The Witness of Queer Christians

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With so much going on around it during this LGBT Week at Lancaster, a lecture can seem a curiously quiet sort of event. Even a sermon has more going for it—better costumes, musical back-up, and—at least sometimes—more imaginative choreography. Still it may be that during this late morning hour we can put to good use the very quietness of the lecture, can learn from its minimalism in a world of excessive media. I offer this lecture as a sort of interlude during which we can reflect, can receive—not only from the events of these days, but from the larger and longer struggles for the recognition of queer Christian lives. And please let me use that word 'queer' as a catch-all term in place of the ever-lengthening string of initials: LGBTQIQ... So I'll set aside the initials for the word 'queer,' by which I'll mean all the erotic Others—all those who can't quite identify as a heterosexual, even if they play one in daily life.

This is a good hour, I said, to receive the witness that is carried to us in those church struggles. We should begin with the witness rather than with now overly familiar arguments about Christianity and homosexuality. The beginning for our thinking about these issues shouldn't be church policies or Christian ethics or even the meaning of certain scriptural verses. The starting point is the witness of queer lives inside Christian churches. We wouldn't be disputing about policies, sexual ethics, or that handful of decontextualized verses unless there were people who were bearing witness both to their queerness and their faith, to their minority sexuality and their continued call as

Christians. If queer people did what some think they should do—if they left the churches as soon as they came out, or (even better) suffocated their desires as soon as they became conscious of them—we would not be having these disputes. Instead honestly queer people come out and then keep coming to church. That is the unexpected witness that churches need to receive.

The witness comes first from the past. Struggles over this witness have by now lasted a long time. I'm not thinking in terms of millennia, though there are fragments of an ancient history in which believers with dissident erotic lives made spaces for themselves in the middle of persecuting Christian societies. Sometimes they made space right in the middle, inside church institutions, which have often given sanctuary to those who couldn't easily perform standard gender roles. But today I'm thinking of a more recent history—and a more local one. The struggle to gain acceptance for people called 'homosexuals' has been building in American churches since the 1950s. Already in that decade, we find queer-affirming groups splintering off from major denominations—or clergy within a few denominations planning special ministries of outreach. Beginning in the 1950s, a series of books in English also urges reconsideration of church teaching. Let me name some of the books—because they too bear witness.

In 1955, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* was published by a staff member of the Church of England's Moral Welfare Council, Derrick Sherwin Bailey.[i] Bailey is one of the first to argue at length that most of the biblical passages supposedly about homosexuality—including the most infamous, the story of Sodom—are in fact not pertinent to contemporary moral discussions.

In 1960, a Congregationalist minister, Robert W. Wood, brought out *Christ and the Homosexual*, which was widely reviewed and eagerly discussed in "homophile" organizations, as they were then called.[ii] Wood's book is not nearly so learned as Bailey's, but some of its pages do offer realistic portrayals of gay lives—both in urban bars and in suburban parsonages. Realistic portrayals of queer lives are not the norm in the Christian writing, which has too often contented itself with ugly caricatures and threatening insults.

In 1963, a group of British Quakers printed a pamphlet entitled, *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*.[iii] The pamphlet suggests astonishingly that homosexual relations should be judged by the same criteria as heterosexual ones—and it gives equal consideration to male and female homosexuality.

The 70s brought applications of liberation theories and theologies to gender and sexuality. Rosemary Ruether's *Religion and Sexism* appeared in 1973; so did an initial public summary of John McNeill's manuscript, *The Church and the Homosexual*—read at the first national meeting of Dignity, an organization for honestly queer Catholics.

The mention of Dignity reminds us that the struggles to bear witness during the last half century have also been struggles to find each other, to build groups—and that some Christian denominations have given indispensable help. There are many examples from the 1950s on. One of the most interesting remains the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, founded jointly in 1964 by Protestant clergy and leaders of San Francisco's "homophile" organizations. It operated for a decade out of Glide Memorial Church, holding conferences and producing educational materials. It also hosted the equivalent of a church dance for queer people on New Year's Day 1965. Permits and permissions had

been negotiated, but the San Francisco police still harassed those attending, not least by photographing anyone entering the premises and then repeatedly demanding access to the hall. When two lawyers with the Council finally asked to see a warrant, they were arrested—along with the straight woman collecting tickets from those courageous enough to attend. This would be just another incident of police harassment except for what happened next: seven straight-identified clergymen called a press conference at Glide Memorial Church to protest the intimidation. As they intended, their group photograph—this line of clerical collars—appears above the fold on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Now those were Allies—and in 1965, four years before Stonewall, that is, before the street fights in New York that are supposed to mark the birth of gay liberation.

