

"Open and Affirming":

Shifting Church Identities in the Movement towards GLBT Inclusion

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***Abstract:** Issues of civil rights for gays and lesbians are some of the most hotly debated in American at present. Attitudes of the Christian church are significant to this movement because of the vast number of Christian Americans. I have interviewed clergy and church members in Memphis, Tennessee in order to understand the shifts in identity which churches in the South are undergoing to incorporate GLBT members.*

Methodology. In order to obtain the information included herein, I have conducted and recorded in-person interviews with clergy and church members. Due to the somewhat sensitive nature of this issue, I obtained each new contact through the last and was not able to choose subjects by attending general services.

**Note:* Often normative claims lurk within academic research disguised as empirical claims. From the beginning I should be clear that I believe that homosexuality, its practice, and those self-identified as GLBT should be fully accepted in the Christian Church. I have attempted to be as objective as possible in my interviews and interpretation of data. However, my personal beliefs and worldview are no doubt made obvious in the following pages.

I. Introduction

An article recently appeared in the *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis's only daily news publication, about an incident concerning a church softball league. The pastor of the church, a Baptist mega-church in Memphis called Bellevue, banned one of their teams

from playing after learning the coach is a lesbian. According to a poll conducted by the Commercial Appeal website, 68% of Memphians disagreed with the decision.ⁱ However, this leaves a sizeable minority who support it. This incident brought to the forefront of Memphis's consciousness a subject which is not often breached. The ministers of two out of the three churches I interviewed brought up the event, signifying the extent to which the decision of such a prominent church pastor has sparked fierce debate on the issue of GLBT inclusion.

The full acceptance and integration of people of all sexual identities into all facets of society, including religious activities and events, is a widely contested issue around the country, but perhaps most fiercely in the Southern, Christian church. Traditionally, Christian churches have been on the front lines of the fight against those who identify as or support GLBT people and the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, relatively recently many churches have begun to accept the gay and lesbian community into their churches; or, at the very least, begun discussions on the subject.

Churches as well as denominations are at very different places in this progression. Even churches that are completely accepting do not necessarily have the same reasons for doing so and almost certainly did not walk the same path to arrive at their decision. Because of tensions—both real and perceived— between the regional, demographic, doctrinal, and sexual identities of the Christian church and the acceptance of homosexuality, renewed understandings of the sources of authority to which Christians appeal—such as scripture, tradition, experience, and social norms—are forced to be created and sustained in churches which wish to be open and affirming. As new members join and long-time members come into contact with these changes, each individual must

confront the parts of their identity which can appear mutually exclusive with a gay-accepting identity in order to strengthen the collective identity of the church and move the church towards progress.

I have discovered only four churches in Memphis who identify themselves as “open and affirming.” Open and Affirming (O&A) churches are those which have publicly declared gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) people welcome into the community and ministry of their congregation. However, there are many more who are somewhere in the middle. These congregations in limbo are more than doctrinally tolerant. They do not believe that homosexuality is prohibited in the Christian tradition, but they are not yet comfortable making a public declaration or electing gay members to positions of power in the church. The Baptist congregation which I have studied and wishes to remain anonymous falls into this category of churches which I will call “accepting, but not affirming.” They accept the legitimacy of the homosexual identity, but do not yet affirm GLBT members’ right to serve in leadership roles or their equality to heterosexual members. It is not that many of the church’s members do not view their homosexual “brothers and sisters” as equal, but that the church as a whole has not yet asserted this officially. I focused on three congregations, two of which are officially open and affirming and one of which is “on a journey in that direction.”ⁱⁱ

Both fully open and affirming churches are a part of the denomination known as the United Church of Christ (UCC). The UCC was founded on progressive beliefs including the equality of women, all races, and, later, of gays and lesbians. First Congregational (First Congo) is a UCC church and one of the most well-known congregations in Memphis. They officially became open and affirming in 1991 and, since

then, the identity of acceptance has become synonymous with its name. It is a church which is incredibly active in the community, even hosting other non-profit organizations in its buildings. Holy Trinity is just as proud of its accepting status, but is smaller and less well-known. It has been O&A since its founding on June 10, 1990. Thus, they were able to avoid the often tumultuous process of becoming accepting. However, in order to sustain this identity, many of the same processes apply. Holy Trinity specifically caters to those who have been “ostracized or demonized by their local churches,” and finds itself aiding individual members, 70% of which are, according to the pastor’s estimation, GLBT, in the process of uniting the disparate portions of their identity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite its celebrity, First Congo only brings in about two hundred people every Sunday out of about three hundred members. Holy Trinity serves even fewer, around sixty to eighty. The accepting, but not affirming Baptist church is perceived as a large church, but in fact only averages around one hundred and fifty people on any given Sunday. They have a history of being progressive and are liberal by Southern Baptist standards, but still retain some members of the fundamentalist Baptist movement. Because of the disparity of opinions in the church, they are hesitant to make a declaration of GLBT acceptance. Though these churches are located in Memphis, their discussions and processes are similar to many Christian churches.

