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A Way Forward: An Alternative Way for Understanding What the Bible is and how it is Understood

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A WAY FORWARD:
AN ALTERNATIVE WAY FOR UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE BIBLE IS
AND HOW IT IS UNDERSTOOD

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy and Religion
Western Kentucky University
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Joshua Scott

May 2015

A WAY FORWARD:
AN ALTERNATIVE WAY FOR UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE BIBLE IS
AND HOW IT IS UNDERSTOOD

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I dedicate this thesis to my family, Carla and Cohen Scott, who have given me more love and support than I could ever dare ask. You both are my entire world, and without you, nothing else matters. I also dedicate this thesis to the late Marcus Borg, whose work has opened up to me a new world of possibility. Dr. Borg taught me that faith can be both a matter of the head and heart. I am eternally grateful.

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101 Pages

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Christianity in America is in decline. Millennials are leaving the evangelical churches of their youth in droves, but they aren't leaving the idea of God or spirituality. Statistics show that the theology of the fundamentalist/conservative evangelical church is contributing to this exodus of Millennials, particularly when it comes to issues of environment, sexuality, and violence.

This thesis explores the roots of fundamentalist theology—particularly their understanding of what the Bible is, and how it is to be understood—and how this theology is practically worked out in their approach to the three issues mentioned above. Finally, I offer an alternative framework for understanding what the Bible is, and how it could be applied in a way that takes the text seriously, is faithful to the Christian tradition, and offers a way forward that is more inclusive.

While this thesis does not answer every question that might be raised about all these issues (and more than these), it does offer a helpful, workable framework and approach to the Bible and culture that must be taken into account by anyone wishing to use the text in an exclusionary manner.

I. Introduction: Christianity at a Crossroads

*“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...”
-Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken*

Christianity in America is at a crossroads. At the turn of the 21st century Christianity, particularly the conservative Evangelical Protestant brand, seemed to have ascended to never-before-seen heights in American culture and political life.¹ George W. Bush was elected, twice, and the dominant voice representing Christianity in America came from ultra conservatives like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. America, it seemed, would soon be “taken back for God.” The defining issues in this quest to reclaim Christendom in America were socio-political: prayer in schools, abortion, gay marriage, the teaching of creationism, and how to deal with America’s enemies abroad. Almost a decade and a half later, however, the Christian fundamentalist project seems to have not only slowed its momentum, but it’s actually losing ground, especially among Millennials.²

One significant characteristic of Millennials is their tendency to break with traditional values. For example, only 26 percent of Millennials were married by age 32, a number that stands in stark contrast to Generation X-ers (36 percent), Boomers (48 percent), and members of the Silent Generation (65 percent).³ Millennials are also more likely to be politically independent (50 percent), untrusting of others (only 19 percent say

¹ I will use the term “fundamentalist” (to be defined more completely in the next chapter) synonymously with the idea of conservative Evangelical Christianity. It should be noted that, while a majority of Christian fundamentalists would claim the label “Evangelical,” not all Evangelicals are fundamentalists. In his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren distinguishes between “Big E” Evangelicals, and “small e” evangelicals. While the former are perhaps more identified with a political party, i.e. The Religious Right, the latter are simply people who believe they have “good news,” which the world evangelical means, and hold a certain “attitude toward God and our neighbor and our mission that is *passionate*.” See Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 115-21.

² The term 'Millennials' (also called Generation Y) refers to those people born from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. Others use the age range of 18-33 year olds to define the term.

³ Pew Research, March 07, 2014.

most people can be trusted), and while 58 percent of Millennials are certain that God exists, 29 percent are religiously unaffiliated.⁴ This skepticism and willingness to question tradition is also reflected in the way Millennials view the Bible. While 61 percent of Evangelicals 30 and older see the Bible as the “literal word of God,” Millennials are much less likely to do so. Among Millennials only 28 percent share this view, while 41 percent reject that the Bible (literal or not) is the word of God.⁵

What does this mean for Christianity? In a word, decline. Seven in ten Millennials who were raised attending church leave by age 23.⁶ In addition, the number of Millennials who identify as having no religious preference hit an all-time high in 2012, at 33 percent, a number that, in 2007, was only at 15 percent.⁷ When examining these numbers, and the decline of Christian influence and authority to which they point, the question that seems most critical is, why?

For some, this decline is exactly what was expected. Rodney Stark begins his compendium on the future of religion by reflecting on the expectations of decline that many scholars postulated in the late 20th century.

At least since the Enlightenment, most Western intellectuals have anticipated the death of religion as eagerly as ancient Israel awaited the messiah. Social scientists have particularly excelled in predicting the impending triumph of reason over “superstition.” The most illustrious figures in sociology, anthropology, and psychology have unanimously expressed confidence that their children, or surely

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Religion Among the Millennials.” *Pewforum.org*. February 17, 2010. <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

The idea of literal and metaphorical readings of the Bible will be addressed in the following pages. For now I'll simply define a literal reading of the Bible as believing that God not only dictated the words that were written, but that we must take the text at face value. If the text says creation occurred in six days, it did. If the text says a man was swallowed by a fish and vomited back out three days later, it really happened like that.

⁶ Scott McConnell, “LifeWay Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church.” *LifeWay.com*. August, 7, 2007. <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church/>.

⁷ “Religion and the Unaffiliated.” *Pewforum.org*. October 9, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>.

their grandchildren, would live to see the dawn of a new era in which, to paraphrase Freud, the infantile illusions of religion would be outgrown.”⁸

In this respect, though, the numbers might be a bit misleading. True, more than three in ten Millennials say that they have no religious affiliation. That, however, does not mean that they have no sense of spirituality. Among Millennials, 72 percent identify as “more spiritual than religious.”⁹ As we have already seen, 58 percent are certain that God exists, while another 28 percent believe in God, but are not certain.¹⁰ Additionally, 62 percent of Millennials report “talking to God” as a regular practice.¹¹ All these data indicate that Millennials do not have a problem with God—or the idea of spirituality.¹² Instead, they have a problem with religion, specifically the Christian tradition in which they were raised.

What is it, then, about Christianity that Millennials—who have grown up in the confines of the church in one way or another—seem to be reacting against? It seems that the problem is not the idea of God, or the idea of being grounded in some kind of spiritual tradition. The problem for many young people has to do with the content of the dominant, conservative Evangelical stream of Christianity. Millennials are fleeing from the Christian church. If the Christian tradition seeks to be relevant—or to be an active shaper of the future—it must face challenges on three major fronts.¹³ These issues include how Christianity views and relates to society, the perceived conflict between Christian

⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Future of Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pg.1

⁹ Kathy Lynn Grossman, “Survey: 72% of Millennials ‘more spiritual than religious’.” *USAToday.com*. October 14, 2010. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27_ST_N.htm/.

¹⁰ “Millennials in Adulthood.” *Pewforum.org*. March 7, 2014. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>.

¹¹ Neuman, Scott. “Millennials ‘Talk to God’ but Fewer Rely on Religion, Survey Finds.” *NPR.com*. April 11, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/04/11/301969264/millennials-talk-to-god-but-fewer-rely-on-religion-survey-find/>

¹² For my purposes, spirituality can be assumed to mean “the sense that there is more to life than one can experience with the five senses, and a desire to somehow live in tune with, or come into contact with, this More.

¹³ No doubt there are more challenges that must be faced. I have chosen these three particular issues because they represent the current conversation happening within evangelical and mainstream Christianity in the US.

teaching on creation (and other science related topics) and the scientific community, and the use of violent language/images/ideas that are prevalent in more fundamentalist forms of Christianity.

First, Christianity has a cultural problem. Specifically, the preoccupation some branches of Christianity have with the issues of homosexuality/same-sex marriage and abortion. Let us focus on one of these issues for now: same-sex marriage. A recent survey indicates that the gap between fundamentalist Christianity and the rest of the culture is widening. For the first time, a majority of Americans are in favor of same-sex couples being permitted to marry legally.¹⁴ The tide is changing socially, and this reality has left many conservative Christians struggling to maintain an identity in a rapidly transforming world.

The fundamentalist Christian worldview contains a hostility toward science that is increasingly becoming a barrier toward reaching younger generations. Particularly, many conservative Christians refuse to acknowledge the environmental issues that face, not only us, but also future generations on earth. Many biblical literalists interpret the creation stories in Genesis 1-2 as a license to consume all of earth's resources without restraint. This belief is undergirded with the belief in the immanent return of Christ, which will culminate in the destruction of earth. This line of thinking asks, If this is all going away soon, why bother? As the global community seeks to grapple with global warming, a barrier to US involvement often has been the voice of fundamentalist Christians. According to Pew Research, only 34 percent of white Protestant Evangelicals affirm that global warming is an issue, with 31 percent denying that there is even a

¹⁴ “Views on Same Sex Marriage.” *Pewforum.org*. September 18, 2014.
http://www.pewforum.org/2014/09/22/public-sees-religions-influence-waning-2/pr_14-09-22_religionpolitics-35/.

problem.¹⁵ With such a large, vocal voting block resisting the changes necessary to tackle the environmental issues we face, real change is unlikely.¹⁶

Perhaps the key issue facing the future of Christianity, underlying both the social and scientific components we have discussed, is the issue of violence. Christianity must rethink some of the violent images that lay beneath a good portion of its theological system. The Bible is filled with stories of God's goodness, grace, and compassion. However, the Bible is also filled with stories of divinely mandated genocide, including the indiscriminate killing of women and children, homosexuals, and others deemed unfit religiously. Even more, many understandings of atonement within Christian theological systems involve God demanding a blood sacrifice from an innocent [Jesus] to somehow make his forgiveness not only accessible, but also possible. So, the question Christianity must grapple with—especially in a world where religiously inspired violence is on the rise¹⁷—is: Does violence belong to God or to humans? Put another way, is the Christian God violent, and does this God carry out, or direct adherents to carry out, violent acts in the world?¹⁸ Beyond these violent images, we must ask if the rhetorical violence that is used in the Bible, and in much Christian discourse, is problematic. While many Christians do not carry out acts of violence against others, does the very language of violence that pervades the Christian tradition present problems that we must address? While some studies suggest global violence as a whole is on the decline, according to a recent Pew survey, religiously based violence is at a six-year high.¹⁹ Seventy-four percent

¹⁵ Leo Hickman, “Just what is it with evangelical Christians and global warming,” *The Guardian*, April 17, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2009/apr/17/climate-change-religion/>.

¹⁶ This is not just hysterical hyperbole. Twenty-three percent of the American electorate in 2012 was made up of white Evangelicals, who also tend to support American war efforts, oppose gay rights, and deny the issues facing the planet due to global warming.

¹⁷ “Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High.” *Pewforum.org*. January 14, 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>.

¹⁸ I will avoid using gendered language for God. If such language must be used I will use the traditional “he,” simply because it is how the biblical text refers to God. I do not think that, whatever it is we mean by the word “God,” God is gendered.

¹⁹ Compare the following two studies:

of people live in regions of the world with high levels of religiously based violence.²⁰ Obviously, the line between religiously grounded, violent language and violent acts can become blurred. Faced with the potential for erupting violence, fundamentalist Christians must reappraise the meaning and value of the violent images and language that pervade the tradition.

In sum, what does all this mean? All these issues emanate from a common source, the sacred text. The Bible is the source of authority for all these issues.²¹ Christianity's problem, then, is one of biblical proportions. Before fundamentalist Christians can address the social, scientific, and violence issues facing them, they must first address the Bible. This process will involve two primary components. First, it will involve a rethinking of what the Bible is. Is this a divinely dictated tome, or the product of several generations of people, responding to a religious experience? Second, this process will necessitate an alternative hermeneutical approach to the Bible. A strict, unquestioned, literal reading of the Bible will not create change. Instead, a new understanding, an innovative reading of the Bible will be necessary for the Christian tradition to move into an influential, vibrant future.

This raises an important question, with which I hope to add a helpful, generative voice: How can we help those who read the Bible through a fundamentalist lens read the Bible differently? Put another way, how might the Bible be read, in such a way, that these issues are reimagined? The data suggest that the idea of the “Sacred” really isn't the

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/22/world-less-violent-stats_n_1026723.html

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/14/religious-violence-pew-survey_n_4596169.html?utm_hp_ref=religion

²⁰ “Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High.” *Pewforum.org*. January 14, 2014.

<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>.

²¹ ‘Bible’ comes from the Greek word βιβλία, which means ‘books’ or ‘library.’ Thus, the Bible should not be viewed as one, continuous story, but a collection of works from diverse genres, composed by various authors, in different times and circumstances. There is no one biblical voice we can speak of; instead, we should speak of voices.

problem for everyone.²² The issue for many people is the way the Sacred is understood and talked about, i.e. how the Bible is interpreted. This is not a dramatic leap, because the Bible is, in many branches of Christianity, the unquestioned and final authority on matters of faith and practice. As it is sometimes said of the Bible, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Yet, an uncritical acceptance of the text, especially when it comes to the issues detailed above, contains disastrous implications for the whole of humanity.

The direction of this project is supported by a threefold concern. First, there is a practical concern. Millennials are leaving the Christian tradition in increasing numbers and the future of the tradition depends on the next generation. Second, there is a hermeneutical concern. What has become the traditional reading of the Bible by fundamentalists is divisive, and increasingly problematic. An alternative approach to the Bible is needed to address contemporary issues. Finally, there is a moral concern. The approach to the Bible advocated herein, simply put, is more generous and compassionate. Simply put, it is the right thing to do.

For the Christian tradition, which is an extremely diverse tradition, the process of transformation into a vibrant faith for the twenty-first century and beyond does not have to involve a reinvention of the wheel. In many ways, it will be a new appreciation of many of the ideas and teachings that have been lost to history—or even at times written off as heretical, with little consideration. Other changes may come from a willingness to embrace new ideas and realities that the fore-bearers of the tradition could not have fathomed in their own time. Whatever the process, the Christian tradition, if it seeks to be relevant in this changing world, will have to look different in the future. Before we can address how fundamentalists should understand and read the Bible differently, however, we must first take a close look at the fundamentalist approach to the Bible as it is.

²² By Sacred, here, I mean the idea or belief that reality is more than molecules and atoms, that there is a More, what is often referred to as “God.”

II. Fundamentalists, Secularization, and the Bible

"Hysterical fundamentalism is not the way into the future; it is the last gasp of the past."
John Shelby Spong, A New Christianity for a New World

In his work *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, author George Marsden quotes the Rev. Jerry Falwell's definition of fundamentalism: A fundamentalist is "an evangelical who is angry about something."¹ While this definition is obviously insufficient, in that it fails to really address the deepness of the issue, it does highlight an important aspect of fundamentalism. Roger Olsen, a Baptist minister and theologian, points out how difficult it is to pin down exactly what fundamentalism is. On his Patheos blog, Olsen writes, "There is no absolute definition of fundamentalism that fits every considered case like a litmus test."² However, it does seem possible to tease out certain characteristics and qualities that will be helpful for gaining insight into who fundamentalists are.

A. Defining Fundamentalism

Martin Marty and Scott Appleby give a more robust definition of fundamentalism that, for our purposes, will serve as the entry point to an examination of how fundamentalists view and use the Bible. According to Marty and Appleby, fundamentalists are members of traditional religious communities who have chosen to "separate from fellow believers and to redefine the sacred community in terms of its

¹ George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1.

² Roger Olsen, "Defining Fundamentalism," *Patheos*, October 10, 2010, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2010/10/defining-fundamentalism/>.

disciplined opposition to nonbelievers and ‘lukewarm’ believers alike.”³ Further, they explain, “Fundamentalists” within these historic religious traditions, convinced of the conspiratorial nature of secularists and liberal religionists, adopted a set of strategies for fighting back against what is perceived as a concerted effort by secular states or elements within them to push people of religious consciousness and conscience to the margins of society.”⁴ Far from being a term forced onto their ideology, fundamentalists coined their own moniker. According to Appleby, et. al., the term “fundamentalist” “was first used by Protestant ministers and scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century to refer to their commitment to adhere to the fundamental beliefs of Christianity in the face of the threats of modern science and the secular world, and their will to resist the modernizing, adaptive trends in their denominational establishments.”⁵

Broadly, fundamentalism is a type of resistance movement, in which adherents seek to combat threats, real or perceived, to their traditional way of life. The very nature of fundamentalism, then, requires interaction of some kind with the culture that poses the threat to the tradition. This interaction, according to Appleby et.al., consists of four methods, though over time most groups will move fluidly between these categories.⁶ These methods are categorized as follows, in no particular order. Many fundamentalist groups choose the response of the *world conqueror*. According to Appleby, et. al., “The primary strategy of the world conqueror is to assume control of the structures of society

³ Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, (University of Chicago Press: 1994), 1. This definition is broad, and can be applied across religious traditions. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the fundamentalist traditions in Evangelical Protestant Christianity.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Ibid., 403.

⁶ Ibid., 425 – ff.

which have given life to the enemy.”⁷ To see an example of this response, we turn once again to the work of the late Rev. Jerry Falwell. The founding of the Moral Majority, a political activist group comprised of conservative and fundamentalist Christians, by Falwell and others in the late 1970s, created a ground swell of momentum for this idea that Christians could take American culture back for God. Obviously, within this idea is the perspective that America was once a “Christian nation” or society, and those outside of the Christian faith (particularly the conservative tradition, since many liberal Christians are seen to be part of the problem) have wrestled influence and control away from the rightful owners.

