, and, in particular, their interpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, suggesting that it was more of a moral about the sin of inhospitality. Many believed that the Bible was open to various interpretations. The various sources of evidence which were discussed in Chapter Two – reason, tradition, the Bible, and experience (as well as faith) were all offered as evidence to support particular Welcoming and Affirming approaches to homosexuality. Two church leaders specifically referred to the Wesleyan triad/quadrilateral as informing such an approach. Having a family member who was gay was another practical experience which informed one church leader’s approach to the topic.

These church leaders sometimes disagreed with each other about whether homosexuality was genetic or environmental (or a combination of both), but they all rejected the idea that it was a sin. Only one church leader aligned herself with queer theology, while another suggested that ‘pro-gay’ (re)interpretations of the Bible were “silly”. Some noted that their church had changed its position over time regarding gay

relationships and same-sex marriage. Many believed that the Bible was open to various interpretations.

Interestingly, in terms of the literature review about sexualities which was conducted in Chapter Two, only one of the Welcoming and Affirming leaders made explicit connections between gender roles and sexuality. This is important, because it may suggest that while their notions of homosexuality have departed from more conservative approaches, their attitudes towards gender roles may be lagging behind more progressive leaders in the queer community. Only one of the Welcoming and Affirming leaders specifically endorsed queer theology, which contains a more fluid notion of both gender and sexuality. This leader had specifically rejected the homosexual/heterosexual binary, and advocated a more fluid notion of sexuality (similar to those discussed in Chapter Two). Interestingly, however, none of these church leaders specifically emphasized the role of heterosexism in the broader process of homophobia – a link which was made by some of the scholars reviewed and discussed in Chapter Two. This may mean that there is more work to do inside their congregations to make them truly Welcoming and Affirming.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Among Christian churches throughout the United States, homosexuality is a controversial issue which may divide a congregation internally. Two dominant perspectives on the topic stem from the Religious Right and Welcoming and Affirming churches. This thesis has examined the competing understandings of “homosexuality” in these churches, analyzing their positions on homosexuality in light of the literature on theological ethics and on sexualities. By interviewing 16 Christian church leaders in Toledo, the national debates were given a local context, and it was clear that various denominations are dealing with issues of acceptance, exclusion, and sexual diversity.

The thesis placed debates around homosexuality in the context of a broad set of literature associated with sexualities studies. This literature highlights fundamental power dynamics which operate in regard to the connection between sex, gender and sexualities. The literature review also emphasized the social construction of sexuality and examined attempts to destabilize sexuality categories (such as ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’). The importance of performativity, essentialism, and social constructionism in debates about homosexuality was another theme which emerged from

the literature review. Debates over the merits of queer, assimilationist, and liberationist discourses of sexuality were also discussed in the literature review. However, these debates were placed in the wider context of the prejudice, marginalization, violence, and social exclusion which homosexuals experience. Insult, shame, and trauma were common responses to homosexuality.

Another body of literature which shaped this thesis involved various theological positions on homosexuality. These were broadly defined into two categories – those of the Religious Right and those of Welcoming and Affirming churches. The former tended to position homosexuality as a sin, and commonly promoted the motto “love the sinner, hate the sin”. The Welcoming and Affirming Churches believe that homosexuality is not a sin, and that homosexuality is a legitimate, loving sexual option for Christians. There were differences among Welcoming and Affirming churches, however, particularly among those who adopted a transgressive, queer theology and those who were less radical in their sexual ethics.

The methodology adopted in this thesis involved qualitative interviews, and every effort was made to protect the confidentiality of participants – an especially important issue given the sensitive and controversial nature of the topic. The coding process was conducted using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program. A total of 26 codes emerged from the data, and they are outlined in Appendix C of this thesis.

The data collected in this study indicated that there were a wide range of attitudes towards homosexuality among Christian church leaders in Toledo. They disagreed as to whether sexuality is innate or changeable and whether homosexuality is a sin. Only one church leader specifically espoused queer theology. Nevertheless, and interestingly, no

matter how critical they were of homosexuality, and no matter how much they condemned it as a “disorder”, a “sin”, and even if they likened it to other sexual practices such as bestiality, every church leader claimed to be “welcoming” of homosexuals.