As O&A congregations, the UCC churches I studied are more than merely “tolerant,” a claim that the Baptist congregation is still working towards. Tolerance implies only the absence of persecution. There is a significant difference between a church which *tolerates* GLBT members and one which *accepts* them. There are many degrees to which Christian churches tolerate GLBT people. Many churches adopt a

‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy. They do not approve of homosexual practice, but do not openly condemn it. Some accept that homosexuality is the true nature of some people, but warn against homosexual practice. Others assert that homosexual practice is not a sin, but will not allow GLBT members to hold an office in the church. Full acceptance is characterized by a full integration and realized equality among heterosexual and homosexual members of the church.

In his essay, “Sources for Body Theology: Homosexuality as a Test Case,” James B. Nelson identifies four sources of authority to which many congregations appeal in this debate: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. These are probably, with the addition of social norms, the largest influences on churches’ decision to accept (in part or fully) or turn away the GLBT community. These authorities are the main points of contention on both sides. Some denominations are more or less influenced by particular sources of authority.

Going in, I was, first of all, shocked that a Baptist church in Memphis would be even doctrinally tolerant of gay members. The more conservative Baptist churches are so much larger, more numerous, and more vocal about their views that it is tempting to assume that all Baptist churches share these views. There is, in fact, only one other Baptist church which I have found in Memphis which does not openly condemn homosexuality. Once I found that the church I was studying was a relatively liberal Baptist church, I still expected scripture to be the main authority on which their decision was based. Although, they do not ignore the authority of scripture, in speaking with the leader and members of the church, I found that relationships with GLBT people do the most to push this process forward. As churches decide to become open and affirming, the

understanding of scripture as the inspired Word of God, meant to be taken literally, shifts to an understanding that scripture should be read with the cultural context of the writers in mind. As the importance of literal interpretation diminishes, the importance of understanding individual GLBT people grows.

Becoming open and affirming often changes the demographics of a church. Many more GLBT people begin to attend and some more conservative members leave. However, the changes run much deeper. Learning to accept fully entails a fundamental change in church identity and in the identities of the individual members. The movement of full inclusion among churches is vital because Christians are very influential in American society and, thus, directly affect the changing of social norms.

The senior pastor of the Baptist church, who wished for his name and the name of his church to remain anonymous, agreed that the attitude of the Christian church directly and importantly affects the attitudes of American society-at-large. He described how the rejection of the GLBT population by the church has given “harm and pain to untold generations of GLBT people.” He also believes that the church has not only pushed gays and lesbians out of the church, but also lost people who saw this rejection as cruel, elitist, and un-Christian. The Christian church, he claims, has, unfortunately, been a safe haven for homophobic people. They know that they will hear what they want and will not have to come into contact with GLBT people.^{iv} Therefore, liberal Baptist churches in the largely fundamentalist South have been caught in the middle, losing members and money. In the minister’s view, the GLBT population sees churches, perhaps especially Baptist ones, as unwelcoming. Homophobic congregants leave upon discovering the church’s liberal sentiments. Thus, the church is left with a plethora of straight, young,

liberal families. The church loses diversity and money, because, unfortunately for this Baptist church, young families are not the most generous of those who tithe.^v This divide has furthered separated Christians and GLBT people into exclusive groups, making them seeming enemies.

As times change and the Church progresses, churches in the South are having an identity crisis. Those who acknowledge the validity of the homosexual orientation are forced to rectify a worldview and church tradition which does not accept gays and lesbians and has, in fact, only recently had to acknowledge their presence. Thus, the church seeks to harmoniously blend its long-standing identities on an individual and collective level to create a new, accepting identity for the church. Church history proves problematic. Church tradition and the gay identity seem utterly incompatible. Thus, both homosexual and heterosexual members—and the church as a whole— must rectify the differences between their religious and sexual-normative identities. They do so by entering discussion about the importance of each religious source of authority.

II. Identities

Scripture, tradition, experience, and social norms are all influences upon the church and its members which lead them towards their shift in identity. Yet, each church and individual is a composite of many identities which can influence and differentiate their journey towards acceptance. Identities are the unique aspects of a person or a church's self which shape the way they view the world and everything in it. One can choose to change her identity willfully and internally through deep consideration; however, most parts of a person's identity and their subsequent changes come from

external forces. The locations in which that person lives affect her identity. For a church, the location in which it is located determines its beliefs and demographics to a large extent. Personal experiences can also establish or change how one views certain groups of people. Experiences are vitally important, because they have the power to change stereotypes, which are ever the enemy of true group identities.