In the September 1984 edition of the *Moral Majority Report*, Falwell stated, “If we are going to save America and evangelize the world, we cannot accommodate secular philosophies that are diametrically opposed to Christian truth ... We need to pull out all the stops to recruit and train 25 million Americans to become informed pro-moral activists whose voices can be heard in the halls of Congress...I am convinced that America can be turned around if we will all get serious about the Master’s business. It may be late, but it is never too late to do what is right. We need an old-fashioned, God-honoring, Christ-exalting revival to turn American back to God. America can be saved!”⁸

For *world conquering* fundamentalists like Falwell, the solution is to jockey for position and power, and to regain the influence and power that they perceive to have been wrongly taken from them. Further, Falwell’s comments in the days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 placed the blame squarely on the parties he blamed for the

⁷ Ibid., 428.

⁸ Jerry Falwell, *The Moral Majority Report*, (September 1984), quoted in http://www.ethicalatheist.com/docs/separation_church_state.html/.

de-Christianizing of America. Falwell is quoted in the *Washington Post* as having said the following:

“And, I know that I’ll hear from them for this. But, throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”⁹

Thus, *world conquering* fundamentalists, like Falwell, place the blame for the current challenges facing American society squarely on those they determine to be pushing a secular agenda, and they see the solution to be clear: take back the society by gaining political power.¹⁰

When conquering the society may be too ambitious, many fundamentalists choose the method of being a *world transformer*. Again, Appleby, et. al., describe the method of the *world transformer* as “a...means of abolishing the enemy” through the reinterpretation and influencing of “the structures, institutions, laws, and practices of a society, so that opposing fundamentalism may become more difficult, and so that conditions become more favorable for the conversion or marginalization of the enemy.”¹¹

While *world conquering* is a blitzkrieg against the perceived threat, *world transformation* is more like a war of attrition. For example, instead of seeking a total takeover of the political powers, as a *world conqueror* like Falwell did, a *world transformer* would seek to pass a piece of legislation, perhaps even partnering with

⁹ John F. Harris, “God Gave Us ‘What We Deserve,’ Falwell Says,” *The Washington Post*, (September 14, 2001), A30.

¹⁰ Later, we will see how this kind of rhetoric can take on more violent tendencies.

¹¹ Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, (University of Chicago Press: 1994), 428.

someone with whom they were not completely in agreement. Appleby notes that, implementing this methodology, “the movement may selectively relax its boundaries to include some shades of gray...”¹² This allows the fundamentalist to reach the ultimate goal, which is the conversion or marginalization of the perceived enemy. From this perspective we might say that one changes a culture the same way one eats an elephant, one bite at a time.

The next category of interaction is known as the *world creator*. While conceding that all fundamentalist movements engage in some amount of world creation, Appleby defines the work of the *world creator* as “to create alternative and encompassing societal structures and institutions. Missionary work is important, not to transform the structures of the world outside, but to increase the numbers of the enclave.”¹³ So, while all fundamentalists are not *world conquerors* or *world transformers*, all fundamentalists do engage in some sort of *world creation*. As an example, we once again draw upon the Rev. Jerry Falwell. Falwell exemplifies this method of *world creation*. Not only did Falwell found the Liberty Christian Academy and Liberty University, but he dreamed of a future without publicly funded and operated educational institutions. “I hope I live to see the day,” Falwell said, “when, as in the early days of our country, we won’t have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be!”¹⁴ In this regard, by creating private educational institutions and working for the end of public education, Falwell demonstrates both the

¹² Ibid., 428.

¹³ Ibid., 429.

¹⁴ Albert J. Menendez and Edd Doerr, *The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 52-3.

world transformation and the *world creating* categories of fundamentalist interaction with the world simultaneously.

The final category of fundamentalist interaction with culture is described as *world renouncing*. Appleby describes a *world renouncer* as one who “seeks purity and self-preservation more than hegemony over fallen outsiders.”¹⁵ However, he concedes that this approach is “a relatively rare mode of fundamentalism...”¹⁶ Perhaps one of the best historically grounded examples of such a group would be the Jewish purists from the Second Temple Period known as Essenes.¹⁷ John Dominic Crossan, a leading New Testament scholar, describes the Essenes as “a priest-led group who withdrew from Jerusalem’s Temple to a settlement on the Dead Sea’s northwest coast. They judged that the Temple was polluted after the usurpation of the high priesthood by Jewish rulers of the Hasmonean dynasty, Jonathan and Simon, between 152 and 134 B.C.E.”¹⁸ Thus, the Essenes withdrew from society and formed an ultra puritan community out in the desert, away from the sanctioned Temple. In this way they would be considered *world renouncers*. Karen Armstrong notes that this tendency to withdraw is often short lived, and the impetus for a more extreme response. She writes that when “Faced with the universalism of modern society, some people instinctively retreated into tribalism. This type of conspiracy fear, which makes people feel they are fighting for their lives, can

¹⁵ Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, (University of Chicago Press: 1994), 429.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹⁷ The Second Temple Period refers to the time between 530 BCE and 70 CE when the Second Jewish Temple stood in Jerusalem. The First Temple was razed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The word Essene (Greek) is, according to some scholars, borrowed from a Hebrew wording meaning “Outside,” i.e. they were a group who had withdrawn from the community and formed an alternative community at Qumran. For more on this enigmatic group, see the works of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.

¹⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 162.

easily become aggressive.”¹⁹ Thus, a *world renouncer* can quickly shift into the ideology of a *world conqueror*.

In sum, let us return to the definition of fundamentalism with which we began. Fundamentalism is a type of resistance movement, in which adherents seek to combat threats, real or perceived, to their traditional way of life. This resistance comes in various ways, and at times in a combination of methods. The question to which we now must turn our attention is: What are these threats to the fundamentalist way of life?

B. The Secularization Problem

The main threat that fundamentalists are reacting to, as Appleby, Almond, and Sivan point out, is a process known as secularization. They argue that “The defining and distinctive structural cause of fundamentalist movements is secularization...Confronted with the threat of secularization, the world of religion responds adaptively or militantly—by assimilating to the values of the secular world, or by mobilizing, usually in part, in opposition to this invasion and to the traitors who compromise with the enemy.”²⁰

Secularization essentially refers to “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”²¹ In a Western context that has been saturated in Christian ideologies and symbols, this would concretely refer to the waning influence of religion—specifically Christianity—over the culture at large. This does not imply that there is not a resilient, resistant Christian subculture—fundamentalists are part of this subculture. What it does imply is that the

¹⁹ Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 172.

²⁰ Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, (University of Chicago Press: 1994), 441.

²¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Anchor, 1990), 107.

cultural “territory” that was once held, even dominated, by Christianity is now shrinking. Peter Berger explains that “secularization manifests itself in the evacuation by the Christian churches of areas previously under their control or influence—as in the separation of church and state, or in the expropriation of church lands, or in the emancipation of education from ecclesiastical authority...It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world.”²²

It is this sense that realms previously under religious influence are now slipping away that drives the fundamentalist agenda. Particularly infuriating to fundamentalists is the idea that America was once a Christian nation, and has since been taken over by a secularist, anti-God agenda. It is actually this resistance to the changing tide of society that makes a fundamentalist a fundamentalist. Appleby writes, “to qualify as genuine fundamentalism in our understanding, a movement must be concerned first with the erosion of religion and its proper role in society. It must, therefore, be protecting some religious content, some set of traditional cosmological beliefs and associated norms of conduct.”²³

Berger aptly encapsulates the secularization process in the phrase, “ the disenchantment of the world.”²⁴ Phenomena that previously would have been given a

²² Ibid., 107.

²³ Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, (University of Chicago Press: 1994), 405.

²⁴ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Anchor, 1990), 111.

Berger argues that the very formation of the Christian church serves the process of secularization. He writes, “The consecration of religious activities and symbols in one institutional sphere, however, ipso facto defines the rest of society as “the world,” as a profane realm at least relatively removed from the jurisdiction of the sacred. The secularizing potential of this conception could be “contained” as long as Christendom, with its sensitive balance of the sacred and the profane, existed as a social reality. With the

supernatural explanation—an eclipse, for example—now can be explained as a natural occurrence. The understanding available to us thanks to advances made in science, beginning with the Copernican Revolution of the mid-fifteen-hundreds, has chipped away at the ability of religion [read Christianity, here in the America, particularly] to serve as an authoritative source for describing how the world came to be and operates. This ebb of influence occurs when the plausibility structures that support religion lose their legitimacy. Berger says that since “every religious world is ‘based’ on a plausibility structure that is itself a product of human activity, every religious world is inherently precarious in its reality...The world of sacred order, by virtue of being an ongoing human production, is ongoingly confronted with the disordering forces of human existence in time.”²⁵ What this means is that, as a human construct, religion and the structures we create to legitimate and prop it up are always facing the peril of being de-legitimated. We create these systems and seek to legitimate them, yet we also, through the reality of our humanness, undermine these same systems. When a crack appears in the plausibility structure that legitimates a religion, according to the line of thinking, the entire system could come crashing down. What, we must ask, causes the erosion of plausibility structures? We will focus, for our purposes, on three specific issues: 1) the progress of science and increasing technological advancement, 2) the individualization/privatization of religion, and 3) the growing pluralistic nature of society.²⁶

disintegration of this reality, however, “the world” could all the more rapidly be secularized in that it had already been defined as a realm outside the jurisdiction of the sacred properly speaking [123].

²⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Anchor, 1990), 50-1.

²⁶ While Berger provides an effective lens through which to understand the secularization process, his ideas about the demise of religion have been discounted. More recently, Berger has written about the “desecularization” of the world, meaning that while “modernization has had some secularizing effects...it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization.” See Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 3.

The progress of science, and scientific ways of seeing the world, has created a palpable tension with religion.²⁷ According to Max Weber,

“Scientific progress is a fraction, the most important fraction, of the process of intellectualization which we have been undergoing for thousands of years and which nowadays is usually judged in such an extremely negative way. Let us first clarify what this intellectualist rationalization, created by science and by scientifically oriented technology, means practically...it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.”²⁸

Further, the seeds of “the disenchantment” of the world are not alien to, but actually embedded in, religion itself. In his *The Future of Religion*, Stark quotes anthropologist of religion Anthony F.C. Wallace:²⁹

...the evolutionary future of religion is extinction. Belief in supernatural beings and in supernatural forces that affect nature without obeying nature's laws will erode and become only an interesting historical memory. To be sure, this event is not likely to occur in the next generation; the process will very likely take several hundred years, and there will always remain individuals, or even occasional small cult groups, who respond to hallucination, trance, and obsession with a supernaturalist interpretation. But as a cultural trait, belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge...the process is inevitable.”³⁰

²⁷ See Rodney Stark, *The Future of Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 433.

Stark discusses the response of religion to the rise of science. He writes, “Thus, the rise of science meant a retreat by religions that, originating in prescientific ages, contained significant elements of magic. In this way, these religions became increasingly secularized—they made progressively fewer claims about the powers of the supernatural and the extent to which the supernatural was active in the empirical world.”

²⁸ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 129-156.

²⁹ Wallace is writing in 1966, so his words are a bit dated, but they express the view common among other theorists of the era.

³⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Future of Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 430.

This quote makes a qualitative subjective judgment about religion that should be problematic for anyone seeking to do anthropological study. Value judgment aside, Wallace is expressing the common social scientific view of the period in regard to the future [or lack thereof] of religion and the role science would play in that future.

One cannot (successfully) argue with the fact that the progress made through modern scientific ways of knowing, and technological advances has drastically altered our assumptions about the universe and our place in it. We have moved from a three-tiered-flat-earth view of the cosmos to an understanding that the earth is a sphere, and part of a solar system, in an ever expanding universe that is billions, not thousands, of years old. We have transitioned from a geocentric view of the solar system, where the earth stands at the center, to a heliocentric view (thanks to the aforementioned Copernicus), in which we revolve around the sun. This reality places a major strain on the fundamentalist worldview, and we will have the opportunity to discuss how they respond to the scientific issues that face them shortly.

Another interesting reality created by the secularizing process is the privatization of religion. At one point, religion served as the fabric of entire societies. The Church and state were, in many ways, synonymous. Berger, in reference to this shift in Western societies, says, “One of the most important consequences of [secularization] is that the state no longer serves as an enforcement agency on behalf of the previously dominant religious institution.”³¹ The “separation of church and state,” by which the state no longer serves to support and legitimate religious claims, leads to an increasingly privatized religion. Indeed, Wilson argues, “Religion is transformed through privatization, not gone.”³² What this “privatization” or “individualization” of religion ultimately accomplished is that it transforms religion from a civic/conventional reality of which everyone was assumed to be a participant, into a matter of individual choice. Berger writes, “the privatized religion is a matter of the ‘choice’ or ‘preference’ of the individual

³¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Anchor, 1990), 130.

³² Isabel Mukonyora, Lecture on theory of religions, Introduction to Religious Studies, August 2014.

or the nuclear family, *ipso facto* lacking in common, binding quality. Such private religiosity, however ‘real’ it may be to the individuals who adopt it, cannot any longer fulfill the classical task of religion, that of constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody.”³³ This lack of ability to create community wide bonds makes religion much like everything else in a consumer driven society, a product or preference. According to Berger, “a ‘religious preference’ can be abandoned as readily as it was first adopted.”³⁴ Thus, religion becomes more “personal” and less “public.” The whole of society no longer serves to support and legitimate religion, and individuals realize that there are other options available, options that, to them, may seem to have stronger plausibility structures. In this way, the privatization and individualization of religion has served to erode the plausibility structures that once supported religion in society.

We can hear, within this plausibility structure, echoes of Emile Durkheim, whose definition of religion centered on the idea of “collective effervescence.” If it was communal interaction that created the concept of the sacred, as Durkheim argued, then what becomes of the divine when the communal aspect of society collapses? Thus, one can see why thinkers like Berger postulate the demise of religion in a more privatized, individualized society. Berger writes:

Such private religiosity, however “real” it may be to the individuals who adopt it, cannot any longer fulfill the classical task of religion, that of constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody. Instead, this religiosity is limited to specific enclaves of social life that may be effectively segregated from the secularized sectors of modern society ... In other words, insofar as religion is common it lacks ‘reality,’ and insofar as it is “real” it lacks commonality. This situation represents a severe rupture of the traditional task of religion, which is precisely the establishment of an integrated

³³ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Anchor, 1990), 133-4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

set of definitions of reality that could serve as a common universe of meaning for the members of a society.³⁵

In response to this shift in how religion is experienced, as we have seen, fundamentalists either seek to take back control (*world conquering*), or transform gradually over time (*world transformation*). This task is compounded by the reality of pluralism, to which we now turn.

The world is getting smaller and smaller thanks to technology. We can follow uprisings in Iran, or what our college roommate just had for lunch on the West Coast, all in real time. Having the world at our fingertips, so to speak, creates a new situation for religion, broadly, and a challenge for exclusivist fundamentalists, particularly. The process of secularization, according to Berger, *ipso facto* leads to a pluralistic situation in a society.³⁶ Pluralism can be described as “the peaceful co-existence of different racial, ethnic, or religious groups in the same society.”³⁷ The world has grown smaller and smaller with the increasing, rapid development of new technologies, travel, and international commerce—otherwise known as globalization.³⁸ Writing from the perspective of Christian theology, Craig Ott and Harold Netland give a helpful, succinct appraisal of the effects of globalization on religion. They write, “The question of religious pluralism is one of the critical issues in the twenty-first century. In the past,

³⁵ Ibid., 134.

³⁶ Ibid., 135.

³⁷ Peter Berger, “Religious Pluralism for a Pluralist Age,” *Project Syndicate*, April 2005, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/religious-pluralism-for-a-pluralist-age/>.

³⁸ For more on 'globalization' and the implications for religion, specifically Christianity, see Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

Here's an interesting bit: “At the heart of the notion of globalization is awareness of an increasingly complex interrelatedness on multiple levels across traditional boundaries.” And, in case we want to locate the affects of globalization in only one or two realms, Ott and Netland add, “Globalization is thus a multidimensional phenomenon involving politics, economics, science, technology, culture, and religion.” Thus, globalization affects every area of life, leaving nothing untouched; that includes, of course, our present topic of religion as well [18].

missionaries faced this question as they encountered other religions abroad. Now churches in the West face the same question.”³⁹ The world is smaller than ever before, and getting smaller through interactive social media. Religions in the West used to send missionaries to “the ends of the earth,”⁴⁰ now people from all over the world are literally living just down the street from one another.

How has pluralism affected the plausibility structures of religion? If secularization “brings about the demonopolization of religious traditions,”⁴¹ then what is left in its place? When a single faith ceases to dominate a society, then religious preference and a consumer approach toward religion are made possible. People who were formerly participants of a particular faith [by birth, or simply culture] now find themselves in a “market situation.” Berger explains this phenomenon well. He writes:

The key characteristic of all pluralistic situations, whatever the details of their historical background, is that religious ex-monopolies can no longer take for granted the allegiance of their client populations...As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be *marketed*. It must be “sold” to a clientele that is no longer constrained to “buy.” The pluralistic situation is, about all a *market situation*.⁴²

So, while fundamentalist Christianity previously may have held an unquestioned place of influence and authority in Western culture, the times, as they say, “are a changin’.” For fundamentalists, this shift toward a secular culture is perceived as a threat, not only to their influence and existence, but to the well-being of the culture itself. After all, fundamentalists hold an exclusivist perspective on religion, meaning that the Christian faith (and usually a very particular kind of Christian faith) is the only way to

³⁹ Ibid., 298.

⁴⁰ A reference to Acts 1:8, where the risen Jesus charges his followers to take the message of the Kingdom of God to the entire world.

⁴¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Anchor, 1990), 135.