6.2 Implications

This thesis has important practical and theological implications for Christian churches. Some of the church leaders who were interviewed for this research indicated that they had not thought a great deal about the topic, and others could not identify specific parts of the Bible which they relied upon to justify their theological stance on the issue. Considering the relevancy of this issue, it may suggest that now is the time for church leaders to take an interest in this topic. Many Religious Right leaders emphasized the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as a key Old Testament story about homosexuality, but Welcoming and Affirming leaders often said that they thought the Bible was open to competing interpretations and that the story was really about the sin of “inhospitality”. No church leaders recognized the link between heterosexism and homophobia. This indicated that few had deeply engaged with (or challenged) the practice of heteronormativity on any meaningful level. Nevertheless, those in Welcoming and Affirming churches did indicate that they were willing to challenge their own prejudices and were open to learning more about alternative sexual expressions and identities.

The case of a transgender man in one of the Welcoming churches raised the connections between sex, gender and sexuality – issues which were flagged as important in the literature review of sexualities studies in Chapter Two. The performativity of gender was apparent in this case, but the church struggled with transphobia. Even the church leader indicated that she had to learn more about the experiences of transgender

people in order to be more welcoming to this community. This thesis has also emphasized the importance of the connections between sex, gender and sexuality in discussions of homosexuality, and has also reiterated the importance of performativity as a crucial element in sex and gender roles, and in sexuality.

While several of the leaders discussed the beliefs held by their particular denomination in regards to homosexuality, only one of them, from the Religious Right, claimed that he believes that his denomination needs to change its policy in order to be more welcoming. Another leader talked about the flexibility of his denomination which allows for a “bottom up authority” meaning that individual churches do not necessarily have to align with the teachings or policies of the national denomination. This “congregational polity” demonstrates that even within a church denomination there is a diversity of opinions on this topic. While this pastor was part of a Welcoming and Affirming church, he has yet to go through the process to become an official Open and Affirming congregation in his denomination. These leaders, and the others who recognized the multiplicity of opinions on this topic in their denominations, affirm that they spoke on behalf of their own personal beliefs. While their beliefs may have aligned with their national leaders, most did not emphasize that they were speaking on behalf of a particular denomination. On the other hand, the priests spoke on behalf of the Catholic Church and gave no indication that their personal ideas were different from anything that was taught by the Church.

Although all of the leaders from Religious Right churches claimed to be welcoming to homosexuals, four of them claimed that a homosexual person would not be allowed to hold a leadership person in their church. This is an area of discrimination that

is still faced by many homosexuals who wish to reconcile their Christian faith with their sexual identity. Many people may choose to hide their sexual identity, or stay in the closet, out of fear of what might happen to them if they come out to their friends and family. The difficulty of this decision and the implications it may have are outlined in Chapter Three of this thesis.

There was very little variance in the demographics of the participants in this study. Most were white, middle aged, and straight. I did not make an effort to differentiate between findings from the two non-white participants or the female who identified as a lesbian because the sample size was too small. It is interesting to note that all of the females in this study were from Welcoming and Affirming churches, but this does not have any implications for the findings or analysis of this study. Again, it is important to note that this research does not claim to be generalizable to any church denomination, religion, or the city of Toledo. The analysis relies exclusively on the primary interview data obtained from the 16 participants.

The centuries-old debate about how the Bible should be interpreted, specifically in regards to scriptures that reference homosexuality, continues to be a controversial issue in the Church. The way that scripture is understood and applied has many important implications for the way that homosexuals are treated in the Church and determines whether or not a church leader believes that homosexuality is a sin. Scripture acts as one of the major sources of knowledge for Christian church leaders and is discussed in Chapter Three. Those with a more literal interpretation of the Bible, such as those of the Religious Right, call homosexuality a sin.

6.3 Limitations

This thesis is not a comprehensive review of all Christian churches in Toledo. A large number of church leaders refused to be interviewed, and many indicated that they were fearful of being misrepresented on a sensitive and potentially divisive issue. But the purpose of qualitative studies such as this is not necessarily to maximize sample size – instead, the purpose was to interview a relatively small number of people who held divergent views, and to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. This thesis was certainly able to gain a greater insight into local perspectives from both Religious Right and Welcoming and Affirming churches.