Regional. As I have already discussed, some regions of the country are more accepting of the GLBT population than others. Memphis, though more progressive than the area which surrounds it, is generally less accepting of gays and lesbians. The pastor of Holy Trinity, Ken Leischner, has significant personal experience regarding the varying levels of acceptance around the country. UCC churches make all of their own decisions regarding doctrine, despite official views which the denomination may hold. The UCC is officially open and affirming and offers year-long seminars to churches who wish to consider becoming open and affirming, but many of its churches are not. Reverend Leischner has been an interim minister for fifteen years and has traveled from region to region frequently. According to Rev. Leischner's observations:

Michigan [is] fairly open, but the further you get up into the peninsula, the more conservative they get...Pittsburg [is] pretty conservative. In the Rocky Mountain area, Denver and Fort Collins are very open, but the western slope is very conservative. Utah is very liberal, but that perception is based on its comparison to the [Church of Latter Day Saints.] Wyoming is also very conservative. Memphis is on the very conservative side, due to the predominance of a few denominations which are conservative. We started a church in Nashville also called Holy Trinity which has about three-hundred members and a fantastic music program, but we can't do that because we aren't in Nashville.

Rev. Walker of First Congo similarly believes that there is a tradition of silence regarding homosexuality in the South and that Memphis is "typically Southern" in that way. Historical memory and pockets of fundamentalism could be explanations for why acceptance varies from region to region. In history, there are certain regions which

continually are the last to accept more progressive views. Same-sex marriages are currently granted by five of the fifty states, the nation's capital city, and one Indian tribe: Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Washington, D.C., and the Coquille Indian Tribe in Oregon allow same-sex marriage. The common denominator here is a location above the Mason-Dixon Line. It is common in history that the South is the region which grants civil liberties last. It was the South, for example, which was the last to abolish slavery and the last to racially integrate.

Another contributing factor to Memphis's less progressive nature is the prevalence of a Christian movement known as Fundamentalism. Fundamentalists tend to view their type of Christianity as the classic Christian ideology. However, Fundamentalism is relatively new, only coming about in the early twentieth century. Fundamentalism understands scripture to be infallible and directly inspired by God. Other strict tenets include beliefs in *Sola Scriptura*^{vi}, the virgin birth of Christ, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the imminent personal return of Jesus Christ. In the Fundamentalist movement, the literal interpretation of the Bible leads these Christians to think that the Bible condemns homosexuality and, thus, that it cannot be accepted in their churches. Fundamentalism is most widespread in the American South and Midwest. So, the combination of a historical precedent which is slow to grant civil liberties and accept marginalized groups plus the prevalence of a religious tradition which condemns homosexuality based on a literalist interpretation of scripture, places Memphis in a poor position for moving forward. Memphis, as a large city, has more ideological diversity than smaller Southern cities, but is nevertheless a part of the Southern tradition.

The Historically Oppressed. The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Civil Rights movement is often compared with the African-American civil rights movement. The parallels are more explicit in the political movement than in the movement for acceptance in the church, although many white, Christian churches were loyal to the practice of slavery and used scripture to support their ideals. It has been noted that African-Americans are, on average, more likely to be against homosexual practice, but more willing to support gay anti-discrimination laws.^{vii} This shows—I believe—that the history of white-on-black discrimination contributes to these statistics. Because of the African-American historical experience, the importance of granting civil rights to minorities is realized. Sonia Walker, associate pastor of First Congo affirmed these findings, saying:

As an African-American and female and, now, older, I am not supposed to have a voice in the public conversation. Why would I want to jump on the back of somebody else [who is oppressed]? That's a violation of another person's humanity. There's no reason for me to believe if God made the people as he did—and I do believe that probably the majority are born as they live—that he made a mistake. I had never been in an open community [before First Congo]. It was not the way that the historically black church had approached the issue. Many clever sayings have been invented [in opposition to gay inclusion] like 'God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.' That's not limited to the black church, but that's where I have heard it. My sons know some [Christian] African-American men who are gay and they say, 'That has got to be the worst. It is hard enough to be African-American and male in Memphis, Tennessee, but to have... persecution slammed across your face in the church house has got to be almost unbearable.'^{viii}

African-Americans realize the struggle for equality which GLBT people face, while the historically black church still overwhelmingly rejects homosexuality as a viable orientation for Christians.