⁴² Ibid., 138.

connect with God or experience salvation. The convergence of science, privatization of faith, and the pluralistic reality of society have made such claims more difficult for many in American culture to hold to such exclusivist claims. In a 2008 Pew Forum survey, 57 percent of Evangelical respondents affirmed, “many religions can lead to eternal life.”⁴³ How do fundamentalists seek to combat the rising tide of secularism, and with it, pluralism? The answer begins and ends with the Bible. Fundamentalists read the Bible in specific ways, particularly regarding the major issues of our day, and this way of reading is grounded in a particular understanding of what the Bible is.

C. How the Bible functions within Fundamentalism

Fundamentalists gain their identity and sense of mission from a particular way of seeing the Bible. The common conviction among many branches of fundamentalism is the belief that the Bible is, in terms used by fundamentalists, inerrant and infallible. This belief, which we will call “inerrancy” in short hand, has become a kind of litmus test among Evangelicals and Fundamentalists. The affirmation of inerrancy is the password into the orthodox club.

What do fundamentalists and Evangelicals, the two groups for whom this doctrine is central, mean by *inerrancy*? Essentially, the term means “without error.” Author Kenton Sparks describes inerrancy as a view “which believes that there are no *human* errors at all—not even one—in the entirety of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation.”⁴⁴

The definitive statement on inerrancy came in autumn of 1978. A group of three hundred Evangelical leaders gathered in Chicago, Illinois to draft what became known as

⁴³ “Religious Landscape Survey.” *Pewforum.org*. June 23, 2008. <http://religions.pewforum.org/portraits/>.

⁴⁴ Kenton Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 28.

the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.” A “short statement” found before the multiple articles of the document summarizes the position set forth: “Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives.”⁴⁵ The statement further nuances this idea by saying, “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God written and it is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”⁴⁶ Thus, according to this view, the Bible, in its original documents (autographs) comes direct from God—beamed into the minds of human beings—who perfectly and flawlessly put pen to parchment, and gave us God’s exact words.

A further summation is, according to Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, “When the Bible speaks, God speaks.”⁴⁷ Mohler is one of the most ardent spokesmen for the doctrine of inerrancy, insisting that it is not only central, but also essential. He writes:

I believe that the affirmation of the Bible’s inerrancy has never been more essential to evangelicalism as a movement and as a living theological and spiritual tradition. Furthermore, I believe that the inerrancy of Scripture is crucial to the project of perpetuating a distinctively evangelical witness into the future. Without inerrancy, the evangelical movement will inevitably become dissolute and indistinct in its faith and doctrines and increasingly confused about the very nature and authority of its message.⁴⁸

It seems Mohler is not only concerned with preserving a view of the Bible, but also the tradition to which he belongs. Inerrancy isn’t just about the Bible, then, it’s about all things fundamental and evangelical.

⁴⁵ Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 159.

⁴⁶ Albert Mohler, *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

Mohler's argument for inerrancy is taken from three sources: the Bible, Christian tradition, and the way the Bible functions within the Christian Church. Before addressing the issues found within the doctrine, we will first examine Mohler's argument more closely. "The first point to be made," he writes, "is that the Bible consistently claims to be nothing less than the perfect Word of the perfect God who breathed its very words."⁴⁹ Following this claim is a list of various texts from the Christian New Testament and the Hebrew Bible that, for Mohler, serve to support his claim that the Bible believes itself to be a perfect document.

This idea depends, Mohler insists, on accepting not only the idea of Biblical inspiration (that God somehow inspired the biblical writers) but a belief in verbal plenary inspiration. According to Mohler, "God determined the very words of the Bible in the original text."⁵⁰ God not only inspired the writers, he argues, God chose the very words they were to write.

This concept is so foundational to Mohler's entire theology that there is absolutely no room for the idea that the Bible may contain conflicting opinions or inconsistent ideas on issues. Mohler boldly says, in response to the idea that the Bible might be historically, scientifically, geographically, or archaeologically incorrect, "I would simply and straightforwardly assert that any problem with our understanding of [the Bible] lies in our interpretation and not the texts themselves ... this is an unapologetic and a priori argument."⁵¹ For Mohler, then, there is no possibility that the Bible is wrong about any issues. If the archeological record suggests that the Hebrew conquest of Canaan did not

⁴⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁵¹ Ibid., 53.

happen as the Bible indicates, then it is a problem of, either, archaeology or our interpretation of the texts. The same is true for any apparent or glaring seemingly contradictory or incorrect passage in the Bible.

There are many problems with Mohler's claim. First, it is dependent on documents that do not exist. There are no extant copies of the originals, the autographs. New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman addresses this issue. He writes,

There was an obvious problem, however, with the claim that the Bible was verbally inspired—down to its very words ... [W]e don't actually have the original writings of the New Testament. What we have are copies of these writings, made years later—in most cases, many years later. Moreover, none of these copies is completely accurate, since the scribes who produced them inadvertently and/or intentionally changed them in places. All scribes did this. So rather than actually having the inspired words of the autographs (i.e., the originals) of the Bible, what we have are the error-ridden copies of the autographs.⁵²

If this is the case, and the weight of contemporary scholarship believes that it is, claims for inerrancy are much more difficult. After all, if we have no existing autographs, only copies of copies—and those vary and disagree in places—then whether or not those original autographs were inerrant is a moot point; even if they were, we have no access to what they said.

In addition, Mohler assumes that the idea of “The Word of God” means the written Scripture. It is evident in the Hebrew Bible that this “Word of God” meant, not words on a page, but a special message from God to a recipient, usually a prophet. Adam Hamilton writes, “The phrase (Word of God) is used to describe a message conveyed, most often, through human beings, but which is believed to express or reveal God and

⁵² Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 4.

God's will."⁵³ In the Bible itself, this phrase is used forty-one times, and few, if any, mean the written texts we know now as the Bible. So, to claim that the Bible insists that it is the Word of God, perfect and inerrant, is actually a failure to appreciate the nuance of that phrase as the writers of the Bible use it.

Second, Mohler points to the Christian tradition having the consistent view of inerrancy. Christians since the Patristic period (roughly 100 CE – 451 CE), Mohler says, have “argued about the proper interpretation of the Bible, the relative authority of the Bible, and such issues as the translation of Scripture, but not about the question of the Bible containing errors.”⁵⁴ He cites the Reformation period (1500s CE) as an example, stating that the “Reformation itself was born out of a declaration of the supreme authority of the Bible and absolute confidence in its truthfulness.”⁵⁵

Outside of the Reformers, however, Mohler's examples are all taken from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are no concrete examples given of the antiquity of his claim, just examples of people claiming that Christians since the beginning have held such a view. Further, upon inspection, Mohler's claim about the Reformation is also shaky. It is historically known that reformer Martin Luther has serious issues with certain books of the Bible, particularly the Epistle of James, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the books of Jude and Revelation, as did other reformers. Using the book of Revelation as an example, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg notes that “Martin Luther included it in the New Testament only reluctantly and gave it secondary nature (even as he wished it would be thrown into the Elbe River); Ulrich Zwingli denied it scriptural status; and John

⁵³ Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 150.

⁵⁴ Albert Mohler, *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 39-40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29. The Reformation doctrine being referenced here, implicitly, is that of *Sola Scriptura*, or “Scripture Alone,” as the source of authority in the Christian church.

Calvin largely ignored it (writing commentaries on the other twenty-six books of the New Testament but not on Revelation).”⁵⁶

With this perspective prevalent among the earlier reformers, one cannot claim that inerrancy was universally celebrated. According to Borg, it was not until the second or third generation of reformers that the idea of verbal plenary inspiration began to be a commonplace affirmation.⁵⁷ It seems that even as recently as five hundred years ago, there was no consensus among Christians as to how the Bible was to be considered inspired.⁵⁸

Mohler’s final assertion in his case for inerrancy is that the Christian church is based on the claim that the church needs the Bible to be inerrant. He argues that “The church must live by the Word of God, or it will depend on human authority as a substitute for God’s Word. Without the Bible as the supreme and final authority in the church, we are left in what can only be described as a debilitating epistemological crisis. Put bluntly, if the Bible is not the very Word of God, bearing full authority and trustworthiness, we do not know what Christianity is, nor do we know how to live as followers of Christ.”⁵⁹

There are several pressing issues with Mohler’s position. First, needing the Bible to be inerrant for epistemological and authoritative reasons does not make it inerrant. It might be helpful for the Christian church to have an inerrant Bible, but that does not, ipso

⁵⁶ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 267.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19. See footnote nine.

⁵⁸ In the nascent church, this debate would not have mattered, because there was no collection of Christian scriptures deemed to be the authoritative canon. Lists of texts began in the second century, but according to Bart Ehrman, “it was not until the year 367 C.E., almost two and a half centuries after the last New Testament book was written, that any Christian record named our current twenty-seven books as the authoritative canon of Scripture.” See Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1997), 11.

⁵⁹ Albert Mohler, *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 42-3.

facto, make the Bible inerrant. Second, Mohler erroneously asserts that having an inerrant Bible means that human error can be removed from the equation. This is not so. Even if one were to concede that the Bible were an inerrant document, the interpreters of the Bible are very prone to error. Thus, an inerrant Bible and an errant interpreter still do not yield an interpretation that is without issues.

The fact before us is that the Bible must be interpreted. Jennifer Wright Knust, a professor of the New Testament at Boston University, aptly observes that “[w]e are not passive recipients of what the Bible says, but active interpreters who make decisions about what we will believe and what we will affirm.”⁶⁰ There is no guide to meaning that comes along as a companion to the Bible. We must make decisions about what these ancient texts mean. To do so is to interpret.

Christian Smith, says it well, “Every scriptural teaching is mediated through human reading and active interpretation, which involve choosing one among a larger number of possible readings. Thus every scriptural teaching is subject to the complexities and different outcomes of the interpretive process...Interpretations are also shaped by the particular historical and cultural locations and interests of the interpreters.”⁶¹

Thus, to say the Bible is inerrant in all that it says really doesn’t matter if we don’t know what the Bible actually says. What does it all mean? Who gets to decide? This is a phenomenon that Smith calls “The Problem of Interpretive Pluralism.” About the scenario of ten different people reading the same text differently, Smith writes, “The very same Bible—which biblicists [his word for those who espouse inerrancy] insist is

⁶⁰ Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), loc.4393-4.

⁶¹ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 51.

perspicuous and harmonious—gives rise to divergent understandings among intelligent, sincere, committed readers about what it says about most topics of interest.”⁶²

The necessity of interpretation, and the multiple interpretations that a single passage alone can generate, doesn’t seem to be factored in to the claims of fundamentalists, like Mohler. Put simply, these various interpretations of the same text lead to a problem for inerrantists. Smith frames this issue with a helpful question. Assuming that one accepts the view of inerrancy, Smith asks, “[I]f there are different possibilities of interpretation, where is one to find which is infallible and absolute?”⁶³ The process of choosing the “right” or “correct” interpretation is too subjective, and it seems careless and dangerous to give a kind of unquestioned, absolute authority to a reading of a text. As George Bernard Shaw aptly put it, “No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: He is always convinced that it says what he means.”

To see the danger of giving unquestioned, absolute authority to an inerrantist reading of a text (or anyone’s reading, for that matter) we need only wind the clock back a couple hundred years. During the shameful period of institutional slavery in the United States, the Bible often was used by proponents of slavery not only to justify their practice of holding slaves, but to demonstrate that it was willed by God, part of the divine plan. Even though the teaching of Jesus would seem, on the surface, to make slavery impossible (how can one love their neighbor while owning them?), those who read the Bible in the way Mohler and others suggest, believed that the Bible affirmed slavery.⁶⁴ After all, texts like Ephesians 6 don’t seem to be calling for an end to slavery, just more

⁶² Ibid., 17.

⁶³ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁴ I am not suggesting that Mohler or other inerrantists today would support slavery. I am suggesting that the tradition from which they come used to justify slavery with similar logic.

humane treatment of slaves.⁶⁵ As Jack Rogers notes, the fundamentalist approach to the Bible on the issue of slavery, back then, allowed “An evil practice of ancient Near East culture, recorded in the Bible ... to overrule central teachings of Jesus.”⁶⁶

D. Summation

In sum, the fundamentalist position of inerrancy has many issues. Among them are the fact that we do not have any of the autographs of the biblical texts—which inerrantists claim as a basis for their position. Further, as Smith term it, the “Problem of Interpretive Pluralism,” or the reality that there are multiple interpretations of the same text, presents a serious issue. How does one decide whose interpretation is the correct one, the one that the inerrant Bible is pointing to? Inerrantists seem to ignore the necessity of interpretation completely. The Bible, as we have seen, must be interpreted; decisions about meaning must be made, and readers must make them. Thus, to claim that one’s interpretation is “just what the Bible says,” is disingenuous and, flatly, wrong. Lastly, the Bible has been read, too often historically, in ways that have been atrocious and destructive. Slavery demonstrates but one of these instances; there are a plurality of others. For Christianity to thrive in the twenty-first century and beyond, a new way of reading, understanding, and interpreting the Bible needs to be explored. Before we turn to this alternative way of approaching the Bible, however, we first need to investigate some

⁶⁵ Of particular interest are verses 5-9: “⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; ⁶ not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷ Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, ⁸ knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. ⁹And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.” These verses do not condemn the practice of slavery; they call for obedience from slaves, and human treatment from masters. For a more direct affront to slavery, see the New Testament letter from Paul to Philemon.

⁶⁶ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 21.

of the central issues we face today. We now turn to examine how the Bible is used to speak about issues of science, society, and violence.

III. Fundamentalism in Action

*“Without the voice of reason, every faith is its own curse.”
Sting, History Will Teach Us Nothing*

To begin to understand the seriousness of the issue at hand we must turn to how fundamentalists actually live and apply their perspectives on the Bible. Each of the three issues that will be addressed here has been the subject of major news headlines in the religious world in the past year, and will only increase as we move into the future. Fundamentalism seems to clash more and more with a society that is moving away from many of the positions fundamentalists hold dear. We begin by examining how the Bible is used by fundamentalists to speak to scientific issues, with a particular focus on creation, the environment, and global warming.

A. Creationism and Climate Change

There is evidence that Catholics and moderate Evangelicals are beginning to open up to the findings of science. For example, in 2015 Pope Francis is expected to write an encyclical letter that focuses on the need for Christians, specifically the world’s estimated 1.2 billion Catholics, to be more active in environmental care. The Pope, at a recent October meeting, boldly said, “The monopolizing of lands, deforestation, the appropriation of water, inadequate agro-toxics are some of the evils that tear man from the land of his birth. Climate change, the loss of biodiversity and deforestation are already showing their devastating effects in the great cataclysms we witness.”¹

¹ John Vidal, “Pope Francis’s edict on climate change will anger deniers and US churches,” *The Guardian*. December 27, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/27/pope-francis-edict-climate-change-us-rightwing/>.

A further promising sign comes from the National Association of Evangelicals. On their website, among their beliefs, the NAE has included a section on “Creation Care.” It reads as follows:

As we embrace our responsibility to care for God's earth, we reaffirm the important truth that we worship only the Creator and not the creation. God gave the care of his earth and its species to our first parents. That responsibility has passed into our hands. We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part. We are not the owners of creation, but its stewards, summoned by God to “watch over and care for it” (Gen. 2:15). This implies the principle of sustainability: our uses of the Earth must be designed to conserve and renew the Earth rather than to deplete or destroy it. The Bible teaches us that God is not only redeeming his people, but is also restoring the whole creation (Rom. 8:18-23). Just as we show our love for the Savior by reaching out to the lost, we believe that we show our love for the Creator by caring for his creation.²

This kind of leadership is a welcome change, but it unfortunately does not yet represent the majority position among Christians.

A recent survey, conducted in a joint effort by Public Religion Research Institute and the American Academy of Religion, demonstrates that “White evangelical Protestants are much more likely to attribute the severity of recent natural disasters to the biblical “end times” (77%) than to climate change (49%).”³ Almost a full three-fourths of Evangelicals assume that global catastrophe is an “act of God,” a necessary component of the “end times”, during which God will eventually destroy the planet. As one infamous representative of the Evangelical movement, Mark Driscoll, put it at a large, national gathering of Evangelical ministers, “I know who made the environment and he’s coming

² See <http://www.nae.net/government-relations/for-the-health-of-the-nation/creation-care/>.

³ “Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted about Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science.” *publicreligion.org*. <http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/11/believers-sympathizers-skeptics-americans-conflicted-climate-change-environmental-policy-science/#.VRno3jvF-NQ/>.

back and going to burn it all up. So yes, I drive an SUV.”⁴ When the destruction of the environment seems both divinely decreed and immanent, the urgency of acting to preserve it is eliminated. Speaking from personal experience, Jenks remarks, “When our worldview is shaped by such a distorted view of the future, as mine was as a child...there is little incentive to work for social justice and global advancement.”⁵

The view crystallized by Driscoll’s statement is deeply connected to the way he, and other like-minded Evangelicals, understand and interpret the Bible. According to Mohler, who presides over the flagship seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention, which according to Pew Research is the largest denomination in the US, the way we interpret the stories found in books like Genesis is central to the entire Christian belief system.⁶ In an appearance on NPR’s *Talk of the Nation* in 2011, Mohler said, “I think it's a very important issue here that we recognize that what's at stake in this discussion is not just, as important as it is, the historicity of the first several chapters of Genesis or the historicity of Adam and the fall...Those are absolutely, I believe, vital to orthodox Christianity, but also to the question as to whether or not the apostles get to tell us how we interpret the Old Testament.”⁷

For Mohler, Driscoll, and other Evangelicals, as we have seen, the Bible is not just a divinely inspired work, but a divinely dictated book. Mohler, in a presentation focused on the age of the universe at a 2010 Evangelical conference, said:

⁴ Hemant Mehta, “Pastor Mark Driscoll: Christians Don’t Need to Care About the Environment because Jesus is Coming Back for Us,” May, 4, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2013/05/04/pastor-mark-driscoll-christians-dont-need-to-care-about-the-environment-because-jesus-is-coming-back-for-us/#ixzz3VJdHIWB5/>.