In 1968, 8 months before Stonewall, Troy Perry held the first eucharist for what would rapidly become a national network of Metropolitan Community Churches. With Troy Perry, you get not only the Pentecostal confidence in founding churches and proclaiming divine calls to ministry, but the deep trust that God does not abandon us, not even when Christian churches do.

Not all Christian churches did, of course. Some were not content to repeat the old abandonment. Beginning in 1970, you can trace a string of official statements from 'mainline' denominations denouncing sodomy statutes and affirming basic civil rights and liberties for homosexual persons.[iv] And there were the precedent-breaking ordinations and consecrations—of <u>women</u>, some of them not evidently heterosexual, and of openly gay men—such as Bill Johnson, who was ordained by the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Conference, UCC, in a liturgy on the third

anniversary of Stonewall. The church struggles began before gay liberation—and will continue after it.

I could go on with the stories—including less happy ones: Anita Bryant, the ex-gay movement, the campaigns against queer clergy and seminarians. Or I could multiply the names of those who have written courageously on these topics: Carter Heyward, John Boswell, Gloria Anzaldúa, Bob Goss, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Irene Monroe. What a cloud of witnesses! But the stories I have already told and the books I have already mentioned are enough to make the point: These struggles in American churches have been carried on in public for at least half a century. They have accomplished much. Openly queer people can now be ordained in some Christian churches. They can find themselves fairly portrayed in some theological libraries. And they have some tools with which to discover messages of hope in the scriptures and their theological traditions. These gains have come in the face of an opposition that always seemed bigger, more lavishly funded, and much better connected; in the face of a horrifying plague that is hardly over; in the face of our own deepest wounds, including fears that our opponents were right and that Christianity could offer people like us nothing except condemnation.

Receive this courageous witness from the past, but then hear in it a question, a caution: our present is not exactly what was wanted by our predecessors. We have become accustomed to living in sharply divided Christian camps, in parallel churches that don't share much—even when they are nominally contained within a single denomination. If the earlier queer witnesses and their allies wished for a reformed, a renewed Christianity, we now tolerate a more divided one. We allow ourselves to be content when we are admitted a little way into the existing structures of church power,

when honestly queer people are ordained to ministry or elected to church office. But the earlier vision foresaw new structures for church, especially in regard to governance. Many of us are now fighting for legal and churchly recognition of same-sex marriages. But the earlier vision dreamed a set of new relationships that would replace what marriage had become with something more prophetic, more hopeful, less damaging. We can congratulate ourselves on all that has been accomplished, but then we must remind ourselves that the witness may lead in other directions for the future. Indeed, it may lead us back to the beginning, to start over again with a more radical sense of purpose.

The struggle to gain a foothold in the churches was conceived as only a first step, only a prelude. Queer people sought to stay in the churches not mainly because they had objections to unjust criminalization; not mainly because they wanted to insist on general principles of fairness; not mainly because they saw themselves as members of a secular minority claiming its rights. Queer people held to their places in Christian churches because they professed that God had called them too, because they believed that the divine was still alive in them—not <u>despite</u> their queerness, but in and through their queerness. They made claims of justice for the sake of a freedom to bear Christian witness. The struggles to be recognized by the churches weren't supposed to end with our squeezing into the back pew as awkward and abashed new arrivals. Our predecessors wanted to be heard in church because they felt themselves messengers of an excluded word—a word from God to the churches. That is the core conviction of their witness.

Queer believers and their allies need to receive, to revive that original witness so that we can remember that we too have been given a witness to bear in the present. We too carry

a word. I see signs in different places that we may have forgotten this work—or despaired of it. For example, those of us who write queer theology have increasingly admitted the worry that we are writing in circles. Elizabeth Stuart has described some of the causes of this unhelpful repetition.[v] The causes are many. One problem is that theological conversation in seminaries or graduate programs spins much more quickly than churchly conversations at large. Sometimes it spins so fast that it shoots right off into the clouds. It is all too easy for graduate students and faculty to become impatient when looking at congregational or denominational disputes. But this frustrating disconnection between the pace of academic theology and the pace of congregational discourse is not the only reason that queer theologians feel themselves to be going in circles. As Elizabeth Stuart shows, we have gone round and round within certain assumptions about queer identity or movement politics or rhetorical strategy. The same arguments get rehashed year in and year out. The same books get written and rewritten.