The Baptist congregation which I studied integrated racially more than fifty years ago; yet, it still has very few African-American members. It does, however, have a "sister church" located in close proximity that is predominantly African-American. Both

churches participate in an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign each year, and the ways in which each pastor goes about defending the church's support are, at base, the same. They view those with HIV as "a hurting population" which "Jesus would want" to help and heal. Neither shifts the focus to GLBT rights. Many members of the congregation and guests of the event, however, view it as a chance to campaign for GLBT rights. For some members, this is welcomed. For others, the perception that these events are declarations of support for gays and lesbians is a source of anger. A slight difference then emerges in the acceptance of this event as primarily an outreach to a hurting minority or an advancement of progressive thinking when it comes to gays and lesbians in the church. It is not the case that one ethnic group is more or less accepting. Just as different denominations view the issue differently, there is a difference in opinion among churches with differing ethnic demographics. Likewise, women are more willing to accept gays and lesbians into the church^{ix}, likely, because of their history of second-class citizenship. Pastor Leischner has personally witnessed this tendency, citing a large percentage of single, heterosexual women who are fully affirming members of the congregation.

Sexual. Just as heterosexual members of the church must accept homosexual ones, gay members must accept themselves. Coming out is always a difficult process, but perhaps more so in the Christian church. Homosexual Christians must not only determine if they can reconcile both their religious and sexual identity, but they must also determine if their church will accept both identities. The pastor of Holy Trinity, Ken Leischner, finds that many gays and lesbians in his church have to struggle to overcome their hurt which derives from feeling victimized. Even after being accepted by the church, it can take years for GLBT people to cease feelings of self-rejection. GLBT people have a

vested interest in reconciling these identities because it is personal, whereas heterosexual members may never be presented with the need. Therefore, the shift in identity of heterosexuals is much different than that of gays and lesbians. It is often through socialization with fellow Christians who are gay, that heterosexual Christians feel the need to change their Christian identity to be one of acceptance. As a Christian, heterosexuals must reconcile a doctrine of love with views which traditionally have rejected and even hated GLBT people. It is when heterosexuals empathize with GLBT Christians that they begin to change. By discovering their inner differences—where they do not fit the norm—that they begin to see how differences should be embraced, not ridiculed.

It should be said that just because a GLBT person wants to accept both of these identities does not mean that they will. In many cases, either the religious or homosexual identity is sacrificed. One member of the Metropolitan Church of New York voiced concern over the incompatibility of these identities saying, “Sure, I mean, [being gay and Christian] is the big thing that homosexual people grapple with, isn’t it? There’s homophobia in there, and there’s fear of divine retribution, there’s all those things. What if I’m wrong? What if there’s a Hell and I’m going there because I’m a faggot and I have sex with men?”^x Many times it is the gay and lesbian members who are the most reticent to discuss the issue of acceptance in the church. The day on which First Congregational voted to become open and affirming almost no openly gay members showed up to vote.

Religious. Christianity is, of course, not the only religion in Memphis. However, it is the most prevalent. In “Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-positive church,” Eric M.

Rodriguez and Suzanne C. Ouellette cite four strategies commonly used by homosexual Christians: rejecting their religious identity, rejecting their homosexual identity, compartmentalization, and identity integration.^{xi} Since I am interested primarily in GLBT people attending church, I have not come into contact with GLBT people who are not religious. However, research shows that gay and lesbian Christians are the minority within the GLBT community. As many as 62% of gays and lesbians feel that religion is *not* an important part of their lives.^{xii} This makes the gay and lesbian population extremely unique in America. When asked how important religion is in their life—very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important— 59% of the general American population say that religion plays a *very* important role in their lives.^{xiii} The fact that gays and lesbians are less religious, further adds to the view of GLBT people as “sinners.” Within the religious community, there are additional factors which aid and detract from the willingness to accept gays and lesbians. Church members are more willing to accept “insiders,” those who have grown up in the church before coming out, than the GLBT community-at-large. Specifically, gays and lesbians who have grown up in church find it easier to come to terms with being both gay and Christian. One openly-gay member who I interviewed stated, “Being a Christian had been such a large part of me for so long that I couldn’t just stop being that way; just like I can’t not be gay. A lot of my gay friends don’t have any interest in going to church...but they weren’t [Christian] before either.”^{xiv}

III. Sources of Authority

These separate identities can only meld and become compatible with an identity of gay acceptance through a renewed look at scripture, tradition, experience, and social

norms. These sources of authority are pillars of the church, and their sustained presence is vital to the continuation of the church; however, shifts are made in churches' understandings of these sources as they seek to become or remain open and affirming.