Another important limitation is that this thesis focuses exclusively on Christianity, but there were many denominations which were not included in the research. So the results of the thesis cannot necessarily be applied across the board to all Christian denominations, including many African American churches because of their lack of participation in this study. Similarly, the results cannot be applied to non-Christian faiths.

Finally, while the literature review on the Religious Right and on Welcoming and Affirming Churches suggests that there are parallels between this local study and wider national stances on homosexuality, it cannot be assumed that this study is nationally representative of the attitudes of Christian church leaders towards homosexuality.

6.4 Areas Requiring Further Research

This thesis has pointed to the wide range of views among Christian church leaders about homosexuality. It was established at the outset of this thesis that homosexuality is associated with different power and gender dynamics than lesbianism, and it would be interesting to conduct further research on the attitudes of church leaders, specifically

towards lesbians, transgender people, and many other sexual expressions and identities. It cannot be assumed at the outset that these would necessarily be the same or different from those attitudes towards homosexuality – that would have to be established through careful research.

Another area which requires more research is the attitude of non-Christian faiths towards homosexuality, and towards homosexuals in their congregations. Although some of the literature in Chapter Two suggested that the experience of homosexuality is profoundly shaped by trauma, shame, and insult, it cannot be assumed that this experience is uniform across different faiths. This also needs detailed practical investigation.

The links between heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia within church congregations also need to be studied in detail. This was one of the most interesting elements of the thesis – even churches which claimed to be Welcoming and Affirming rarely cast a critical eye on their assumptions about heterosexuality and its associated prejudices and power dimensions.

Finally, there is a desperate need to record the perspectives of homosexuals within various faith communities – to hear their testimonies of inclusion and exclusion. Since the focus of this thesis was on the attitudes of Christian church leaders, it was not possible to gain a sense of the ways in which people with diverse sexual experiences and identities had experienced sexual power, privilege, or marginalization through their church.

6.5 Conclusion

The Religious Right still uses words like “disorder” to describe homosexuality, and they regard homosexuality as a sin. The hurt and shame associated with being homosexual continues to be a factor in the religious experiences of many homosexuals in these denominations. However, in recent years, a number of churches have recognized the patterns of discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion which homosexuals experience. They have made some strides towards more inclusivity by becoming Welcoming and Affirming churches. As this thesis has demonstrated, the battle is not over; they are still grappling with the complexities of the relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Documentation



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ADULT RESEARCH SUBJECT - INFORMED CONSENT FORM *(Religion and Sexual Orientation)*

Principal Investigator: Dr. Mark Sherry, Assistant Professor, 419-530-4076
Aleiah Jones, Student, 419-530-4076

Purpose: You are invited to participate in the research project entitled, *Religion and Sexual Orientation* which is being conducted at the University of Toledo under the direction of Dr. Mark Sherry and Aleiah Jones. The purpose of this study is to explore the varying attitudes of Toledo area church leaders towards homosexuals in general, and in their congregations in particular.

Description of Procedures: This research study will take place in your church and should only take 30 minutes. You will be asked questions regarding three primary issues: *What are your attitudes toward homosexuality in general? What are your attitudes toward homosexuals in your congregation? Which part of the Bible do you rely on to find the inspiration for these ideas?* The interview will be tape recorded.

Will you permit the researcher to audio record during this research procedure?

YES	<input style="width: 40px; height: 20px;" type="checkbox"/>	NO	<input style="width: 40px; height: 20px;" type="checkbox"/>	
	_____		_____	_____
	Here		Initial Here	Initial

After you have completed your participation, the research team will debrief you about the data, theory and research area under study and answer any questions you may have about the research.

Potential Risks: There are minimal risks to participation in this study, including loss of confidentiality and your right to stop participation at any point. Participating in this study might cause you to feel upset or anxious. If so, you may stop at any time.

Potential Benefits: The only direct benefit to you if you participate in this research may be that you will learn about how sociological research is conducted and may learn more about you own perspectives on homosexuality. Others may benefit by learning about the results of this research.