The sense of theological circling is accompanied, in my experience, by a gloomy stagnation in many of the groups that struggled so energetically during years past. The Catholic group Dignity, for example, began a membership decline in the late 1980s that it has never succeeded in reversing. At last summer's national meeting, many of the heads in the room were white—and not from a loose hand with the peroxide bottle. Membership numbers for MCC are also down from their peaks. Religious sociologists—or historians of American churches—could situate many of these changes within larger trends. Moreover, more importantly, numbers alone can never be equated with spiritual vitality. Some of the most energetic movements in Christian history were much smaller than MCC is now. But I do think that queer Christians and their allies are

called to reflection here—to wondering whether we still believe that we have witness to bear. We are called to a kind of spiritual discernment—to an examination of conscience, if you will let me use the old word. Some of the present theological circling, some of the institutional stagnation, is the result of our fears and our vices. We have not been bold enough in imagining what might be ours to witness—what excluded word it might be ours to carry.

We have not been bold enough because of our vices—understandable vices, but vices nonetheless. Let me name just one—or, rather, let me confess one, because I suffer it, I succumb to it as much as anyone. The vice is the craving for acceptance. Who can fail to understand this craving in queer people? On the scale of generations, just yesterday being honestly queer meant bitter exile: fleeing or being thrown out from your birth-family, giving up aspirations for professional prestige or even steady employment, living in fear of any number of government agencies. So of course queer people crave acceptance—want to succeed in the world's eyes, want to be respectable, want to have the most normal-looking lives. Our churches must have all the trappings and all the titles of the big world's churches. Craving for acceptance, however understandable, interferes with bearing witness to an excluded word. Craving acceptance, queer Christians have forgotten some of the word they were sent to bring as witnesses.

What is that word? Why is it a word entrusted to queer people? Not because we are better, purer, or holier than other people. Not because we understand this word so much better than others. It's not so simple as chanting, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it." Bearing witness can never be reduced to a slogan. We bear witness to what is

enigmatic in our experience, not to what is clear. Often we carry the word of what we suffer or desire, rather than what we understand. Still I might say that the word of witness entrusted to queer people—though not only to queer people—is a critique of certain lies that worldly power tells about itself through gender and sexuality. This critical word has been entrusted to queer people because they carry the deep contradictions of the power-structures of gender and sexuality. Unable to obey those power-structures because of their created desire, they suffer punishment—and so see how much violence is required to enforce claims about what are supposedly matters of divine creation or self-evident divine command.

Same-sex desire is not just any interruption of prevailing power structures. It is an interruption down at the base of those structures—because they depend on a number of illusions about sexuality and gender, including the 'natural' subordination of one sex to another in the reproductive family. Same-sex desire exposes those illusions. It shows that much of what worldly power calls nature—or divine creation—can be experienced otherwise. And so same-sex desire shakes all the supposedly divine social hierarchies that rest on simplistic valuations of gender duality. Only by acknowledging the necessary connection of gender and sexuality to other kinds of power can I understand the horror that gender transgressions provoke, the violence with which they are punished. Why does it feel so urgent to attack, to torture, to kill someone like Matthew Shepard or Brandon Teena or Sakia Gunn? Why is bashing gay men to 'toughen them up' or raping lesbians to 'convert them' such <u>understandable</u> violence in our society? Because it is violence that polices, that enforces the most familiar social distribution of power.

It is no wonder, then, that queer Christians have difficulty in bearing witness to this word that has been given to them. No wonder that we want to lay it down—to stop carrying it—to exchange it for a nice, quiet place in the back pew. Only we can't. Queer believers have been given a witness for today.

I'm not predicting that we and our allies can win all the political fights overnight—even with divine assistance. Churches are often adept at resisting divine impulses. Our bearing witness is not about winning political fights. Should queer people be full members of churches? Yes, of course. But that is not the only thing we should be. That is not the extent of our calling. The measure of the witness is not its success in gaining a share of worldly power. On the contrary, the measure of the witness is its capacity to speak Christianity *against* power—including the settled power of churches. We do not bear witness to fixed identities in order to be admitted through them to power. We bear witness to what we are becoming beyond identities, in the imagination of something other than the routines of churchly power.