Scripture. In the 1920s, a religious movement gripped the United States which has drastically changed the face of American religion up to the present day. Fundamentalism, which confesses the inerrancy of the Bible, has held most firmly in the South. As such, any indication in scripture that homosexuality is viewed negatively can easily convince many individuals to condemn it. However, it is not such a simple issue. Although the Bible seems to suggest that homosexuality is non-normative, it does not necessarily regard it as immoral. Scripture is relatively ambiguous on this issue, but many believe that the Bible has a clear answer for everything and will use it and even twist its meaning until they can formulate an answer. Many congregations, though, earnestly want to find what scripture is trying to say. They will continually cite it as the primary means to make their decision, so it must be taken seriously. Many issues which were once condemned “by scripture”—subjection of women, slavery—have been reinterpreted. As John Boswell states in his book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, the acceptance and condemnation of minority groups usually has more to do with social mores than with Christian faith.^{xv} On the path to becoming open and affirming, many churches which once held firmly to the infallibility of the Bible begin to understand it culturally and contextually. Instead of focusing on biblical law, they instead emphasize the importance of love in the bible and the acceptance of social outcasts by Jesus. They recognize that the Bible was written in a time and historical context which is much different from our own. In Holy Trinity's mission to aid GLBT members in becoming

self-affirming, the pastor repeatedly asserts that “God loves everybody and there is nothing shameful in being who God created you to be.” First Congregational does not feel obligated to defend their status as open and affirming scripturally and emphasizes the individuality of each member’s journey to acceptance. An older female member of the church, Betsy, put it this way: “Jesus told us to love everybody and I’m okay with that.” Born several decades ago in Arkansas, she rarely came into contact with out gays and lesbians until moving to Memphis and becoming a part of First Congo. Out of the three churches, the Baptist congregation displayed the most interest in biblical authority. In the words of the pastor,

[Many Baptists hold] the belief in the authority of scripture—that this is the one authoritative text through which God speaks to us, at least more than any other; Some Baptists take that more seriously than others. Some have gone to the place of saying [that the Bible is] inerrant or infallible. Others see that it is authoritative, but sees the interpretation through the Holy Spirit as coming into the picture. We see it as authoritative, but also use Jesus Christ as the standard.

Both UCC churches pointed out themes in the text rather than specific passages. As the associate pastor of First Congo, Sonia Walker, stated, “I know people who can quote and quote and quote [scripture]; but, for me, that is God’s business. God didn’t say ‘Judge your siblings. Judge your brothers and sisters in Christ.’ The great commandment doesn’t have those stipulations.”

In fact, only seven biblical passages mention sexual relations between persons of the same sex. The word “homosexuality” is never mentioned. Jesus never approaches any subject regarding the relationships between two people of the same-sex. For Pastor Ken Leischner of Holy Trinity, “Jesus’ commandment to ‘Love your neighbor’

supersedes all other readings or writings of the scripture because that is according to [Jesus] the first commandment.”

For Holy Trinity, who began as an O&A congregation, the shift from a more literalist reading of the text was never necessary. However, for many members of the Baptist congregation and First Congo, a new way of viewing scripture is paramount. In his article, “The Bible and Homosexuality,” Mark Allan Powell^{xvi} condenses the relevant passages into four, useful groups:

Genesis 19:1-9 and Judges 19:22-25

Both the passage in Genesis and Judges relate the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Powell believes that the stories have little relevance to church discussion today, because they are concerned with the abhorrence of rape, not consensual relationships. Most others on the “pro-gay” side agree that the passages are irrelevant, but for the reason that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality. John Boswell even points out that Jesus believed this, citing Matthew 10:14-15^{xvii}: ‘Whoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment, than for that city.’ I must admit that the connection is not exactly explicit. Insofar as Sodom and Gomorrah are classic examples of the recipients of God’s wrath, the passage does not necessarily mean that they were destroyed for not receiving guests. Yet, Victor Paul Furnish points out an even more compelling bit of scripture in his essay, “The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context, that Ezekiel 16 describes Sodom’s sin as greed and indifference to those in need—namely, the guests. Ezekiel

16:49 explicitly states, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.” Nowhere in this discussion of Sodom and Gomorrah is sexual intercourse among people of the same sex mentioned.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

These passages specifically prohibit sexual intercourse between males. However, it is part of the Jewish purity laws—many of which are no longer followed. “A man lying with a man as with a woman is an abomination.” However, a few lines previous, eating shellfish and planting two kinds of seed in one field are also considered an “abomination.” The word abomination does not refer to something that is inherently morally wrong. It is simply something that was considered ritually impure for God’s “chosen people.” Proponents of acceptance know the “abomination argument” well and dismiss it. The minister at Holy Trinity is “always puzzled that the people who quote Leviticus quote just a few verses and then don’t quote the fact that [it also states] if your daughter disrespects you, you’re supposed to kill her or sell her into slavery.” He also pointed out that I was breaking Levitical code during our interview because I was wearing different kinds of cloth. While his comments were an off-handed, inexact paraphrasing of the verses, his point is clear. If one intends to read the Bible strictly, one cannot pick and choose. It is just as important to understand the context of the written words as the text itself.