Confidentiality: The researchers will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you provided this information, or what that information is. The consent forms with signatures will be kept separate from responses, which will not include names and which will be presented to others only when combined with other responses. Although we will make every effort to protect your confidentiality, there is a low risk that this might be breached.

Voluntary Participation: Your refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled and will not affect your relationship with The University of Toledo or any of your classes. In addition, you may discontinue participation at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits.

Contact Information: Before you decide to accept this invitation to take part in this study, you may ask any questions that you might have. If you have any questions at any time before, during or after your participation you should contact a member of the research team (Dr. Mark Sherry 419-530-4076 or Ms. Aleiah Jones 419-530-4076).

If you have questions beyond those answered by the research team or your rights as a research subject or research-related injuries, the Chairperson of the SBE Institutional Review Board may be contacted through the Office of Research on the main campus at (419) 530-2844.

Before you sign this form, please ask any questions on any aspect of this study that is unclear to you. You may take as much time as necessary to think it over.

SIGNATURE SECTION – Please read carefully

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above, you have had all your questions answered, and you have decided to take part in this research.

The date you sign this document to enroll in this study, that is, today's date must fall between the dates indicated at the bottom of the page.

Name of Subject (please print)

Signature

Date

Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Signature

Date

This Adult Research Informed Consent document has been reviewed and approved by the University of Toledo Social, Behavioral and Educational IRB for the period of time specified in the box below.

Approved Number of Subjects: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

- What are your attitudes towards homosexuality in general?
- Do you think homosexuality is a choice or genetic?
- Do you think homosexuality is controllable?
- Do you think homosexuality is a sin?
- Do you think that people can be converted from one sexual orientation to another? How?
- What are your attitudes towards homosexuals in your congregation? How have you helped them?
- How do you think a gay person would feel if they attended a worship service?
- What kinds of things does your church do to reach out to the gay community, if any?
- Which part of the Bible do you rely on to find inspiration for these ideas?
- Do you think that Scriptures are open to different interpretations?

Appendix C

Code List

- Biological- sexual orientation is based in creation or genetics
- Celibacy- abstaining from sexual relations
- Church tradition- what a specific church denomination believes, whether the leader agrees with it or not
- Cultural interpretation- interpreting the Bible based on the culture of the time it was written, or the current culture that it is being applied to
- Desire vs. act- sexual orientation, specifically homosexuality, is an attraction that a person can choose not to act on
- Discrimination- mistreatment or unequal treatment of homosexuals
- Doctrine- beliefs about homosexuality in regards to their understanding of the Bible or of Christianity
- Ethics- right or wrong conduct, whether it be homosexual acts or other behavior
- Ex-gay- whether or not a person can change their sexual orientation
- Experience- an individual's personal life experience influences their own beliefs about homosexuality, typically having a friend or family member who identifies as homosexual

- Family unit- reference to the heterosexual family
- Insult, shame, and trauma- damaging emotions and experiences that homosexuals often face
- Literal interpretation- interpreting the Bible word for word without taking cultural aspects into consideration
- Ministry- outreach to the gay community, or lack thereof
- Nature/nurture- reference to the debate of homosexuality being attributed to biological or socially constructed dimensions
- New Testament- any reference to a Scripture from one of the 27 books
- Old Testament- any reference to a specific Scripture from one of the 39 books
- Other forms of sexual expression- reference to bisexuality, transgender, pansexuality, queer, or any other type of sexual expression
- Other sin comparison- comparing homosexuality to another sin or behavior like alcoholism or gluttony, typically something that is seen as being able to be controlled
- Political- reference to political party or terms such as liberal or conservative
- Queer theology- teaching or belief that affirms the homosexual lifestyle
- Reason or logic- an individual's personal reasoning or logical understanding that influences their ideas about homosexuality
- Sin- whether or not homosexuality is considered wrong, based on what the Bible teaches and their personal beliefs
- Social construction- sexual orientation, specifically homosexuality, is the product of an individual's upbringing or life choices

- Social justice- equality for people who identify as homosexual
- Sodom and Gomorrah- cities of an Old Testament story in which angels visit Lot and the men of Sodom asked to have sex with them, and consequently God destroys both cities