⁵ Gregory Jenks, *The Once and Future Bible*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 26.

⁶ “The Religious Composition of the United States.” Pewforum.org. February 1, 2008. <http://www.pewforum.org/2008/02/01/chapter-1-the-religious-composition-of-the-united-states/>.

⁷ Albert Mohler, interview by Neal Conan, *Talk of the Nation*, NPR, September 22, 2011.

As we are looking at the Scripture, we understand it to be as it claims, the inspired and inerrant word of God. Every word inspired by the Holy Spirit. We believe that the speaking God speaks to us in this word. This is an inscripturated revelation of the one true and living God...Our only means of intellectual rescue, brothers and sisters, is the speaking God, who speaks to us in scripture, in special revelation. And it is the scripture, the inerrant and infallible word of God that trumps renderings of general revelation, and it must be so. Otherwise we will face destruction of the entire gospel in intellectual terms. When general revelation is used to trump special revelation, disaster ensues...I would suggest to you that in our effort to be most faithful to the scriptures and most accountable to the grand narrative of the gospel an understanding of creation in terms of 24-hour calendar days and a young earth entails far fewer complications, far fewer theological problems and actually is the most straightforward and uncomplicated reading of the text as we come to understand God telling us how the universe came to be and what it means and why it matters.⁸

Mohler's position is clear: the Bible, and all that the Bible articulates, must be taken to be the literal, inerrant communication of God that should be interpreted at face value, and as a consequence, that it must trump all other modes and means of understanding how life came to be. Thus, for Mohler, not believing literally in Genesis makes it impossible for one to believe in Jesus or the message of Jesus. I will save my full critique of this position for a later chapter. For now it will suffice to say that this is an unnecessary leap.

For Mohler, everything begins with his understanding of the Bible. Thus, if the Bible indicates God made the world in six-literal-twenty-four-hour-days, then it must be so. If, as the New Testament states in 2 Peter, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed," then why should a devout Christian care about the state of the environment?⁹

⁸ Albert Mohler, "Why Does the Universe Look So Old?" (presentation, 2010 Ligonier Annual Conference, 2010).

⁹ 2 Peter 3:10, NRSV. All Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), San Francisco, HarperOne, 1989.

However, this issue goes deeper than just whether or not one chooses to recycle. This debate touches on the perceived conflict between science and religion. This centuries old conflict came to the forefront in 2014, when a Christian musician named Michael Gungor posted several blog entries that expressed doubts about the literal nature of the Bible, particularly Genesis. Gungor wrote:

I have no more ability to believe, for example, that the first people on earth were a couple named Adam and Eve that lived 6,000 years ago. I have no ability to believe that there was a flood that covered all the highest mountains of the world only 4,000 years ago and that all of the animal species that exist today are here because they were carried on an ark and then somehow walked or flew all around the world from a mountain in the middle east after the water dried up. I have no more ability to believe these things than I do to believe in Santa Claus or to not believe in gravity. But I have a choice on what to do with these unbeliefs. I could either throw out those stories as lies, or I could try to find some value in them as stories. But this is what happens ... If you try to find some value in them as stories, there will be some people that say that you aren't a Christian anymore because you don't believe the Bible is true or "authoritative". Even if you try to argue that you think there is a truth to the stories, just not in an historical sense; that doesn't matter. To some people, you denying the "truth" of a 6,000 year old earth with naked people in a garden eating an apple being responsible for the death of dinosaurs is the same thing as you nailing Jesus to the cross.¹⁰

Gungor was correct that arguing for some sort of allegorical understanding of Genesis would not suit fundamentalists. Mohler responded in a podcast by saying that

We will either believe the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God — that it is the specially revealed word of God, which is our ultimate intellectual authority, because it is, indeed, the word of God — or we'll see it merely as a collection of inspirational and spiritual writings that are to be 'reinterpreted'. That's Michael Gungor's word, when it comes to claims of a superior intellectual authority, in his case modern science. The issue remains that simple. In reality, the fact that Adam and Eve were real, objectively live human beings, who lived in space and time and history, is essential to the entire biblical narrative, not to just the interpretation of Genesis 1 and following.¹¹

¹⁰ Michael Gungor, "What Do We Believe," *Gungor Music*, February 22, 2014, <http://gungormusic.com/2014/02/what-do-we-believe/>.

¹¹ Bob Allen, "SBC Leader Says Gungor Trusts Science More Than Bible," *Baptist News Global*, August 22, 2014, <http://baptistnews.com/faith/theology/item/29127-sbc-leader-says-gungor-trusts-science-more-than-the-bible/>.

What Mohler fails to take into account is context. He is concerned that questioning the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis will somehow necessitate the questioning of the existence of Jesus. This need not be the case. Mohler fails to see the need to allow Genesis to be a certain type of literature. As we explore an alternative posture toward, and interpretation of, the Bible, I explicate why this issue of context is paramount and illuminating.

For Mohler, the integrity of the Christian tradition is at stake, yet failing to act on issues of climate change will lead us into another crisis—one of our own making. According to NASA, the loss of sea ice, which leads to the increasing of sea levels, coupled with intense and prolonged heat waves and drought are the tip of the iceberg. The results of such occurrences would also produce a rise in illness (especially insect borne illnesses) and the disruption of ecosystems, which could lead to widespread food shortages.¹² This is not a science fiction movie; this is the future we are careening toward if something does not change. A way of reading the Bible is needed that both respects the tradition, and seeks to proactively meet the challenges of the present and future.

B. Sexuality

One of the most pronounced and debated issues of our day involves human sexuality, particularly same-sex relationships. In 2007 the Barna Group released the results of a survey of 16-to-29-year-olds, in which the participants were asked to choose words—or phrases—that aptly describe the state of Christianity today. Possible answers ranged from the positive terms (“offers hope”) to the negative (“judgmental” and “hypocritical”), yet an astounding 91percent of the young people survey chose the option

¹² “Global Climate Change,” *Nasa.com*, accessed March, 24, 2015, <http://climate.nasa.gov/effects/>.

“anti-homosexual.” What’s more, a staggering 80 percent of actual churchgoers chose the exact same term.¹³ Christianity is becoming known as a religion that, in many of its forms, is unwelcoming to LGBTQ individuals.¹⁴

This perception, and without a doubt there are many sincere Evangelicals who would like to change it, has been reinforced by some of the gatekeepers of fundamentalist Christianity, Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell. In an exchange on Robertson’s show, *The 700 Club*, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, both Robertson and Falwell seemed certain of where the blame for the tragic attacks should be placed. Falwell noted that these attacks in 2001 were the first on American soil since the War of 1812, and the reason for that was God’s protection of America. Now, however, God was letting America experience judgment because of certain groups of people.

Falwell attributed the attacks to “...[t]hrowing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools.” He continued, “The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad.” However, this was just the beginning. He further blamed “the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way — all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.’”¹⁵

¹³ Referenced by Justin Lee, *Torn*, (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 2.

¹⁴ LGBTQ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning.

¹⁵ Marc Ambinder, “Falwell Suggests Gays to Blame for Attacks,” *ABC News*, September, 14, 2001, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=121322/>.

Robertson affirmed Falwell's statement, saying, "Well, I totally concur..."¹⁶

Homosexuals, along with atheists at times, have been blamed for a number of tragedies, including earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. John Hagee, a fundamentalist mega-church pastor in Texas, infamously stated during an interview with Terry Gross on NPR that God sent Katrina as a punishment on the city of New Orleans. "New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God," Hagee said, because "there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came."¹⁷

Others have proposed unthinkable "solutions" to, in their mind, the problem of homosexuality. A relatively unknown fundamentalist pastor from North Carolina, Charles Worley, made headlines in 2012 when a clip of one of his sermons hit the Internet. Worley says, in the sermon, "I figured a way to get rid of all the lesbians and queers." He continued, "Build a great, big, large fence —150-or-100-mile [sic] long—put all the lesbians in there . . . do the same thing for the queers and the homosexuals, and have that fence electrified so they can't get out."¹⁸

Worley concluded, "Feed 'em, and you know what? In a few years they'll die. Do you know why? They can't reproduce."¹⁹

To hear a Christian minister call for the rounding up and exterminating of an entire group of people—reminiscent in many ways of the Nazis—is shocking for many. While many fundamentalist Evangelicals would agree with Worley's position that homosexuality is a chosen lifestyle, few would dare espouse the kind of hate and vitriol

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Pastor Hagee: Katrina Struck New Orleans Because Of Homosexual Rally," *Huffington Post*, May 2, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/24/pastor-hagee-katrina-stru_n_98385.html/.

¹⁸ "Charles L. Worley, North Carolina Pastor: Put Gays And Lesbians In Electrified Pen To Kill Them Off," *Huffington Post*, May, 21, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/21/north-carolina-pastor-gay-rant-starvation_n_1533463.html/.

¹⁹ Ibid.

that are seen in the clip of Worley's sermon. The responses vary, but the fact remains that this is not just a public relations problem, and it is not just the Westboro Baptist Church.²⁰ This problem cuts to the core of the Evangelical message that God loves the world and wants to save it.

The causes for the Evangelical push back against LGBTQ persons are grounded in their understanding of the Bible. Mohler wrote a clear statement on this on his website. In a blog entry dated March 16, 2007, Mohler asserts the following:

Let's get this straight — God's condemnation of sin is not determined by science, but by God's Word. The Bible could not be more clear — all forms of homosexual behavior are expressly condemned as sin. In so doing the Bible uses its strongest vocabulary and places this condemnation in the larger context of the Creator's rightful expectation of our stewardship of the sexual gift. All manifestations of homosexuality are thus representations of human sinfulness and rebellion against God's express will. Nothing can alter this fact, and no discovery in science or any other human endeavor can change God's verdict.²¹

Again we see Mohler's conviction that the Bible is an infallible book of law for all times and places. Thus, in his opinion, science cannot reveal anything new, or contribute to any new understanding of life or humanity, that was not already understood in texts that range from 3,000 to 2,000 years old.

What are these texts? There are six passages in the Bible, often referred to as "Clobber Passages," that are thought to deal with the issue of homosexuality. I will share each passage here, but I will reserve exegesis of these texts for a later chapter, in which I will argue for a different understanding of these particular passages. For now, we are simply looking at what these texts seem to say in their English renderings. This is

²⁰ Westboro Baptist Church is the Kansas-based church founded by the late Fred Phelps. The church travels the country, protesting various events and organizations, carrying signs that read "God hates fags."

²¹ Albert Mohler, "Was it Something I Said? Continuing to Think About Homosexuality," *albertmohler.com*, March, 16, 2007, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2007/03/16/was-it-something-i-said-continuing-to-think-about-homosexuality/>.

significant because many fundamentalists claim to simply take the Bible at face value. This reality is evidenced by a recent controversy surrounding Phil, the patriarch of the now famous Robertson family, featured in the hit A&E television series, *Duck Dynasty*. In an interview with GQ magazine, Robertson touched off a firestorm with the following statement about homosexuality:

“Everything is blurred on what’s right and what’s wrong,” he says. “Sin becomes fine.”

What, in your mind, is sinful?

“Start with homosexual behavior and just morph out from there. Bestiality, sleeping around with this woman and that woman and that woman and those men,” he says. Then he paraphrases Corinthians: “Don’t be deceived. Neither the adulterers, the idolaters, the male prostitutes, the homosexual offenders, the greedy, the drunkards, the slanderers, the swindlers—they won’t inherit the kingdom of God. Don’t deceive yourself. It’s not right.”²²

The public outrage over Robertson’s comments led A&E to initially suspend him from filming the show. However, the suspension lasted only one week, and Robertson was reinstated.²³ The controversy did not subside as quickly. In an interview with CNN, the Robertson family’s pastor, Mike Kellett, defended his parishioner. Kellett told CNN that “the verse explains itself,” referring to Robertson’s paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 6.²⁴ This perspective corroborates a 2007 Barna Group study that found two-thirds of Americans believe that the Bible can be taken at face value.²⁵

²² Drew Magary, “What the Duck,” *GQ*, January 2014, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/television/201401/duck-dynasty-phil-robertson?currentPage=1/>.

²³ Emily Yahr, “A&E retracts its suspension of ‘Duck Dynasty’ star Phil Robertson,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/aande-retracts-its-suspension-of-duck-dynasty-star-phil-robertson/2013/12/27/116181b4-6f44-11e3-a523-fe73f0ff6b8d_story.html/.

²⁴ Daniel Burke, “Does Phil Robertson get the Bible wrong,” *CNN.com*, December 20, 2013, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/12/20/does-phil-robertson-get-the-bible-wrong/>.

²⁵ “Most Americans Take Well-Known Bible Stories at Face Value,” *Barna Group*, October 21, 2007, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/congregations/92-most-americans-take-well-known-bible-stories-at-face-value#.VRGJbjTF-NR/>.

1. Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorrah

Perhaps the most infamous of the texts that are considered by fundamentalists to reference homosexuality is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This story centers on angelic guests who had come to stay in the house of Lot, nephew of the great patriarch Abraham. The angelic beings were intending to destroy the city due to “the outcry” against the sin of the two cities.²⁶ This sin is not defined by the text. Instead, interpreters must deduce from the text what sin is being punished.

Once the men of Sodom discover the guests staying at Lot’s home, they seek to rape them. The text reads:

...the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down.²⁷

The angelic visitors rescue Lot, blind the aggressors, and warn Lot and his family to leave the city because its destruction is imminent. This story is repeated with slightly different details in Judges 19:1-30. The characters are different, as well as the setting, but this text is clearly an alternative telling of the Sodom and Gomorrah story, and I believe, can be interpreted in the same way. As a result, when I treat this text from Genesis later, I assume the same interpretation would be applicable to the Judges text as well.

²⁶ See Genesis 18:16-33 for the context of Genesis 19.

²⁷ Genesis 19:4-9, the word translated “know” here in the NRSV יָדָע which is idiomatic in Hebrew for an intimate sexual knowledge of another.

2. Leviticus 18 and 20

Leviticus 18 and 20 are part of a collection of laws in the Hebrew Bible called “The Holiness Code.” These laws deal with cultic purity among the people of ancient Israel, and must be understood in that context if we wish to understand how they function in the life of a devout Israelite.

The first text is Leviticus 18:22, and it reads as follows:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

The second passage, Leviticus 20:13, is similar:

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

There are a couple points for consideration, which will be addressed later. First, how one interprets the Hebrew word *תועבה* is critical. In the NRSV, as seen above, the translators opted to translate the word into English as “abomination,” while the New American Standard Bible renders the word “detestable acts.” The key question is—while we may understand these words to have certain definitions in English—what does the Hebrew word imply? Is there even an English word that can capture the intent of the original Hebrew, and if not, how do we begin to unearth the meaning the priestly authors of Leviticus intended?

Second, the penalty for such acts that Leviticus describes in 20:13 is death. For those who wish to uphold the veracity of these texts today, this injunction surely must pose a challenge. While some, like Worley, seem to be in favor of taking this command and its penalty into the twenty-first century, most people, even fundamentalists, would

consider the literal application of this text today a problem. So, what happens to these texts then?

3. 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1

While many Evangelicals, even of the fundamentalist variety, would assent to the fact that these texts from the Hebrew Bible do not present an airtight case (after all, many Christians ignore dietary and clothing mandates that are found in the same Holiness Code), the texts found in the New Testament are a horse of a different color. Many Christians look at the Hebrew Bible as law—the things that used to be done to garner God’s approval and acceptance—while the New Testament is about grace. Thus, for many, the Old Testament, as Christians are wont to call it, is not binding in the same way that the New Testament is. So, when the New Testament speaks on an issue, it is often held to be irrevocable, final, and non-negotiable.

Two of these New Testament texts are found in lists of vices that will exclude someone from the Kingdom of God. The first comes from a genuine Pauline epistle, 1 Corinthians, while the second, 1 Timothy, is likely pseudepigraphal.²⁸

First, the Corinthian text, which was quoted by Phil Robertson in *GQ Magazine*. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul draws attention to a series of vices that, he warns the Corinthian church, disqualify them from the kingdom of God.

²⁸ Pseudepigraphy was not uncommon in the ancient world. According to Bart Ehrman, this would often be done “in antiquity to get a hearing for one’s views.” Thus, an relatively unknown writer, in the case of 1 Timothy, claims Pauline authorship in order to give credibility to his views. Ehrman notes, “Someone who wrote in the name of a famous person was therefore not necessarily driven by wicked intent. Sometimes the writer’s motive was pure as the driven snow, at least in his or her opinion.” See Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament*, (London: Oxford Press, 2011), 321.

Further, Karen Armstrong describes pseudepigrapha as a development and innovation on Paul’s thoughts by his associates. She writes that “...after (Paul’s) death in the early 60s, Christian writers who revered Paul wrote in his name and developed his ideas in letters to the churches...and wrote supposedly posthumous letters addressed to Paul’s associates...” See Karen Armstrong, *The Bible, A Biography*, (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 61.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

This text, from a completely surface reading, seems to deal with a wide array of potential vices, ranging from the worship of other gods, to greed, to issues of human sexuality. Further, those who engage in such practices will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” How one understands this phrase, “kingdom of God,” will also be important.