The view of homosexuality as abomination accompanies the widely-held view of homosexuality as “unnatural.” It is this pseudo-scientific view which perhaps fuels the

fire for the commitment to this particular Levitical law. This influence is more implicit than explicit. If homosexual desire can be proven “normal,” many would be more willing to accept it. Alfred Kinsey wrote the first substantial work about sexuality in the 1940s. He shocked the world with results that stated that both homosexual and heterosexual tendencies can be found in most humans and animals. However, as of yet, no same-sex couple has produced offspring. Opponents of gay inclusion appeal to this bit of common-sense science as evidence that same-sex couples do not fulfill God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply.” This, of course, begs the question as to whether or not childless couples are deviants. However, there is no clear answer due to the biblical ambiguity regarding romantic relationships. Paul claims that being single is better than marriage; however, the Bible also upholds having children as the ultimate goal of humankind. The Bible repeatedly uses marriage as a comparison to the covenant relationship between God and His people^{xviii}, or between Christ and the Church.^{xix} God famously commands Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply.”^{xx} Yet, on the contrary, the scriptures praise the single life. Paul called celibacy a “gift.”^{xxi} Paul claimed to have enjoyed this advantage in his own ministry. He wrote, “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided...So, then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.”^{xxii}

I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10

These passages refer to *malakoi and arsenokoitai* as sinful. The term *arsenokoitai* is extremely rare and its definition is unknown. *Malakoi* means “soft” and could refer to effeminate boys or boys who were used sexually by older males, but it is unclear. The apologetics of these verses is similar to those of Romans 1:18-32, where it is mostly likely Roman sexual practices which are under fire.

Romans 1:18-32

Here, Paul explicitly calls same-sex intercourse “unnatural” and “shameful.” Again, many scholars—and Pastor Leischner—insist that Paul was reacting to the Roman practices of temple prostitution, same-sex rape, and pagan rituals; that he had no concept of meaningful, long-term relationships. In Ancient Rome, older men would often take young boys as their sexual partners. Paul’s condemnation is believed by many to be of pedophilia, not consensual homosexual relations. There is a tradition of viewing homosexuality and pedophilia as the same, but they certainly are not. The number of Americans who believe the myth that gays and lesbians are child molesters has declined substantially. In a 1970 national survey, more than 70% of respondents agreed with the assertions that “Homosexuals are dangerous as teachers or youth leaders because they try to get sexually involved with children” or that “Homosexuals try to play sexually with children if they cannot get an adult partner.” By 1999, the belief that most gay men are likely to molest or abuse children was endorsed by only 19% of heterosexual men and 10% of heterosexual women. Even fewer – 9% of men and 6% of women – regarded most lesbians as child molesters. Consistent with these findings, Gallup polls have found

that an increasing number of Americans would allow gay people to be elementary school teachers. For example, the proportion was 54% in 2005, compared to 27% in 1977.^{xxiii} Unfortunately, it is difficult to produce statistics concerning the percentage of pedophiles who are heterosexual or homosexual.

There are defenses for all biblical passages concerning homosexuality and it is up to the reader to read it literally or contextually. All three of the churches with which I spoke acknowledge that the writers were influenced by their own social context. However, they do not completely ignore the authority of scripture. The pastor of the Baptist congregation takes the authority of scripture very seriously due to a sizeable number of his members who are products of the Baptist biblical tradition. He explained to me that, when it comes to this issue, he chooses to read the applicable passages “culturally,” just as the pastors of the UCC churches do. This particular Baptist church is obviously fairly progressive. According to its pastor they “never got caught up in the wave of fundamentalism.” However, many of the members of the church come from more conservative, Biblical literalist churches. In every case, biblical literalism folds to the gay identity. One openly gay member of the Baptist congregation once believed that it was not possible to be both Christian and gay. This man and this church are not alone in their situation. I recently learned of a Christian organization called Good News, which constructs a positive gay identity for Evangelical Christians.^{xxiv} It is doing the work which is happening in more progressive churches in a very conservative tradition. However, the identities of these Evangelicals necessarily shifted. By the end of the study, the gay Evangelicals no longer interpreted scripture as condemning homosexuality. Once again, bible literalism did not hold out over individuals’ sexual identities.