Perhaps you're thinking that I've spun off into the clouds myself. So let me propose three specific challenges for queer Christians as they try to bear witness without repeating the routines of power. Let me name three particular tasks confront queer Christians in scriptural interpretation, in worship, and in ethics or moral theology.

<u>First challenge: scriptural interpretation</u>. Here I'm <u>not</u> thinking of the so-called "clobber passages," that is, the handful of verses that are ripped out of scriptural context to condemn queer desire or queer acts. On the contrary, the challenge is to model scriptural interpretation that does not deal in "clobber passages," that does not treat the

scriptures as a *Guinness Book of World Records* useful for settling bar-room arguments. In our churchly disputes over homosexuality, we have fallen back into some of the worst habits of reading the Bible within controversy, as if it were an indexed compendium of facts and regulations that needed only to be properly manipulated to win cases. In disputes over homosexuality, you will often hear from one side that the issue is biblical authority. The ongoing disputes do present issues of biblical authority—namely, of the kind of authority that the Bible has and of who has authority over its meaning. I believe that the scriptures have unique authority among Christian texts, but I also believe that they do not lend their authority to readers who would treat them only as ammunition.

The challenge for queer Christians, the witness they are asked to bear, would remind churches that the Bible is a book of enigmas. The New Testament in particular is built around this central enigma: Jesus wrote nothing. There is a deliberate gap between Jesus and any text about him. One important sign of that gap in the biblical text is that we have four different Gospels, not one. There can be no single, authoritative text about Jesus. Those four Gospels further remind us that misunderstanding fills the gap between Jesus and texts. He is regularly misunderstood by those who suppose that they should understand him, namely, his students. He is understood instead by outsiders. Jesus speaks to these outsiders as often by action, by transgressive touch, as by word.

This line of thinking would suggest that queer believers and their allies might need to approach scriptural controversy with new expectations. We have often replied to the use of scripture against us by doing better philology or more detailed history. I've done this myself, e.g., with regard to the story of Sodom. But this kind of reply doesn't get to the heart of the dispute. Historico-philological exegesis doesn't persuade someone

who is holding on to a copy of the Scofield Bible as the only certainty in a sea of troubles. Talking about violations of the nomadic host-guest bond at Sodom doesn't convince someone who can read, right in their own copy of the New RSV, that St. Paul condemns "sodomites" alongside other sexual sinners (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10). Before we can contest those mistranslations or the sovereign authority of Scofield, we have to address the expectations, the needs that different readers bring to the texts. We cannot do that in under the heat of controversy. We do it only when we model an alternate relation to the scriptures—not just to the "clobber verses," but to the whole of the scriptures. We have to bear witness in our daily practice that the scriptures don't have to be a fearsome law-code to shape Christian lives. They can still have authority over us as a text that is built around a central silence, that addresses excluded hearers, that is full of transgressive actions.

The second challenge, worship and sacrament. Here I'm not thinking of the challenge to include honestly queer Christians in worship—either by extending rites and sacraments to them or by permitting them to have leadership roles. I think that those things should happen, of course, but they are not the most important part of the witness. The challenge is not inclusion, but recognition. The challenge is not to let queer believers into church services but to let them bring in a word about the divine services outside. One of the most remarkable things in the last half century is the tenacity with which queer believers cling to Christian worship. When they are denied the eucharist, they seek out ministers to celebrate it elsewhere. Exactly this happened at a Catholic parish in Atlanta in 1946. When queer Christians are denied blessings on their unions, they arrange to be married in secret. When churches refuse to mourn or to bury their

dead, queer believers perform their own memorials. There is more. Queer believers and their friends compose rituals to celebrate the stages where queer life differs from straight life—in the repeatable rite of coming out, for example, or in the annual celebration of Pride. By persisting in worship, by improvising and inventing rituals when they were denied them, queer believers witness to the importance of liturgy—to the ways it gives and sustains lives.