The 1 Timothy text, is list of those people that are proved to be guilty of wrongdoing by the Jewish Law. In chapter 1:8-11, the author writes

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

In this list of vices we see the familiar term, “sodomites,” which echoes back to the Genesis 19 story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus, in many ways, translating the original Greek of these two passages depends on how the translator understands and interprets the story of Sodom.

4. Romans 1

The final text is thought to be the most clear and forceful by fundamentalists. At the beginning of his letter to the Christian community in Rome, Paul begins to confront the issue of idolatry—the worship of something, usually depicted in an object—besides the Jewish God. In 1:23-27, Paul states the following about the idolaters:

...they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped

and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.²⁹

In this text same-sex relations are deemed to be unnatural, and shameless, while those who have participated in such action are said to have “received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” Taken at face value, it is not hard to see how some fundamentalists have taken news headlines and interpreted them as punishments on the LGBTQ community.

It must be noted that all fundamentalists do not take the path of hate groups like the Westboro Baptist Church, whose “God hates fags” message is repulsing even to most fundamentalists. Perhaps many feel trapped between a desire to honor the Bible and their tradition, while at the same time they also live a world that is getting smaller and smaller, and what used to be a faceless issue now has a name and face. Many well meaning fundamentalists have tried to explain why people are gay—usually by choice, while other acknowledge that being born gay is possible only because we are all born sinners—as well as trying to “pray the gay away” through various types of conversion therapy and counseling. Yet, the tide is turning. The flagship “ex-gay” ministry, Exodus International, apologized and disbanded in 2013, and in doing so, president Alan Chambers acknowledged the pain his organization had created for many in the LGBTQ community.³⁰

²⁹ The NRSV translation here is problematic. It uses the phrase “shameless acts,” when it clearly seems to be pointing to “shameful acts.” As I move forward with the passage, I will assume the latter meaning.

³⁰ Jeff Chu, “‘Let’s Do Something Different’: The End of the World’s Leading ‘Ex-Gay’ Ministry,” *The Atlantic*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/06/lets-do-something-different-the-end-of-the-worlds-leading-ex-gay-ministry/277039/>.

In a September 2014 survey the Public Religion Research Institute found that “White evangelical Protestant Millennials are more than twice as likely to favor same-sex marriage as the oldest generation of white evangelical Protestants (43% vs. 19%).”³¹ This change in perspective among younger evangelicals represents a challenge to the established leadership. Will fundamentalist leaders, like Mohler, be willing to rethink how they approach the Bible? If not, the trend of seven in ten Millennials who were raised attending church leaving by age 23 might only be the beginning of a larger, more pressing issue.³² The future of Christianity, in America at least, might be at stake.

C. Violence

In an interview-turned-heated-debate with the Reverend Jessie Jackson that aired on CNN in October of 2004, the Reverend Jerry Falwell emphatically asserted his support for then President George W. Bush and the “War on Terror” that was being waged in Afghanistan and Iraq. The exchange between the two men—both religious, both Christian—reveals a deep rift in perspective:

JACKSON: ...I submit to you today that our going to Iraq was a misadventure. It has put America in isolation. We are losing lives, money and losing our character in that war. We deserve better leadership. And we need...

FALWELL: I'd rather be killing them over there than fighting them over here, Jesse. And I think you would...

JACKSON: Let's stop the killing and choose peace. Let's choose negotiation over confrontation.

³¹ “Views on Same Sex Marriage.” *Pewforum.org*. September 18, 2014. http://www.pewforum.org/2014/09/22/public-sees-religions-influence-waning-2/pr_14-09-22_religionpolitics-35/.

³² Scott McConnell, “LifeWay Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church.” *LifeWay.com*. August, 7, 2007. <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church/>.

FALWELL: Well, I'm for that too. But you've got to kill the terrorists before the killing stops. And I'm for the president to chase them all over the world. *If it takes 10 years, blow them all away in the name of the Lord.* [Emphasis added]

JACKSON: That does not sound Biblical to me. And that sounds ridiculous.³³

This exchange reveals much more than the politics of Jackson and Falwell. In many ways, what we see here is exegesis being enacted. Both men read the same Bible, yet both men come away with very different ideas about how the US should respond to its enemies after 9/11. For Falwell, the idea that God—he recommends killing terrorists “in the name of the Lord,” after all—approves of human violence, perhaps even expects it, is a natural concept. He describes an approach to violence that is shared by many fundamentalists.

In a 2007 interview with *Relevant Magazine*, former mega-church pastor Mark Driscoll was asked the following question: “What do you see as the greatest challenge for young Christians in the next ten year?” Driscoll’s response, while somewhat shocking, is indicative of how violence can be intertwined with religion:

There is a strong drift toward the hard theological left. Some emergent types [want] to recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie in a dress with a lot of product in His hair, who drank decaf and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes. In Revelation, Jesus is a pride fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is a guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.³⁴

The text reference by Driscoll, Revelation, is the final book of the New Testament canon, and is replete with violent images, including divinely enacted genocide. The image of Jesus referred to by Driscoll, sans tattoo, is found in Revelation 19:11-16:

³³ Interview with Rev. Jerry Falwell and Rev. Jessie Jackson.” CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer. CNN. October 24, 2004. Television. Transcript.

³⁴ “Seven Big Questions,” *Relevant Magazine*, January-February 2007, http://web.archive.org/web/20071013102203/http://relevantmagazine.com/god_article.php?id=7418/.

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

While many fundamentalists share Driscoll’s reading of the text—see the popular *Left Behind* book series from the late 1990s and early 2000s—there are other options that we shall discuss later. For now it is important to note that these violent images and language do not stay confined to the eschatological realm; they bleed over into the practical theology of many fundamentalist Christians.

Practically, the issue of violence is connected to the other areas we have already discussed, creation and homosexuality. As we saw previously with Driscoll’s comments about driving an SUV because he knows “who made the environment and he’s coming back and going to burn it all up,” many fundamentalist Christians accept the idea that the present creation has a limited future, that God will eventually destroy it anyway. If God’s intentions toward creation are destructive—violent—the reasoning goes, then why should we recycle, cut emissions, or limit our use of fossil fuels? If the Creator is also the Destroyer, then our acts of aggression and violence toward creation become justifiable.

Further, the approach of fundamentalists to the Bible can lead to a desensitization toward contemporary violence. In Leviticus chapters 18 and 20, as we have seen, there are laws against men having sexual relations with men as they would women. The penalty for such an act is recorded in Leviticus 20:13b, “both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” A cursory, surface-

level reading of this text implies that the punishment for those engaging in homosexual relations is that they both be executed. With this text in mind, pastor Steven Anderson recommends the following response:

Here's what the Bible says, Leviticus 20:13, "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them." And that, my friend, is the cure for AIDS. It was right there in the Bible all along...Because if you executed the homos, like God recommends, you wouldn't have all this AIDS running rampant.³⁵

Pastor Anderson, based on his reading of the Bible, recommends the extermination of all homosexuals. And, while Anderson does not appear to be organizing a mob or any death camps, this language should be more than troubling.

In an article entitled "Why I Am Absolutely Islamophobic," published in September 2014 by *Charisma Magazine* on their online platform, the president and CEO of *DefendChristians.org* (and a former pastor), Gary Cass describes his plan for dealing with ISIS, and all Muslims. Cass wrote that ISIS is "doing to American journalists what every true follower of Mohammed wants to do to you and yours; subjugate or murder you."³⁶

Cass further laid out the three viable options, in his mind, for dealing with all Muslims—because for Cass, all Muslims are like ISIS. The three options Cass presents are conversion, deportation (from the US), or violence. In his own words:

The only thing that is biblical and that 1,400 years of history has shown to work is overwhelming Christian just war and overwhelming self defense. We must be prepared for the increase of terror at home and abroad. This is not irrational, but

³⁵ Curtis Wong, "Arizona's Pastor Steven Anderson Argues That AIDS Would Be Eradicated If Gays Were 'Executed'," *Huffington Post*, December 3, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/03/arizona-pastor-steven-anderson-gay-men-_n_6263720.html/.

³⁶ Dominique Mosbergen, "Charisma News Takes Down Hateful Post Calling For Violence Against Muslims," *Huffington Post*, Septemeber 8, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/08/charisma-news-islamophobic_n_5786942.html?utm_hp_ref=religion/.

the loving thing we must do for our children and neighbors. First trust in God, then obtain a gun(s), learn to shoot, teach your kids the Christian doctrines of just war and self defense, create small cells of family and friends that you can rely on if some thing catastrophic happens and civil society suddenly melts down.³⁷

Cass' solution is tantamount to genocide; he advocates the extermination of an entire religious tradition. The outcry against the post was loud and swift, and within days, *Charisma* decided to take the post down.³⁸ Yet, in many ways, the damage was done. The seeds of violent language and images were planted.

These are only two examples of an increasingly militant sounding branch of Christian fundamentalists. And, while physical violence is absent from both examples, rhetorical violence is abundantly present.³⁹ Rhetorical violence in many ways acts to desensitize people from the harshness and ugliness of violence by making such images and language part of the fabric of daily life.⁴⁰ Eventually, however, history shows that the rhetorical becomes physical; what began as mere words is too often translated into action. A Pew Research Center study from January 2014 revealed that religiously inspired violence was on the rise, reaching a six-year high. According to the findings, "A third (33%) of the 198 countries and territories included in the study had high religious hostilities in 2012, up from 29% in 2011 and 20% as of mid-2007."⁴¹ Our world is getting more religiously hostile. This willingness to embrace violence in the Christian tradition is not a necessary consequence of religion, but occurs due to certain fundamental ideas that

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Credit goes to TK Waters for coining this helpful term. Waters defines rhetorical violence as "language and behaviors that harm others and that occur so regularly that they are often not noticeable."

⁴⁰ One example of this in recent times would be the work of American-Israeli rabbi Meir Kahane, who's works, such as *They Must Go*, railed against Palestinians and any two state solution, and inspired acts of violence and aggression.

⁴¹ "Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High." *Pewforum.org*. January 14, 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>.

some religious people have. Two issues are at the core of the violence that is embraced by many fundamentalists: how they see the Bible, and atonement theory.

When the Bible is seen to be inerrant and infallible, the problem of violence becomes acute. There are multiple texts in the Hebrew Bible that assert that God commanded the Hebrew people to annihilate the entire population of what was then known as Canaan, so that the Hebrews could take possession of their Promised Land. Notice one text in particular that can serve as an example. In Deuteronomy 13:6-16, we find the following command concerning how the Hebrews are to respond to those worshipping other gods, i.e. not Yahweh:

If anyone secretly entices you—even if it is your brother, your father’s son or your mother’s son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend—saying, “Let us go worship other gods,” whom neither you nor your ancestors have known, any of the gods of the peoples that are around you, whether near you or far away from you, from one end of the earth to the other, you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them. But you shall surely kill them; your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterwards the hand of all the people. Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Then all Israel shall hear and be afraid, and never again do any such wickedness. If you hear it said about one of the towns that the Lord your God is giving you to live in, that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods,” whom you have not known, then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation. If the charge is established that such an abhorrent thing has been done among you, you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it and everything in it—even putting its livestock to the sword. All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It shall remain a perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt.

These words are shocking and intense, and unknown to many. Here, God seems to command extermination and genocide, even of women, children, and animals. How should this text be understood? According to John Piper, a fundamentalist pastor and author:

It's right for God to slaughter women and children anytime he pleases. God gives life and he takes life. Everybody who dies, dies because God wills that they die. God is taking life every day. He will take 50,000 lives today. Life is in God's hand. God decides when your last heartbeat will be, and whether it ends through cancer or a bullet wound. God governs. So God is God! He rules and governs everything. And everything he does is just and right and good. God owes us nothing. If I were to drop dead right now, or a suicide bomber downstairs were to blow this building up and I were blown into smithereens, God would have done me no wrong. He does no wrong to anybody when he takes their life, whether at 2 weeks or at age 92. God is not beholden to us at all. He doesn't owe us anything. Now add to that the fact we're all sinners and deserve to die and go to hell yesterday, and the reality that we're even breathing today is sheer common grace from God.⁴²

Piper, operating under the framework of inerrancy, must find a way to make justifiable, what seems to be a morally reprehensible act commanded by God. Thus, Piper cannot say the problem is with the Bible, it must be, as Mohler says, “any problem with our understanding of [the Bible] lies in our interpretation and not the texts themselves...this is an unapologetic and a priori argument.”⁴³ Taken this way, violence is a necessary part of God’s interaction with creation; violence is not only justifiable, but at times, a divinely mandated act; violence becomes religiously legitimated.

Beyond the Bible itself, there is the issue of atonement theory. Atonement theory seeks to understand and describe the meaning of Jesus’ death, or to put it another way, “how” the death of Jesus works or functions in a salvific way. And while there are multiple and conflicting theories about the nature and meaning of Jesus’ death, most make a similar assumption, that God required the death of the innocent, sinless Jesus in order to forgive and reconcile human sin. God, according to many atonement concepts,

⁴² John Piper, “What Made It Okay for God to Kill Women and Children In the Old Testament,” *Desiring God*, February 27, 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-made-it-ok-for-god-to-kill-women-and-children-in-the-old-testament/>. Emphasis added.

⁴³ Albert Mohler, *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 53.

willed and needed the death of Jesus. This atonement issue normalizes violence, making it a necessary part of the human-Divine relationship. Any attempt to move away from this paradigm of violence will necessitate a rethinking of how the death of Jesus is understood.

D. Summation

In this chapter we have examined the way the fundamentalist understanding and reading of the Bible is enacted in relationship to three key issues of our day: the environment, issues of sexuality, and the over-arching issue of religiously legitimated violence. Based on the data, the ways fundamentalists approach the issues at hand present challenges that must be met thoughtfully and creatively. How will Christians respond to the environmental crises that loom large over future generations? How will Christians respond to people in same-sex relationships, who also want to spend their lives together in monogamous fidelity? And, perhaps most importantly, how will Christians approach the issue of violence in an increasingly hostile and violent world? To meet these challenges, an alternative way of understanding what the Bible is, and how it can be read, is needed.

IV. An Alternative Approach to the Bible

*“How one sees the Bible and how one sees Christianity go hand in hand.”
Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time**

We have seen, in a broad sketch, how fundamentalists see the Bible—through the lens of inerrancy and infallibility—and how that reading is then enacted in terms of three specific issues dealing with the environment, sexuality, and violence. What the statistics seem to tell us is that, when faced with the option of holding the views espoused by fundamentalists or walking away from Christianity, many, more than one in five according to a recent PRRI survey, do walk away.

¹ This does not, in every situation, have to be the case. Breaking with fundamentalist assumptions and interpretations of the Bible does not intrinsically mean breaking with the Bible itself. There are alternatives. So, before we move to reframing the three issues that have been central to our discussion, we must first reframe the Bible. Borg asserts, “Foundational to reading the Bible is a decision about how to see its origin. Does it come from God, or is it a human product?”²

A. An alternative way of understanding what the Bible is

Fundamentalists see the Bible in a top-down manner, meaning, they begin with the premise that the Bible comes from God, was in some way dictated by God, and is thus “The Word of God.” The alternative begins with changing this assumption. In this

¹ Joanna Piacenza, “10 Things the American Values Atlas Teaches Us About America’s Religious Landscape.” *publicreligion.org*. February 25, 2015. <http://publicreligion.org/2015/02/10-things-the-american-values-atlas-teaches-us-about-religion/#.VRoAgDvF-NR/>.

² Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 21.

understanding, the Bible is not a divinely dictated set of historically and scientifically accurate facts, laws, and stories. Instead, the Bible is a collection of ancient documents that record how two ancient communities, Israel and the early Christians, perceived their experience of the Sacred.

According to Borg:

I see the Bible as a human response to God. Rather than seeing God as scripture's ultimate author, I see the Bible as the response of these two ancient communities to their experience of God. As such it contains their stories of God, their perceptions of God's character and will, their prayers to and praise of God, their perceptions of the human condition and the paths of deliverance, their religious and ethical practices, and their understanding of what faithfulness to God involves. As a product of these two communities, the Bible thus tells us about how *they* saw things, not about how *God* sees things.³

This reframing of the source of the Biblical text enables us to rethink its use.

McLaren describes the traditional way of seeing the Bible, held by fundamentalists, as a legal constitutional approach. He describes this approach as follows:

Like lawyers, we look for precedents in past cases of interpretation, sometimes favoring older interpretations as precedents, sometimes asserting newer ones have rendered the old ones obsolete. We seek to distinguish "spirit" from "letter" and argue the "framers intent," seldom questioning whether the passage in question was actually intended by the original authors and editors to be a universal, eternally binding law. As a result we turn our seminaries and denominational bodies into versions of a Supreme Court. At every turn, we approach the biblical text as if it were an annotated code instead of what it actually is: a portable library of poems, prophesies, histories, fables, parables, letters, sage sayings, quarrels, and so on. Read as a constitution, the Bible has passages that can and have been used to justify, if not just about anything, an awful lot of wildly different things.⁴

Here, McLaren both identifies the problem (the legal constitutional understanding), and the solution (seeing the Bible as a library of diverse materials created by the two communities that produced it). Positively, McLaren says that the Bible is "the library of a culture and community—the culture and community of people who trace their

³ Ibid., 22-3.

⁴ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 78-9.

history back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”⁵ This approach, seeing the Bible as a library—a community repository—is not to say that the Bible is not inspired, but it does understand the meaning of that adjective differently.