Tradition. I understand tradition in two parts. First, there is historical tradition which is that which has been believed and done by the Christian church and its various Protestant denominations. The myth still persists that the Church has been in perfect agreement since its inception and that Christians should look to the past to determine the future. This is somewhat strange considering the number of Protestant denominations in existence today. Still, it is a convincing argument for many. Tradition is most often used to reject the inclusion of the GLBT community in the church; however, according to John Boswell, the church did not disapprove of homosexuality for its first two centuries. The opposition that did appear in the third to sixth centuries was more political and theological. Again, in the eleventh century, the acceptance of gays and lesbians was revived. A good deal of gay literature was produced and the culture thrived. Even once persecution began again in the twelfth century, it was still widely practiced. In fact, John Boswell points out that the GLBT community, although not known as such until relatively recently, has always been a large minority.^{xxv}

In the cases of the congregations in Memphis, the second form of tradition, precedent, has actually aided in the progression towards acceptance. The Baptist congregation that I studied was one of the first in Memphis to racially integrate. This progressive past paves the way for acceptance of all people. This, I should add, is how the Baptist pastor talks about the inclusion of GLBT people. He does not view it as a special, separate issue. For him, the message of the Bible is love and acceptance, and this should be shown to everyone. This is, however, potentially problematic. If he is simply accepting gays and lesbians into his church and not accepting homosexuality in a larger sense, he is of the “love the sinner, hate the sin” school. Yet, he also says that he does not

believe that homosexuality is a sin. He finds it particularly useful rhetorically to lump the gay civil rights movement in with the struggle of women and African-Americans. In his words,

I have not felt the need to preach a sermon just on the issue of sexual orientation. It is one part of a larger issue of God's reconciling work. I try to be as inclusive as possible. For the typical member, it is helpful to speak this way. If you try to get biblical about this particular issue, you raise anxieties and defensiveness. When you say, 'Issues of sexism, well, yes, we have them still in our world, but we've moved a little past that; Issues of race, we've still got them, but we've moved a little beyond that haven't we?' and then throw sexual orientation under that umbrella, people emotively think, 'we can make it through this issue, too.'

Experience. Originally, I did not think that experience was something that *should* be considered. I did not think that it was reliable and thought that it was misperception which was mostly the result of homophobia. Experience can be wrong, especially when paired with an already biased worldview. However, I have since learned that experience is that which makes the most substantial difference in the attitude and identity of the church. By experience, I mean those events that in some way change a person's perception or identity. Most commonly these experiences involve interaction and socialization of heterosexual and homosexual church members. The pastor of the Baptist congregation tells a story of a heterosexual couple with two young daughters. The couple divorced and the woman began dating another woman. Initially, the congregation was very angry with the women and was vocal about their disapproval. However, they loved the little girls and decided to tolerate the lesbian couple for the children's sake. Eventually, they grew to accept the couple for who they were. In the opinion of the pastor, it is these experiences and relationships with gay Christians which change minds.

He also shared with me another story of a man, "David," who had grown up in the church. His family was very active and loved by the congregation. As a teenager, he

realized that he was gay. Everyone received the revelation differently; but many reacted negatively. There was another male member of the church, “Peter,” who was especially homophobic. These two men served on the board of the church together. Initially the relations were tense. However, once Peter saw how dedicated and respectable David is, he began to accept him. Peter is still struggling with reconciling his religious identity with the gay-accepting identity, but is no longer vocal about his disapproval of gays and lesbians.

In some cases, it is simply the lack of negative experiences which can influence congregants. Both UCC pastors stated that their congregants realized that “we are all God’s children.” As the differences became less noticeable and the similarities grew, church members, conquered their homophobia. Stereotypes, which create identities for gays and lesbians that are as far from the accepted social norms as possible, are reversed with true socialization.

Social Norms. Without a doubt, the secular world influences decisions in the church. There is a strong correlation with what is accepted by society and what is accepted by the church. Members do belong to both, after all. It’s also true that both are somewhat dependent on the other. That is, society may be more or less apt to accept a group based on church teaching, especially in the South. However, with every change in attitude towards a minority in the past has come a change in church doctrine. Those who do not follow suit—usually extremely conservative Christian groups—are the fringe, not the majority. In her essay “Queering the Mainstream, Mainstreaming the Queer,” Melissa M. Wilcox predicts:

It seems that the question is not whether these [mainstream] groups will fully accept LGBT people, but when. Beyond the mostly white mainstream, the picture

becomes increasingly complex. Conservative religious organizations are fairly easy to predict...Change is more likely in the historic black denominations...The changes may also be slow, especially in a time of increasing resistance to full racial equality, but there is reason to be optimistic about the future of LGBT people. (124)

One cannot discuss social norms without addressing stereotypes. Most social attitudes derive from misunderstandings about the humanity and personality of GLBT people. When a group becomes the “other,” or the non-normative group, the tendency arises to view each member of that group as an exact replica of every other member. Despite a GLBT person’s identification in other groups, she is often only viewed as a gay person. In speaking with the pastor of the Baptist church, he mentioned that it is not until some members of the church see that a GLBT person is also a “good Christian” that they can accept the sexual identity of the individual. Before effort is put forth to socialize with the gay and lesbian members, many assume the negative characteristics which are equated with the gay identity by society. As Pastor Ken Leischner of Holy Trinity points out, “there is the stereotype of the militant, in-your-face gay... which makes a lot of people uncomfortable. Most of our gay members are just your neighbor—the folks next door.”