The lives of queer Christians, still often lived in exile from churches, can teach churches to recognize worship in unexpected forms and places, in despised bodies and ridiculed communities. Real liturgy can be performed by unauthorized ministers in prohibited places, borrowing texts, gestures, and sacred vessels as it can. Receiving this witness, churches learn something about all Christian worship. No matter how well rehearsed, all Christian worship is unlikely improvisation in the face of the divine. I have been known to claim that all Christian liturgy is camp—is an expression of that famously queer sensibility that finds beauty where it shouldn't be. For me, camp must be a deep sensibility in the religion of an incarnate God: Christianity is finding divinity where it isn't supposed to be. Camp sensibility—like a theology of incarnation—is animated by an impossible confidence. It trusts that divine realities can withstand humor; can shine through improbable material; can catch us when we risk ourselves beyond the limits of decent expression. Camping is an act of faith, which is to say an act of love. A love that invites the beloved to respond even to fractured forms, to unlikely improvisations, because those are the best we can manage before God.

Which brings me to the third challenge, the last: Christian ethics or moral theology. The real challenge here is not to justify queer sexual practices or queer loves

according to the prevailing books of rules. The excluded word that queer believers bring is the reminder that Christian morality is not about rules, but about vicariously transformed lives. It is about becoming oneself by putting on another. The fundamental category in churchly ethics isn't an act, a law, a sentiment, or even a virtue, but the new figures, the new characters that the preaching of the Gospel and the practice of Christian worship promise to elicit as a gift.

Christians tend to forget that there is no detailed ethical code in the New Testament, which is why Christian codifiers so often and so clumsily excerpt the Hebrew scriptures. What we get in the Gospels is not a moral code, but a series of moral exhortations and stories framed in the telling of a life, of biography. Christian ethics ought to be most concerned with forms of life, because it arises in response to the ways that Jesus' life makes room for our new lives. The same concern is clear in worship. Worship teaches forms for our lives—by recalling Jesus' exhortations and narratives, but also by re-identifying us with him through ritual and then giving us occasion to practice our new selves. Worship is a theater of livable possibilities—and a space for inhabiting them.

Queer Christians bring the word that human erotic capacity has a place in that theater, that desiring human bodies can also be redeemed. Bringing that word, they reverse old churchly charges against them. The medieval theology of the sodomite says, "You are completely consumed by the desire of your damned flesh." Queer believers can now reply, "It's your desires that we carry as well as our own." Sodomites and lascivious witches were some of the scapegoats for Christianity's inability to imagine sexual desire within the kingdom of heaven. Scapegoats for sex, but also its protectors, its guardians.

The challenge for queer Christians and their allies in the present moment is to deliver the erotic back to the churches as a teaching for everyone. During centuries, queer people were told in church, "You are nothing but sinful sex." Now they are challenged not only to show churches that their sexual desire is good, is divinely created, but that they are more than essentialized desire. To show how sexual desire can flourish within the whole of a Christian life. We have been made the extreme case of erotic sin. We can now cooperate in redeeming the erotic within Christian life. The gift of the scapegoat.

Sometimes after a lecture like this, a member of the audience will complain, in bewilderment or anger, "All you homosexuals talk about is sex." I am sometimes tempted to reply, "That's the role you assigned us in church—to make up for so much inability to talk about sex." But what I really mean to say is this: The witness we have been given to bear, in the enigma of our desiring lives, is indeed about sex—but not only about sex. Beginning from desire, it reaches out—through scripture, through worship, through ethics—to the whole of Christian life as embodied desire for God. The struggle was never for our acceptance alone, never for ourselves alone. It bears a witness to be received by all—in the shape of lives, not in the battle of words.

Do we still have a witness to receive and to bear? Yes, we do, in this very hour, for the sake of all.

[i] Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1955).

[ii] Robert W. Wood, *Christ and the Homosexual: Some Observations*, intr. Albert Ellis (New York: Vantage Press, 1960).

[iii] Alastair Heron ed., *Towards a Quaker View of Sex: An Essay by a Group of Friends* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1963).

[iv] Early statements include those by the Lutheran Church in America (1970), the Unitarian Universalist Association (1970), the United Methodist Church (1972), the United Church of Christ (1975), the Protestant Episcopal Church (1976), the Disciples of Christ (1977), the United Presbyterian Church (1978), and the American Lutheran Church (1980). Statements in support of equal legal protection for homosexual persons were also adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations as early as 1977.

[v] Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershott, UK: Ashgate, 2003).