For fundamentalists, inspiration is synonymous with dictation. Hamilton describes how this view, called verbal plenary inspiration, works: “Regardless of what Paul, or Luke, or Peter perceived themselves to be doing, many Christians today believe God influenced the choice of every word and every idea, so that the words written were literally the words of God.”⁶ The phrase from the New Testament most often asserted to defend this view comes from 2 Timothy 3:16, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” The phrase rendered here in the NRSV as “inspired by God” is translated in multiple translations as “God-breathed.” This is a literal rendering of the Greek word, θεοπνευστος, which is a combination of two words, θεος, meaning “God,” and πνεω, meaning “to breathe, or blow.” This word is problematic, in that it appears in no other place in the New Testament or early Christian writings.⁷ The lack of occurrences outside 2 Timothy makes the translation of this word difficult, because how words should be translated often comes down to how the words are used in various contexts; meaning comes from usage. In the case of θεοπνευστος, however, there are no other occurrences that lend interpretive help. Beyond the initial difficulty, we must also recognize that, whatever this word was meant to signify, it is clearly a metaphor. In the New Testament

⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁶ Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 138-9.

⁷ Ibid., 136-7. In addition, there was no New Testament at the time of the writing of 1 Timothy (110s). Thus, the author is referring to the Hebrew Bible.

tradition, God is understood to be spirit, i.e. not a flesh and blood being.⁸ If this is the case, God would not be imagined to have lungs, thus God does not breathe. God-breathed or God inspired must be a metaphor for something else.⁹

Is there another way to describe the Bible as being inspired, other than the assumptions of verbal plenary dictation? McLaren believes there is. For McLaren, inspiration has to do with the role the Bible plays within a community. He writes,

I certainly believe that in a unique and powerful way God breathes life into the Bible, and through it into the community of faith and its members, and into my soul. And I certainly believe the biblical library has a unique role in the life of the community of faith, that no other texts can...to say that God inspired the Bible is to say that, for the community of people who seek to be part of the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Moses, Ruth, David, Amos, John, Mary, and Jesus, the Bible has a unique and unparalleled role that none of these other voices can claim.¹⁰

Thus, the Bible can be said to be inspired because of the role it plays within the community of faith. In this way, according to Borg, the Bible becomes a sacrament of the Sacred. “A sacrament,” Borg writes, “is commonly defined as a mediator of the sacred, a vehicle by which God becomes present, a means through which the Spirit is experienced.”¹¹ The Bible, then, was born out of the experience of the Sacred by several communities of people, who then recorded their experiences in ways that culturally made sense to them. Based on their perceived experiences of the Sacred, one could say that they were *inspired* by these instances to record their stories. Today, then, when a community receives this library of texts, and through them has a perceived encounter with the Sacred, they continue to be inspired and inspiring.

⁸ See John 4:24 and 2 Corinthians 3:17 for this view in the New Testament.

⁹ Richard Rohr says, “Metaphor is the only possible language available to religion because it alone is honest about Mystery.” For more on this, see Richard Rohr, *The Immortal Diamond*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2013), 67-ff.

¹⁰ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 83.

¹¹ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 31.

What does this understanding of inspiration give us that the previously discussed understanding does not? First, instead of having to be read defensively, the Bible can be read inspirationally. When the need to defend the Bible as inerrant and infallible is removed, the Bible opens up as a fascinating account of how these particular communities and writers saw God, meaning, and culture. When the focus is on defending the Bible as a divine product, one may miss how the authors are responding to both their perceptions of God, and the contexts to which they spoke.

Second, seeing the Bible as a library frees us from worrying about places in the library that contradict or correct one another. If the Bible is one, long, contiguous work, then places that seem to disagree become problematic. Take, for example, the *lex talionis*, or Law of Retaliation, found in Leviticus 24:17-21:

Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered. One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death.

This law is essentially trying to limit retaliatory violence in ancient Israel. Thus, if someone kills your goat, you can only retaliate in kind by killing their goat; you may not take a human life for an animal life, or a human life for a broken tooth. However, in the New Testament, Jesus overturns this law in favor of forgiveness. Matthew 5:38-42 reads as follows:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Much could be said about this passage, but for our purposes, notice that Jesus is going against the command found in Leviticus. Both of these texts are found in the Christian Bible, but they do not agree; they are in tension with one another. When the Bible is a human product created in response to an experience of the Sacred, this tension is normal, and even expected.

Third, seeing the Bible in this alternative way allows the conversation that begins in the Bible to continue. When the Bible is held to be a divinely dictated text that is the final word, eternally relevant at all times, in all contexts, for all subjects, then all issues in the contemporary world, whether explicitly found in the text or not, must be filtered through the text. However, seeing the Bible as a human response to the Sacred allows for a continued discussion. There is continuity with the past—the Bible is still a source for connection with the past and a lens through which the present may be discussed—yet there is also change. Theologian Stanley Grenz refers to this dynamic of continuity and changes as an “open tradition”. According to Grenz:

A tradition grows as it confronts new challenges and as it faces new situations and difficulties over the course of time and in various contexts. The Christian tradition is thus characterized by both continuity and change as the faith community, under the guidance of the Spirit, grapples with the interaction between scripture and the particular challenges of changing situations.¹²

The Bible then becomes part of a dynamic, not static, process of theological reflection. Instead of serving as a kind of litmus test for our decisions about contemporary issues, the Bible becomes a source of inspiration and guidance; the way the earliest generations of Christians wrestled with situations of their day, opens up the possibility for new generations of Christians to do the same in their own contexts. There

¹² Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 118-9.

is, in this paradigm, a permission to be creative and thoughtful when encountering new situations or information. The Bible becomes a springboard into the future, not a ball and chain tying us to the ways of understanding the world that people had 2,000 years ago.

B. An alternative hermeneutic

Coupled with an alternative way of seeing and understanding what the Bible is, an alternative hermeneutic is also needed. The old hermeneutic, described previously and employed by fundamentalists, seeks to prove that the contexts of the Bible are literally true, that is, that all the events described in the text transpired in exactly the way the text says. Thus, if we see in the text that Joshua prayed and God made the sun stand still, in order for the Israelites to slaughter more of their enemies, the literalist hermeneutic assumes that we must take this text at its word.¹³

An alternative hermeneutic would enable an approach that honors the sacred nature of the Bible, while also seeking a faithful way of speaking to today's issues—about which the Bible often says nothing. One component of this alternative hermeneutic has been described by Borg as a “historical-metaphorical approach.” This approach seeks to ground itself, first in good contextual scholarship, and second by seeking to uncover meaning, not factuality.

The historical component seeks to uncover the historical meaning of the text by focusing on the historical context of the text. Borg reminds us that context is key to meaning. He says, “The context in which words are spoken or written, or deeds are done, pervasively shapes their meaning.”¹⁴ This stands in contrast to the devotional way in

¹³ See Joshua 10 for this story.

¹⁴ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 38.

which most people are taught to read the Bible. Devotional reading of the Bible tends to focus on what a text means to the reader and how it can be applied to their everyday lives. This type of Bible reading has its place, but it cannot be used to determine the meaning of texts in relation to the key issues of our day. After all, what a passage in the text might mean to me, personally, may have nothing to do with what it meant in its original context, to the original audience, or the author.

Borg, a chief proponent of the need to read the Bible historically, using all the tools available to modern scholarship (i.e. language, archeology, various forms of criticism, etc.), believes that reading the Bible this way illuminates the text in a unique way:

Setting biblical passages in their ancient context makes them come alive. It enables us to see meanings in these ancient texts that otherwise would remain buried in the past. Moreover, it allows us to hear the strangeness of these texts that come to us from worlds strange to us. Thus it helps us to avoid reading the Bible simply with our current agendas in mind and frees the Bible to speak with its own voice.¹⁵

Reading the Bible in its historical context leads to the second component of the approach suggested by Borg, the metaphorical approach. This approach seeks to move beyond the black and white arguments of factuality, and to dig deeper, into the meaning. This approach is helpful because it allows the reader to gain wisdom and meaning from the text, without having to sacrifice their intellectual commitments, i.e. one can seek the meaning and truth of Genesis 1, without being confined to accepting that Genesis 1 is an accurate description of how the world was created. The metaphorical approach also gives us the space to respect the fact that the original authors may not have approached the

¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

world in the same, literal way many of us do in America. The ancient Hebrew worldview was rich and alive with uses of metaphor and Midrash, more pictorial than literal.¹⁶

Borg argues that this approach can even be found within the Bible and early Christianity. He argues, “The writers of the New Testament frequently used texts from the Hebrew Bible in a nonliteral way. The practice continued in the ‘spiritual’ or ‘allegorical’ reading of scripture that was widespread in Christianity from the second century through the Middle ages.”¹⁷ Thus the metaphorical approach allows the reader to gain insight into the meaning present in the text, without becoming hung up on whether or not the events described therein are literally, factually true.

A third component of this alternative hermeneutic would be what Christian Smith calls “Christocentric Hermeneutical Key.”¹⁸ Put simply, “Jesus is the norm—the standard, the lens—through which Christians are to understand the Bible and Christianity as a whole.”¹⁹ This does not mean that Christians should try to force readings of texts, in the Old Testament for example, to be about Jesus when they clearly aren’t. What this Christocentric hermeneutic means is that everything else in the Biblical library is subordinate to what is seen in the life and teachings of Jesus. While this might seem to be a very agreeable statement, it often meets resistance. For example, take the two passages mentioned above, Leviticus 24 and Matthew 5, both of which are about how people who claim these texts as sacred should respond to injury and insult. Leviticus places a limit on retaliation; only do to the offender what has been done to you. Jesus’ teaching in

¹⁶ Midrash is a type of hermeneutic employed by Jewish scholars and rabbis that seeks to go beyond the text and fill in the gaps in stories. While it may not be grounded in literal, historical events, midrash is rich with deep meaning.

¹⁷ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 42.

¹⁸ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 93.

¹⁹ Marcus Borg, *Convictions*, (New York: Harper One, 2014), 81.

Matthew is starkly different; Jesus calls for no retaliation. Instead, Jesus calls for, what scholars like Walter Wink helpfully point out, a non-violent resistance to insult and injury.²⁰ These two texts do not teach the same thing, yet many fundamentalists will try to make them harmonize with one another. This attempt to make Matthew 5 and Leviticus 24 say the same thing is a result of how fundamentalists see the Bible, inerrant and infallible, and in turn the literalist hermeneutic they employ. However, a Christocentric hermeneutic frees the exegete to lift the teaching of Jesus above the rest of the Bible.

In addition to the helpful “Christocentric” language of Smith, William Webb introduces the concept of a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.” Webb defines this as “the most crucial component of the application process as it relates to cultural analysis, namely, the need to engage the redemptive spirit of the text in a way that moves the contemporary appropriation of the text beyond its original-application framing.”²¹

Essentially, Webb is arguing for an understanding of the text in its own cultural framework, but at the same time, not freezing the text in that particular time and place. Webb calls this the “XYZ” principle. If “Y” stands for the frozen words of the text found in the Bible, and “X” represents the original culture that produced the text, Webb argues that our culture stands between “Y,” the Bible, and “Z,” the ultimate ethic pointed to by the Bible.²²

For illustration purposes, notice this text, found in Deuteronomy 21:10-14:

When you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman whom you desire and want to marry, and so you bring her home

²⁰ See Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

²¹ William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 30.

²² *Ibid.*, 31-2.

to your house: she shall shave her head, pare her nails, discard her captive's garb, and shall remain in your house a full month, mourning for her father and mother; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. But if you are not satisfied with her, you shall let her go free and not sell her for money. You must not treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.

This passage is shocking to modern sensibilities, as it should be. However, Webb argues that text, for the culture that produced it (X), was a dramatic, humane leap forward in the treatment of women. He writes,

In defense of the Biblical text, we should note that Deuteronomy 21:10-14 is at least somewhat redemptive relative to the original culture (X). After all, the Israelite male had to wait one month, marry the girl, and in the case of divorce he could not sell her as a slave ... Compared to the horrible rape scenes that often accompanied ancient warfare (not unlike the rape camps of modern Bosnia) these biblical texts are clearly redemptive. Even in "ugly texts" like these, a redemptive spirit surfaces within the Bible, especially when it is read against the backdrop of ancient culture...When compared to the ancient treatment of women in war, the biblical text represents a measure of, or a greater movement toward, love and compassion. What we should live in our modern culture, however, is not the isolated words of the text but the *redemptive spirit* that the text reflects as read against its culture. In applying the text to our era, we do not want to stay static with the text (Y). Rather, we need to move on, beyond the text, and take the redemptive dimension of those words further to a more redemptive level (toward an ultimate ethic, Z).²³

Webb offers a helpful framework for understanding the radical nature of many biblical texts for their own time and culture, while also giving us a way of moving beyond what is now a morally dated text. Yesterday's radicality can become today's brutality when in a legalistic manner. The *lex talionis*, or Law of Retaliation, is another example of such a redemptive movement in the biblical text. While the concept of "eye for an eye" once limited excessive retaliation, it cannot be the ultimate goal for eliminating human aggression and violence. Thus, Jesus brings the *lex talionis* further by

²³ Ibid., 32-3.

calling his listeners to what the original command pointed but could not achieve: forgiveness.²⁴

Combining these two lenses or approaches into one, coherent hermeneutic (a Christocentric-Movement hermeneutic) allows us to approach the biblical text in a fresh way that respects the past, but at the same time, equips us to speak about the Bible helpfully in the contemporary world. Paired with the historical-metaphorical approach to understanding the text, this hermeneutic offers a way of dealing with difficult texts and issues—specifically the three we have made our focus up to this point—which the fundamentalist literalist approach cannot offer.

One concern about embracing this alternative approach is that it devalues the Bible, takes it less seriously. The fundamentalist approach begins with the supposition that “[t]he truth and authority of the Bible are grounded in its origin. As a divine product, it has a divine guarantee to be true and must be taken seriously as the ultimate authority about what to believe and how to live.”²⁵ The misconception here is that to take the Bible seriously means to take it literally. However, asking questions about composition, genre, historical context, intended recipients, translation, and other key factors is not to take the Bible less seriously. On the contrary, paying attention to these important elements that comprise a text in the library we call the Bible is to actually take it more seriously. In addition, asking how these ancient texts—many of which were radical in their day, but much less so in ours—point to an ultimate ethic, is actually taking them more seriously; this method requires much thoughtful exegesis.

²⁴ See the discussion above on page 68.

²⁵ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 9.

If the Bible is going to play a role in shaping Christian communities, then due diligence must be done in the exegesis of the texts. As Borg puts it, “To affirm that Jesus is the norm of the Bible does not mean that the rest of the Bible is irrelevant.”²⁶ It simply means that, as one puts on a corrective lens to improve eyesight, which allows the words on the page to become sharper and more easily recognizable, for Christians Jesus becomes that lens. His way of living and teaching become the litmus test, not only for the lives his followers live, but also for the Bible itself.

C. Summation

By embracing the historical approach to understanding what the Bible is, “a human product” that “tells us how our religious ancestors saw things, not how God sees them,” we are freed to wrestle with the text and employ all the best tools that scholarship offers: various types of criticism, archeology, etc.²⁷ So also, the metaphorical approach allow us to ask questions about meaning—trying to uncover what these texts and their authors are seeking to communicate—and not be bogged down with questions of how literal a particular text needs to be taken. Finally, the Christocentric hermeneutic, coupled with the historical-metaphorical approach, allows exegetes to have a lens through which to read and make decisions about the entirety of the Biblical library. Now, we will seek to apply this approach to one of the three issues that have been central to our discussion: same-sex relationships.

²⁶ Marcus Borg, *Convictions*, (New York: Harper One, 2014), 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

V. Enacting an Alternative Approach to the Bible.

“The Bible isn’t the problem. The problem is coming to the Bible with expectations it’s not set up to bear” -Pete Enns, The Bible Tells Me So

To demonstrate the effectiveness of the alternative way of understanding and reading the Bible we have just discussed, I will apply it to the issue of homosexuality in the biblical passages we addressed earlier. While this alternative hermeneutic is also effective on the issues of creation/climate change, and violence in the Bible, applying the hermeneutic in all these cases goes beyond the scope of this project. It will be clear, however, that this alternative approach can be applied to both issues, and many more, effectively.¹

A. Test Case: Homosexuality and the Bible

We have seen the traditional approach fundamentalists take toward the issue of homosexuality. Some are more extreme than others in their suggested responses, yet across the board there is a rejection of same-sex attraction, relationships, and marriages that is based on the biblical texts that are assumed to speak to the issue. In this chapter, I will take each of the so-called “Clobber Passages” and examine them against the backdrop of their own culture (X, in Webb’s hermeneutic) and where they stand in the Bible (Y). Finally, I will offer suggestions about what an ultimate ethic (Z) might look like through the Christocentric-Movement hermeneutic outlined above.

¹ While it falls beyond the scope of this project, the work of Phyllis Trible is an important contribution to the discussion of religion and human sexuality. See Trible, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. London: SCM Press, 1978.

B. Dealing with the Clobber Passages

1. Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorrah

The key moment in the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah is found in Genesis

19:4-11:

...the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down.

When taken at face value, this text has been assumed to be about the men of Sodom desiring to engage in same-sex relations with the men who were guests at Lot's home. However, further investigation into the cultural history and context of this text raises serious doubts about this assumption. One horrifying detail of this pericope is that Lot offers his own virgin daughter to the insatiable mob. While many conservative interpreters point to the mob's rejection of Lot's offer as proof that they were homosexuals, we must ask a further question: If this was a group of homosexual males, demanding to rape Lot's guests, why would Lot offer his daughters to them in the first place?