IV. Conclusion

The acceptance of GLBT people often is a crisis of faith for many American Christians. With each interview, it became abundantly clear that identities and opinions are kept from shifting only because they seem to be radically opposed to previously held opinions and former identities. Most Christian churches see their identity as so exclusive from gays and lesbians that convincing pastors and church members to even speak with me was nearly impossible. After the initial interview, two of the three pastors ignored any further communication with me. In one interview, I was asked afterwards to omit a

sizeable portion of the data. Clearly, fear of negative repercussions is still very present in the church. Yet, once Christians enter into discussion, they discover that Christianity and homosexuality are just as compatible as Christianity and heterosexuality. Once this realization is made, the progression from closed off or simply tolerant to open and affirming often begins. But, whether churches change their identity to include gays and lesbians or to reject them, they can no longer ignore the issue. There is no issue more important to modern America than that which pertains to the rights of a group of people. As complex and different as individuals are is as different as the processes that each church and its individuals endure. Doctrine, like the times, is always changing. As long as the mission and primary identity of the church is one of love, official sentiments will change to include new groups of people who become the “other.”

Religious commitments were the primary obstacle for the acceptance of GLBT people in this study. The Baptist congregation seemed to be kept from becoming fully open and affirming due to the past doctrinal stances of the Baptist denomination and the people who were informed by these stances. Positive experiences of GLBT people are the primary advancer of accepting identities. As gays and lesbians began to be viewed less and less as outsiders and began to be identified as “good, average Christians,” congregations became more open and affirming. What is fundamentally important is that church identity can and has been changed. For past civil rights issues, which go hand in hand with acceptance in the church, we have clear, historical hindsight. From our modern perspective, it may seem that current views on homosexuality are unchangeable. However, as I have witnessed in my study and discovered through my research of other churches and even Evangelical programs, Christian churches are open to change.

The limitations of my project have not allowed me compare the shifts in identity of other religious traditions, denominations, or those who openly condemn homosexuality. By focusing only on those who are accepting to some degree, it may seem as if the attitudes in Memphis or America are overwhelmingly positive. That is most certainly not the case. Yet, these churches, like many in America, are pushing forward. The Baptist minister predicts, “In fifteen years, the attitude of the Church has changed so much on this issue... In five or ten years we will have a gay deacon.” From my interviews in Memphis, I have come to believe that he is probably correct. Moreover, I would predict that churches which are in stark opposition to gay inclusion will begin to breach the topic, as they come into contact with more and more GLBT Christians and GLBT-accepting churches.

ⁱ “Bellevue says ‘you’re out,’ gay softball coach claims”. *The Commercial Appeal*.

<http://www.commercialappeal.com/polls/2010/jun/16gaypoll/results/>

ⁱⁱ Anonymous Baptist pastor. Interview, June 16, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leischner, Ken G. Interview. July 06, 2010.

^{iv} Anonymous Baptist pastor. Interview, June 16, 2010.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} The doctrine which states that the Bible contains all necessary knowledge for salvation

^{vii} Gregory B. Lewis. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 59-78. Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

^{viii} Walker, Sonia. Interview. July 14, 2010.

^{ix} Eric M. Rodriguez and Suzanne C. Ouellette. “Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church”. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 333-347. Blackwell Publishing on behalf of Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387818>

^x Rodriguez and Ouellette. “Gay and Lesbian Christians.” p. 333.

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} Singer, Bennett L. and David Deschamps. 1994. *Gay and lesbian stats. A pocket guide of facts and figures*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

^{xiii} *Pew Global Attitudes Project*. The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press. 2002.

<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/167.pdf>

^{xiv} Anonymous Baptist congregant. Interview. June 19, 2010.

^{xv} Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980.

^{xvi} Powell, Mark Allan. "The Bible and Homosexuality." *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003. 19-40. Print. James M. Childs, Ed.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 31:31-32; Hosea 2:2

^{xix} Ephesians 5:22-33

^{xx} Genesis 1:28

^{xxi} 1 Corinthians 7:7-8

^{xxii} 1 Corinthians 7:32-34, 38. New Oxford Annotated Bible.

^{xxiii} Klassen, A. D., Williams, C. J., & Levitt, E. E. (1989). *Sex and morality in the U.S.: An empirical enquiry under the auspices of the Kinsey Institute*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

^{xxiv} Thuma, Scott. Negotiating a Religious Identity: The Case of the Gay Evangelical
Sociological Analysis, Vol. 52, No. 4, Religious Movements and Social Movements (Winter, 1991), pp. 333-347. Oxford University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3710850>

^{xxv} Boswell, John. *Ibid.*