Daniel Helminiak offers a likely explanation. Helminiak argues that Lot's offer of his daughters has to do with ancient Near Eastern conventions of hospitality. He writes,

In desert country, where Sodom lay, to stay outside exposed to the cold of the night could be fatal. So a cardinal rule of Lot's society was to offer hospitality to travelers. The same rule is a traditional part of Semitic and Arabic cultures. This rule was so strict that no one might harm even an enemy who had been offered shelter for the night. So doing what was right, following God's law as he

understood it, Lot refused to expose his guests to the men of Sodom. To do so would have violated the law of sacred hospitality. If, in addition, the Sodomites did want sex with the town visitors, the offense against them would have been multiplied. For forcing sex on men was a way of humiliating them. During war for example, besides raping the women and slaughtering the children, the victors would often also “sodomize” the defeated soldiers. The idea was to insult the men by treating them like women. So part and parcel of the practice of male-male anal sex was the notion that men should be “macho” and that women are inferior, pieces of property at the service of men... To be the active partner was generally more acceptable, but to be the receptive partner was “unmanly.” Evidently, the objection was more to a man’s being “effeminate” than to his having sex with another man.²

Helminiak makes two important statements about this Sodom text. First, the issue is first and foremost about hospitality. Lot refuses to give the mob access to his guests, because he is bound by traditional Near Eastern hospitality customs. Later in the biblical text, this fact seems to be affirmed in the writings of the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, the writer says, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”³ There is no mention in this text about homosexuality; the sins mentioned here are excess and apathy toward those in need. Jack Rogers agrees that hospitality is a key component in a valid interpretation of this text. Rogers says, “These texts take us into an ancient Near Eastern world whose values are very different from ours. The central idea in these passages is the sacred obligation of hospitality for travelers (and the ways in which sinful people often violated this sacred obligation).”⁴

One writer in the Gospel tradition about Jesus picks up on this thread of hospitality/inhospitality as well. In Matthew 10, Jesus says to his twelve disciples, as he sends them out:

² Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 46.

³ Ezekiel 16:49.

⁴ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 67.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. *If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.*”⁵

Here we see Jesus’, or at least the community represented by the author of the Gospel

According to Matthew’s, view of the “sin of Sodom,” the sin of inhospitality.

Helminiak’s second assertion is that the underlying issue is not same-sex relations, but misogyny; being penetrated, as a woman would be during a sexual act, becomes the ultimate humiliation. For a modern example of this reality, we can look at the issue of prison rape. Scott Howard, an inmate who served time in the Colorado Department of Corrections, came forward with his story in 2010. While an inmate, Howard was, in his own words, “repeatedly raped, assaulted and extorted by members of a large, notorious gang.”⁶

This “large, notorious gang,” is known as the 211 Crew, a white supremacist group. Howard says the “211 leaders pressured him for money and demanded that he help them in an ambitious \$300,000 fraud scheme; their threats soon turned into physical attacks, then sexual assaults. He was forced to perform oral sex on gang members and anally raped.”⁷ Were the sexual assaults performed against Howard by a group of

⁵ Matthew 10:5-15 (emphasis added).

⁶ Alan Pendergast, “Prison Sexual Abuse Survivor Speaks Out,” *Prison Legal News*, December 15, 2011, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2011/dec/15/prison-sexual-abuse-survivor-speaks-out/>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

homosexual gang members? No. These acts were intended to degrade and humiliate the victim. After all, those performing the abuse did not assume the role of shame and degradation; if they had, they would not have carried out such acts. The goal of the abuse was to humiliate the victim by treating him like a woman; at the core of acts like this, whether in a Colorado prison, or in ancient Sodom, is not homosexuality, but misogyny.

Based on this idea, Hamilton writes, “I doubt any of the men of Sodom would have considered themselves homosexual by our definitions today. Genesis 18 tells us the people of Sodom regularly practiced evil. This attempted gang rape was just the latest in a long line of horrible things the people of Sodom had done.”⁸ Spong similarly writes, “Of course gang rape is wrong whether its style is homosexual or heterosexual ... But what does that have to do with the hopes and aspirations of two women or two men in the twenty-first century who love each other, and who want to live for and with each other in a partnership of intimacy and faithfulness and with the blessing of God?”⁹ Reading the text in this light, perhaps the “sin of Sodom” must be revisited. Could the “sin of Sodom” be less about sexuality and more about hospitality? If so, those who actively and aggressively refuse to make space for loving, same-sex relationships in today’s world—those who are inhospitable—could actually be committing the transgression found here in Genesis 19.

⁸ Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 269.

⁹ John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 132.

2. Leviticus 18 and 20: The Holiness Code

Two of the “Clobber Passages” are located within a section of the book of Leviticus known as the “Holiness Code,” a portion of the Hebrew Bible that emerged during the time of the Jewish Exile in Babylon. Spong explains, “This was written to assist the captive Jews to achieve their objective of keeping themselves apart from the people among whom they were forced to live. Such separation was the key to their survival in history. It was incumbent upon Jews as exiles to define themselves as both holy and different.”¹⁰ Some of the ways they kept themselves different were the observance of a Sabbath day of rest, the rite of circumcision, dietary (kosher) laws, and what we know today as the Holiness Code. Before we move further, let us turn to the texts themselves:

Leviticus 18:22: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13: If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

The key word in these verses, as we discussed previously, is *abomination*. The Hebrew word here is תועבה. Most modern English translations choose to render this word as we have it above, yet all translations are interpretations, so we must press further. One way to gain a closer look is to see how the word is used elsewhere in Leviticus. For example, take this passage from Leviticus 20:

You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; *you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems,*

¹⁰ Ibid., 122.

*which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.*¹¹

According to Helminiak, this passage is instructive, in that it defines something else as an *abomination*, the consumption of unclean animals. He writes, “Evidently, ‘abominable’ is just another word for ‘unclean.’ An ‘abomination’ is a violation of the purity rules that governed Israelite society and kept the Israelites different from the other peoples.”¹²

This being the case, if one were to claim that the death penalty should be given to homosexuals, then for consistency’s sake, one would also have to consent to the same fate for people who enjoy shrimp, catfish, or lobster, as well as those who do not groom themselves or choose their clothing based on the Holiness Code of Leviticus.¹³

Peter Gomes is right to ask, “When Christians ignore most of the Holiness Code and regard its precepts as irrelevant to a New Testament understanding of purity of heart, and yet cite Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality as the basis of their own moral position on that subject, one is led to wonder what is behind the adoption of this prohibition and the casting away of others.”¹⁴

One final note of interest on these two passages is that only male same-sex activity is condemned, not female. Why might the authors of the biblical holiness code

¹¹ Leviticus 20:25-26 (emphasis added).

¹² Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 56.

¹³ Friedman and Dolansky interestingly point out that the worship of other gods was also called an “abomination,” or *toebah* (transliterated from the Hebrew) for Israel. They point out, “Pagan worship by an Israelite is a *toebah* according to Deuteronomy—and it is identified as a breach of God’s covenant. But it cannot be *toebah* for a pagan, who is not a party to that covenant. On the contrary, there are texts that say that God apportioned the nations to the gods. This means that worship of other gods is *toebah* only for the Israelites, not for the pagans who worship those gods in their own religions.” By implication, one could pose the same question of the ban against male same-sex relations. For more, see Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky, *The Bible Now*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

¹⁴ Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1996), 154.

explicitly condemn male same-sex relations, and yet stay silent on female same-sex acts? Some argue that women are included implicitly; that even though the texts refer to two males, that is just the patriarchal convention of the day, and women should be assumed. However, as Friedman and Dolansky are careful to point out, other Levitical laws are inclusive of women. They point to a verse in the same chapter, Leviticus 20, as evidence that women were singled out in these types of laws.

“If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.”

As a result, Friedman and Dolansky write, “...if the law tells us when women are included and when they are not, we are on dangerous ground if we conclude that they are suddenly implicitly included in this one case.”¹⁵

Why, then, are women left out of the same-sex prohibition in the Levitical law? The most plausible explanation has to do with the ancient Near Eastern cultural context from which these laws emerged. Friedman and Dolansky point to *polygamy* as a possible reason for the silence of female same-sex acts:

In Israel (and among many other peoples) in biblical times, men could have many wives. They could also have other women—concubines—in their homes along with their wives. Men with two wives, or even harems, had opportunities for group sex and for voyeurism of female homosexuality. This is a common male fantasy...but for men in the ancient world it was an option, at least for the men of wealth who could afford it. They could arrange it, see it, even participate along with it on any given night. For those who believe that the biblical law codes were written by men, men were not about to forbid female-to-female contact...Now, the fact that biblical law prohibits male but not female homosexual acts tells us something important: it was not something about homosexuality itself—about relations with a person of the same sex—that was the issue. It was rather something specifically about *male-to-male sexual contact*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky, *The Bible Now*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

Now we have come full circle, back to the issue of misogyny. The issue here, according to Friedman and Dolansky, is not same-sex relations across the board, but male same-sex acts, because, as Leviticus puts it, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman.”¹⁷ The issue was not sex, but a man being treated as a woman. Friedman and Dolansky write:

The law in Leviticus against “laying a male the layings of a woman,” if understood as prohibiting any homosexual intercourse between men regardless of rank is unique in the ancient world. However, we need to understand it within the wider culture context in which the denigrating nature of male homosexuality is not tied to homoerotic desire but, rather, is regarded as a violation of a penetrated man’s dignity and thereby a socially degrading act. In other words, what the authors of Leviticus 18 and 20 may be prohibiting is not homosexuality as we would construe the category today but, rather, an act that they understood to rob another man of his social status by feminizing him.”¹⁸

Perhaps, just as we saw with the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, these Levitical texts actually say nothing about, what we would call today, same-sex relationships. It is likely that the ancients would not have had categories for such concepts. If Friedman and Dolansky are correct, and I believe they are, these texts are about the social status of males in ancient Israel, not sex.

3. 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1

As we turn to the New Testament the texts we discover present more of a challenge. Most Christians do not feel bound to the Levitical laws of the Hebrew Bible; this is evidenced in the reference to the Hebrew Bible as the “Old” testament or covenant, and the Christian Bible as the “New” testament. Prohibitions against same-sex relations

¹⁷ Leviticus 18:22.

¹⁸ Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky, *The Bible Now*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.

in the New Testament, then, are more authoritative for Christians. Here are the two texts, both of which are lists of vices:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10: Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Timothy 1:8-11: Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

We should keep in mind that every translation is an interpretation. The Greek of the New Testament must be translated into English, for example, but there are not always adequate, coterminous words to go from one language to another. The words translated in the NRSV above as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” are the Greek words *μαλακοι* and *αρσενοκοιται*. *Μαλακοι* is found in 1 Corinthians 6, and is translated in the NRSV as “male prostitutes.” Helminiak notes that the word “has no special reference to homogeneity.”¹⁹ *Μαλακος*, the singular form of the plural *μαλακοι*, is a common word in Greek, and according to Rogers, can best be translated as “‘soft’ and often connotes effeminacy, which in that culture was treated as a moral failing ... in the patriarchal culture of the time, lack of self-control and yielding to pleasures were both considered signs of effeminacy.”²⁰ Thus, *μαλακοι* is a wide category, not pertaining to sexuality at all, but instead to behaviors that were deemed to be more fitting of a woman.

Helminiak agrees with this interpretation of the word. He writes,

¹⁹ Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 105.

²⁰ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 71.

Effeminacy was simply not associated with male-male sex in the ancient world, though a man who allowed himself to be penetrated might be called “effeminate.” But on the other hand, *malakos* was also applied to men who primped themselves in order to attract women or who were lazy, wanton or loose. Besides as a contrast with “virile” or “manly” in certain texts, “undisciplined” or “weak” would translate *malakos* as well as “effeminate.”²¹

Again, even in the New Testament, misogyny still haunts the discussion.

The other word, *αρσενοκοιται*, is used in both the 1 Corinthian and 1 Timothy texts. While *μαλακοι* is a common word, *αρσενοκοιται* presents challenges because when Paul cites it in 1 Corinthians 6 (and the author of 1 Timothy 1 uses the same word as well) he “is using *αρσενοκοιτες* for the first time ever in either Greek or Jewish literature, thus making it very difficult to interpret.”²² Since this word is an innovation by Paul, there is no way to compare its use in other biblical, and non-biblical, texts, meaning we are left with the word itself, and the context in which Paul coined it, to sort out the meaning.

Αρσενοκοιτες is a compound word, etymologically composed of two root words. The first, *αρσενο*, is the Greek word that refers to male human beings. That is clear. The second, *κοιτες*, is the word for bed or bedroom, and carries the connotation, not just of having sex, but, according to Helminiak, “it refers to the active partner in sexual intercourse, the one who penetrates.”²³ *Αρσενοκοιτες*, then, refers to males who penetrate other males. Yet, what that means is not clear once the two words are combined. Does the word “man” refer to the one doing the penetrating, i.e. a man having sexual relations with a woman or another man, or does it refer to both the penetrator and the one being

²¹ Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 108-9.

²² Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 70. *Αρσενοκοιτες* is the singular of *αρσενοκοιται*.

²³ Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 109.

penetrated, i.e. both male. This requires an interpretive decision, because this word is an innovation of the author, Paul.

The two most plausible options are that the word refers to a type of male prostitute, a common reality of the ancient world. This then, would place the onus, not on the sexual act, but on the reality of prostitution, most likely in the context of a pagan cult.²⁴ The second, and most unnerving of the two, is that the word points to pederasty. Helminiak notes, “[T]he whole ‘model of homosexuality’ of the day was pederastic. That is, it always involved an older man and a young boy or youth.”²⁵ This is not what we know today as homosexuality. In fact, the use of *αρσενοκοιτες* in these vice lists, and the behaviors that follow them (“slave trading” in 1 Timothy, and “thieves and the greedy” in 1 Corinthians), should tip us off to the reality that the behaviors being addressed aren’t about faithful, monogamous, committed same-sex relationships.

When understood in context, then, these passages condemn both men who are lazy or unrestrained, as well as men who are engaging in sexual acts with young boys. Thus, Rogers argues, “The modern concept of ‘homosexual relations’ should by no means be read into Paul’s text, nor can we assume that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 ‘condemn all homosexual relations’ in all times and places and ways. The meanings of the word are too vague to justify the claim, and Paul’s words should not be used for generalizations that go beyond his experience and world.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 109-11.

²⁵ Ibid., 113.

²⁶ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 71.

3. Romans 1

The final text is, as previously noted, thought to be the most clear and forceful by many fundamentalists. In Romans 1, Paul is addressing the church at Rome, which is comprised of both Jewish and Gentile members. The cultural contexts of the two groups were drastically different, which led to conflict in many communities of the nascent Christian movement. Before discussing how Paul is trying to speak to this issue, let's examine the text once more:

...they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.²⁷

Paul is speaking about the impurity of Gentiles and their failure to worship the God that Jews believe is the one, true God. Instead, Paul asserts, they worshipped idols. According to Helminiak, Paul addresses the impurity of Gentiles strategically; he is seeking to make a larger point. Helminiak argues, “[Paul] wants to teach a lesson on morality, namely, violations of social expectations and impurities according to the Jewish Law are not the same thing as sin. So, in opening his letter to the Romans, Paul talks about impurity as one result of Gentile idolatry, and he mentions homogeneity as an example of such idolatry.”²⁸

²⁷ Romans 1. Again, the NRSV translation here is problematic. It uses the phrase “shameless acts,” when it clearly seems to be pointing to “shameful acts.” As I move forward with the passage, I will assume the latter meaning.

²⁸ Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 97.

Perhaps, however, Paul is doing something brilliant here. He begins the letter to the Romans by essentially playing in to the Jewish attitudes and biases against Gentiles. Helminiak writes, “At this point Paul appears to be sympathizing with the common Jewish feeling that the Gentiles are dirty. But this appearance is only a ploy. Paul will use this Jewish prejudice to teach his lesson about Christian community.”²⁹

What is this lesson? Paul brings the Jewish audience closer by seemingly agreeing with their prejudice, and then he lowers the theological boom:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”³⁰

Paul essentially turns the tables on his Jewish readers by arguing that all—both Jews and Gentiles—are in the same boat, because the purity that matters is not physical, but purity of heart. Thus, this passage in Romans 1 is not so much Paul condemning homosexuality, but Paul trying to raise the deeper issues that are dividing the community, namely physical purity verses purity of heart and conscience.

While this is convincing, it needs further support, which can be found by further examination. Paul’s use of *unnatural* to describe same-sex relations, which is clearly the topic, is a point of contention. What does Paul mean? The word for natural, in Greek, is φυσικς, while unnatural is παρα φυσικς. As we have already seen, understanding what a word means for an author is crucial, so we must ask if Paul uses this word anywhere else

²⁹ Ibid., 98.

³⁰ Romans 2:17-24.

in Romans. If he does, then it would be instructive for how we take his usage in Romans

1. Indeed, Paul uses the same language in Romans 11:24:

For if you have been cut from what is by nature (φυσιν) a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature (παρα φυσιν), into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.³¹

What makes this passage so instructive is that Paul uses the exact same words in reference to God's inclusion of the Gentiles into the family; it is an action of God that is being called *unnatural*, or *contrary to nature*, here. Rogers says that, for Paul, unnatural simply "is a synonym for 'unconventional.' It means something that is surprisingly out of the ordinary...to say that God did what is 'contrary to nature' or 'against nature' means God did something surprising and out of the ordinary."³²

Another issue found in Romans 1 is the phrase (in reference to men giving up "natural" relations with women) they were "consumed with passion for one another." The phrase in Greek, εξεκαυθησαν εν τη ορεξει αυτων ειςαλληλους, literally means "were inflamed in the craving of them to one another." It is a reference to unrestrained indulgence, not committed, monogamous, loving relationships between same-sex partners.

What, then, should we make of Paul's assertion that the idolatrous Gentiles "received in their own persons the due penalty for their error?" First, the phrase, "in their own persons" is a poor rendering of the Greek. The word being translated "own persons" is αυτοις, and is a pronoun better translated as "themselves." The best rendering, according to Helminiak, is "among themselves." He writes, "The reference is not to

³¹ Φυσις appears in the accusative case here, thus the different ending.

³² Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 74.

individuals and their persons but to the Gentiles as a whole.”³³ In addition, the word penalty, *αντιμισθια* in Greek, does not mean punishment, but simply *recompense or payment*. There is a difference between divine punishment and simply reaping what one sows. Helminiak notes, “The error Paul refers to is not homosexuality but Gentile idolatry. Idolatry is his concern throughout the whole of that chapter: they knew God but did not worship God. And the recompense that comes to the Gentiles for not worshipping God is the uncleanness that is a regular part of their culture.”³⁴

As with the Sodom story, it seems that using Romans to condemn and inflict pain on LGBTQ individuals actually goes against the spirit and purpose of Paul in writing the text; he was seeking to create equal footing in the Roman church, and it is often used in our day to do just the opposite for the LGBTQ community. A close, contextual, historical reading of Paul opens up alternatives to the exclusionary practice of many fundamentalist readings.

C. What have we learned?

By making use of the historical-metaphorical approach, we have been able to peel back the layers of the biblical text to see the culture and context that underlie the words on the page. Engaging with the original contexts and language has demonstrated that, far from condemning what we, today, call same-sex relationships, the Bible is actually silent. How can Christians move forward on the issue of same-sex relationships, if their sacred texts are silent? The answer is found in the historical-movement hermeneutic.

³³ Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 98.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 99. Remember, Paul is setting up his Jewish audience by painting the Gentiles to be unclean, impure. His move is to demonstrate that everyone is impure, not because of physical impurity, but because of their impure hearts.

D. Applying the Christocentric-Movement Hermeneutic

How does the Christocentric-Movement hermeneutic apply to the issue of same-sex relationships? On the surface one might not think that this hermeneutic could be helpful here. After all, Jesus never addresses the issue of same-sex relationships.³⁵ It is likely that the issue did not come up, because the ancient world in which he lived had no category for what we know today to be committed, monogamous, same-sex unions. Jesus' silence can be seen as problematic, as Helminiak points out. He says, "Without [Jesus'] actual statements, it is impossible to say what Jesus actually thought about homosexuality. But in this case his actions may speak louder than words."³⁶

I submit that Jesus' way of interacting with people, specifically in his meal practices and healings, gives us a clue into how he would receive people in same-sex relationships. Jesus regularly ate with, and performed healings for, people who were considered marginal in his day, and since the movement that began around him has worked so hard to marginalize the LGBTQ community, we need to look closely at his practice of inclusion.

Borg writes of Jesus' meal practice,

One of [Jesus'] most characteristic activities was an open and inclusive table. "Table fellowship"—sharing a meal with somebody—had a significance in Jesus' social world that is difficult for us to imagine. It was not a casual act, as it can be in the modern world. In a general way, sharing a meal represented mutual acceptance. More specifically, rules surrounding meals were deeply imbedded in the purity system. Those rules governed not only what might be eaten and how it should be prepared, but also with whom one might eat. Refusing to share a meal was a form of social ostracism. Pharisees (and others) would not eat with somebody who was impure, and no decent person would share a meal with an

³⁵ Ibid., 127. Helminiak suggests that it is possible that the account of Jesus' healing of the centurion's slave boy, in Matthew 8, could be a reference. However, he makes no definitive statement, and it seems unlikely.

³⁶ Ibid., 127.

outcast. The meal was a microcosm of the social system, table fellowship an embodiment of social vision.”³⁷

Jesus’ meal practice is instructive for us, then, because it reveals an inclusive program that was open and inviting to anyone who wished to participate. Notice the accusations Jesus’ opponents level upon him:

Mark 2:16: When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that [Jesus] was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Luke 5:30: The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

Luke 15:1-2: Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus’ meal practice regularly included and celebrated those who were excluded by the conventional religion/purity system of his day. When asked to explain his reasoning behind such a practice, Jesus told parables about the finding of a lost sheep and lost coin, and the return home of a wandering son, and these stories signified that Jesus believed these people—the ones who had no place at the table of the dominant religion—were included in God’s family and kingdom as well.³⁸

Further, Jesus practiced an inclusive healing ministry.³⁹ Jesus cured Jews and Gentiles alike. First, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus engages in a discussion with the Pharisees about *true purity*, which Jesus asserts comes from the inner life, the heart, and not from what one does or does not consume. He immediately leaves that discussion,

³⁷ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 55.

³⁸ See Luke 15 for the three parables mentioned here.

³⁹ How literal these signs and wonders should be taken is peripheral to this discussion. My assumption is that literal or metaphorical, these stories tell us something about Jesus’ practice of including people who were deemed surprising or unlikely.

goes into Gentile territory, and encounters a woman with a sick daughter. The exchange between them is captivating:

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.⁴⁰

Jesus' initial response, about throwing bread to dogs, is the expected response of a Jew to a Gentile.⁴¹ Yet, the woman's response is so powerful, that Jesus relents and heals her child. Scholars debate the details of this text, but perhaps the most interesting detail is that it comes on the heels of a discussion about purity, about what makes one clean or unclean. Jesus' healing, then, acts as a parable of his teaching.

A second example is found in Matthew 8:

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.⁴²

⁴⁰ Mark 7:24-30.

⁴¹ Jews regarded Gentiles as no better than dogs, thus the reference fits within Jewish prejudice of the day. Yet, Jesus goes beyond the prejudice to offer healing to this Gentile woman's daughter.

⁴² Matthew 8:5-13.

The point of interest here is that the man asking Jesus for the miracle is a Roman centurion—not simply a Gentile, but a member of the Roman domination system that was oppressing the people of Palestine in Jesus’ day—and Jesus responds with compassion.

Jesus’ practice of inclusive table fellowship and healings is programmatic; it was not coincidental. In addition, as we have seen, Jesus not only included Gentiles, but also women in his fellowship. This was scandalous for a patriarchal culture, such as we find in the first century Near Eastern world. Moreover, Jesus allowed the *unclean*, such as a leper, to touch him, putting his inclusivity further at odds with the purity based structure of his day.⁴³ Thus, it seems that a Christocentric hermeneutic would lead toward inclusivity of those who were being thrust to the margins by the religious system.

What, then, can we say about movement? Is there an XYZ movement with this issue? If we continue with the idea of Gentile inclusion, we can see some parallels within the New Testament. As we have seen, the line between Jew and Gentile was thick, so much so, that Paul had to address it, indirectly in some ways, through his letter to the Roman church. Within the book Acts, which chronicles the unfolding of the nascent Christian movement, we see the earliest Christians grappling with these issues.⁴⁴

In Acts 10, one of the foundational leaders of the new movement centered on Jesus had an experience, a vision of sorts, which called into question the us/them dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles. A man named Cornelius, a Gentile, has a vision in which God directed him to send for Peter. Before Cornelius’ messengers arrived, Peter experiences the following:

⁴³ Prior to the story of the centurion’s servant in Matthew 8, Jesus touches and heals a leper.

⁴⁴ The historicity of the stories in the book of Acts is peripheral to this project; for our purposes the narratives will demonstrate how, at least some, Christians thought about Gentile inclusion.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.⁴⁵

Following the vision, Peter goes to Cornelius’ home, announces to him the message of Jesus, and is surprised by the outcome:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.⁴⁶

The surprise is, that without becoming Jewish, these Gentiles are given the ultimate sign of God’s acceptance in Acts, the Holy Spirit. Peter’s question in response is both rhetorical and honest. This is new territory for this Galilean fisherman.

After the conversion of Paul, more and more Gentiles begin to respond to the message Jesus’ followers bring to them, and they all receive the Holy Spirit as a sign of their inclusion in God’s family. This reality brings this fragile new movement to the point of schism, as some ardent Jewish members demand these new Gentile converts submit to circumcision, that is, become Jewish before they become Christian. This leads to a definitive meeting of both sides of the debate in Jerusalem. Here, Peter and Paul share their experiences with the other early leaders, chief among them, James the brother of Jesus. Acts offers this window into the discussion:

⁴⁵ Acts 10:9-16.

⁴⁶ Acts 10:44-48.

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”⁴⁷

The response of James was groundbreaking:

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.”⁴⁸

In his response, James essentially says that Gentiles should not be compelled to become Jewish, but instead, should seek to honor Jewish sensibilities when they meet together. Paul, in one of his genuine letters, gives us our most reliable summation of this historic conference:

And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.⁴⁹

While this account and the one found in Acts vary slightly, they both indicate an historic moment of inclusion in the Christian movement. In this narrative we see the XYZ

⁴⁷ Acts 15:6-11.

⁴⁸ Acts 15:19-21.

⁴⁹ Galatians 2:6-10.

movement of Gentile inclusion occur. The story begins with Gentile exclusion, moves toward inclusion (with the string of circumcision attached), and finally toward the ultimate ethic of equality for Gentiles in the Christian church. An inclusion, mind you, that actually went against several of their sacred texts found in the Hebrew Scriptures that demanded separation from Gentiles. I would argue that it was their experience of Gentile conversion that led them to understand their sacred text differently. Perhaps that is what I am suggesting here.

There has been movement in many circles in the past thirty years; many churches welcome LGBTQ individuals now that would not have before. Instead of turning them away, they welcome them with strings attached (requiring life-long abstinence, disallowing certain activities such as involvement in church leadership and programs, or sacraments such as marriage). I am arguing, on the basis of historical exegesis, and the Christocentric-Movement hermeneutic, that more movement is necessary. Moving from X (exclusion) to Y (partial inclusion) is positive, but incomplete. It is possible, through this alternative hermeneutic and approach to the Bible, to move farther, to Z (full inclusion of LGBTQ individuals). Employing such a hermeneutic allows us to grapple with the biblical text seriously, while also welcoming the LGBTQ community with open arms. A reading of the Bible that makes space for more people at the table is better than one that excludes and demeans.

VI. Conclusion: A Way Forward

*“I hope for the day when everyone can speak again of God without embarrassment.”
-Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich**

Christianity in America is at a crossroads. The tension is palpable; it hangs in the air like a dense fog, before spilling out into the public sphere. Examples of this reality abound, but in these closing remarks, I will highlight two particular instances, one ecclesiastical, one both ecclesiastical and political.

In January 2015 a large evangelical church in the Nashville, Tennessee area, called GracePointe, issued a statement of inclusion for LGBTQ members. Prior to the inclusion statement, LGBTQ members were not permitted to engage in certain aspects of the community life. Volunteering, leadership positions, child dedication, and marriage were all experiences only heterosexual members were privileged to enjoy. The inclusion statement changed all of that. In the words of senior pastor, Stan Mitchell:

Our position that these siblings of ours, other than heterosexual, our position that these our siblings cannot have the full privileges of membership, but only partial membership, has changed. Full privileges are extended now to you with the same expectations of faithfulness, sobriety, holiness, wholeness, fidelity, godliness, skill, and willingness. That is expected of all. Full membership means being able to serve in leadership and give all of your gifts and to receive all the sacraments; not only communion and baptism, but child dedication and marriage.¹

The statement was met with mixed reaction. Many stood to applaud; many others chose to part ways with the church. According to a *Time.com* article, the decision by

¹ Elizabeth Dias, “Nashville Evangelical Church Comes Out for Marriage Equality.” *Time.com*. January 29, 2015. <http://time.com/3687368/gracepointe-church-nashville-marriage-equality/>.

GracePointe leadership to be inclusive of LGBTQ individuals has carried a cost for the community:

GracePointe's move is not without concrete consequences. January giving usually is about \$100,000—so far this month the church has brought in an estimated \$52,000. When GracePointe began the listening process in 2012, Sunday attendance averaged 800-1000. The Sunday he preached the inclusion sermon, attendance was 673, and two weeks later, it was down to 482.²

The move to include was not a hasty, knee-jerk reaction. Mitchell led the church through a three-year conversation process centered on the LGBTQ issue. This conversation involved teachings from Mitchell about how to rethink the “Clobber Passages,” group discussions, and town hall style meetings. Yet, when GracePointe chose to take the next step to inclusion, roughly 60 percent of attendees chose to part ways with the community. However, Gracepointe is seeing a growing influx of Millennials that have been attracted to the church's more inclusive approach. While 60 percent of the conservative membership has left, Gracepointe is reaching many of the disaffected Millennials who would not be part of the Christian tradition otherwise.

While these repercussions have been difficult, Mitchell still has a sense that GracePointe is moving in the right direction, and that his community has the opportunity to lead the way in forging a new path for Christianity in the future. Mitchell likens the current conversation about LGBTQ rights to the earlier civil rights campaigns in the US in the 1950s and 60s. “Could you be a church in Selma and not march, just handle your own community?” Mitchell asks. “I don't think I can do that. We are on the front edge of a movement that means so much.”³

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Realizing that Christianity in America is standing at an important moment of decision, Mitchell and GracePointe have chosen the path less trod. Yet, many fundamentalist Christians faced with the same crossroads experience are choosing the opposite path. In March of 2015, Indiana governor, Mike Pence, signed the “Religious Freedom Restoration Act” into law. This law, according to the Indiana.gov website, seeks to protect religious owners/operators of private business from government intrusion on their business practices. The law reads:

Religious freedom restoration. Prohibits a governmental entity from substantially burdening a person's exercise of religion, even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability, unless the governmental entity can demonstrate that the burden: (1) is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (2) is the least restrictive means of furthering the compelling governmental interest. Provides a procedure for remedying a violation. Specifies that the religious freedom law applies to the implementation or application of a law regardless of whether the state or any other governmental entity or official is a party to a proceeding implementing or applying the law. Prohibits an applicant, employee, or former employee from pursuing certain causes of action against a private employer.⁴

The essence of this law, according to supporters, is that it prevents the government from penalizing, for example, a Christian baker, for not wanting to serve a same-sex couple. Critics see this as a far more dangerous precedent that opens a veritable Pandora’s box of implications for civil rights in America.⁵ While this law came from a political process, its origins are obviously religious, particularly Christian. Many fundamentalists wish to be able to refuse whom they serve, and whom they don’t, through their businesses. However, does this stop only with sexuality? Could it spread to

⁴ <https://iga.in.gov/legislative/2015/bills/senate/101#digest-heading/>.

⁵ On the less serious side, some are using this new law to try to create a church centered on the use cannabis as a sacrament. For more, see Ferner, Matt. “Church Of Marijuana Gets Boost From Indiana's Anti-Gay ‘Religious Freedom’ Bill.” *Huffington Post*. March 30, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/30/indiana-marijuana-church_n_6970028.html?ir=Religion&ncid=fbklnkushpmg00000051/.

race, ethnicity, or even discriminating against other religious traditions? This is seen as a dangerous precedent of legalizing discrimination by many of the law's opponents.

While the source of this new law is Christian, so is the opposition. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has announced that they are considering an alternative site for their annual General Assembly meeting, slated to be held in Indianapolis this year. According to Lauren Markoe, of Religion News Service, this could have a major financial impact. She writes, "The General Assembly will bring more than 6,000 church members to whatever U.S. city the church decides upon and is expected to generate about \$5 million in tourism dollars."⁶ In the scheme of state budgets \$5 million might not be a catastrophic loss, but this form of protest does more than create a financial cost, it raises awareness that the new Indiana law is discriminatory.

In a statement addressing the new Indiana law, the church's general minister, Sharon E. Watkins, wrote, "Purportedly a matter of religious freedom, we find RFRA contrary to the values of our faith — as well as to our national and Hoosier values ... As a Christian church, we are particularly sensitive to the values of the One we follow — one who sat at table with people from all walks of life, and loved them all." The Christian Church (DOC), like GracePointe, is seeking to lead the way forward.

Christianity in America is clearly at a crossroads, and many Christians are struggling to decide which path to take. In this project, I have identified a way to begin to move forward. Specifically, I have identified resources for understanding what the Bible is (and conversely, is not), and a hermeneutic for interpretation that takes both the biblical

⁶ Lauren Markoe, "Disciples Of Christ Church Threatens A Boycott Over New Indiana Bill That Allows LGBT Discrimination." *Huffington Post*. March 28, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/28/disciples-of-christ-lgbt-indiana_n_6955558.html/.

text and cultural advancement seriously. While every question has not, and cannot, be answered here, I believe that any forward progress toward a more compassionate and generous Christianity in the future will begin with a reframed understanding of the Bible. Christianity needs the Bible, and the world needs a generous and compassionate Christianity. I believe we can have the best of both.

At the outset I outlined three concerns that were the impetus for this project. The first is the practical concern for the future of the Christian tradition. As we have seen with the example of Gracepointe, a change in approach can result in losses among conservative members, yet there have also been significant gains among Millennials. Second, there is the hermeneutical concern. The goal is not to perpetuate the fundamentalist approach to the Bible, but to offer an alternative hermeneutic that takes both the Bible and culture seriously. In these pages I have outlined a possible way to do just that by focusing on a historical approach that is Christocentric, and seeks to discover the ultimate ethic to which the biblical text points. Finally, there is the moral concern. Simply put, the approach put forth here opens up more room for more people to sit at the table. In keeping with Jesus' own practice, that seems to be the right thing to do.

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