



# Reimagining Queer Affirmation in an Evangelical Identity: Narratives, History, Wonder, and a Journey to Heal and be Seen

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**Reimagining Queer Affirmation in an Evangelical Identity:  
Narratives, History, Wonder, and a Journey to Heal and be Seen**

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*Dedicated with gratitude to  
my parents, Wayne and Miho Jansen,  
my mentors, Jeff Bouman and Rev. Cody J. Sanders,  
and my Calvin University friends:*

*Your spirit of love, wisdom, and radical compassion has saved lives.*

### *Introduction*

My desire to write and reflect on the historical, theological, and experiential contexts of being young and queer in evangelical America is a desire to make space for people to be, to breathe, and to kindle a flame of wonder and mystery that is often snuffed out far too quickly in spiritual circles that do not affirm LGBTQ+ experience and understanding. My desire comes from personal reflection – one that is grateful for my parents, mentors, and friends who held me close as I came out, and one that is frustrated by the reality that so many young, sacred,<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ lives are not granted that same loving response. Philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson writes about how “other people’s stories about [us] are often more authoritative than the person’s own self-told stories.”<sup>2</sup> To an extent, who each of us are depends on what those around us allow us to be. Acknowledging this interdependency of identity formation is crucial in coming to understand that folks who find themselves in a community that associates their identities and

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<sup>1</sup> Mt. 5:14.

<sup>2</sup> Cody Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide, and the Souls of Queer Folk* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 66.

experience (and even honest questions) as an abomination worthy of hell<sup>3</sup> are, to an extent, limited and defined by that authoritative identity coercion. Every soul deserves the space to breathe and to be released. Sharing first-hand stories is key to reclaiming that breath.

This paper explores several spheres of commonly shared Christian LGBTQ+ experiences and questions. My hope is that through the sharing of my own story here, queer folks who find or have found themselves in situations resonant with mine can encounter a glimmer of solidarity amid what is often a lonely experience of LGBTQ+ survival in non-affirming Christian spaces. Through the exploration of the term “evangelical”, my hope is to make sense of a label and identity that has been shaped both by biblical and extra-biblical history and current events, inviting queer folks in evangelical spaces to consider the wider avenues of an often seemingly narrowed understanding of evangelicalism. Lastly, I write on the themes of silence and wonder in hopes of reclaiming our humanity and visibility, lamenting the reality of what is and what has been, yet reimagining also what could be.

### *Narratives as One of Many*

As I share my personal narrative of making meaning with my queer and evangelical Christian identities, I want to acknowledge that even within an evangelical queer experience, there is a wide diversity. While my experience took place in generally non-affirming or neutral congregations and communities, for others who grew up queer and evangelical, their context may have been welcoming and affirming. This project does not intend to discredit or make invisible the existence of LGBTQ-affirming evangelical spaces, nor does it intend to generalize the experiences of non-affirming Protestant Christian spaces, but rather focuses on common

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<sup>3</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: how white evangelicals corrupted a faith and fractured a nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 97, 197. Sanders, 57, 61.

themes and realities that many evangelical spaces may share, as well as highlighting the challenges of LGBTQ+ folks who do face marginalization, rejection, violence, and erasure in evangelical spaces. Each act of storytelling brings forth a piece of the never-ending process of understanding the fuller picture of the vastness that is LGBTQ+ experience in evangelical Christian spaces.

Additionally, when I address the challenges, frustrations, and the hurtful and dangerous patterns observed in evangelical Christian movements, these discussions are not intended to label evangelicalism as fundamentally flawed, evil, or ill-willed. Rather, it is to illuminate an observation and analysis of the ways in which certain patterns, use of language, and other factors impact marginalized queer Christian lives, and to begin to explore where healing, reclamation, and reimagination can take place.

### *Finding Myself, Finding Welcome*

“We see it. We see it. We see it.”

These simple, beautiful, and genuine words pierced my heart, a heart which was both racing and glowing as I received my pre-ordination blessing. Racing because of the overwhelm and excitement of standing before my masked-and-distanced congregation as they affirmed, in unison, the call to ministry that they see in me, and warm and glowing because as I looked out to the dozens of outstretched hands and met the eyes of my beloved family of Old Cambridge Baptist Church, I knew that they meant these words wholeheartedly.

If I told my 17-year-old self that in a few years’ time I would be working towards a master’s degree in ministry, pursuing ordination with the American Baptist Churches USA, and providing interfaith chaplaincy services and spiritual care to LGBTQ+ college students and

hospital patients, there is no way I would have believed it. The more my tradition made me feel unnatural because of who I was, the more eager I felt to escape my Christian burden. My years of childhood leading up to my freshman year of college were saturated with fear, shame, and privacy, hidden underneath a façade of smiles, busyness, and pursuing my academic and church responsibilities wholeheartedly. Though I would say that I was a relatively happy kid growing up, I was afraid of coming to terms with an identity that revealed itself to me with each passing year – a sin supposedly so evil that my community avoided naming it altogether.

As I would often practice my trombone for jazz ensemble in the practice rooms of my high school music building, I would catch myself looking into the full length mirror on the wall across the room, seeing not only myself but the me that I was hiding underneath my skin. Longing, panicking, I would try to confess the words in my head, working up the courage to admit the reality outloud, “I am gay.” For years these words never came out. The fear that my queerness would manifest itself if I even uttered it into my inner speech was so terrifying that I found myself confessing daily this unspeakable sin, begging for God to take it away from me. I was hopeful that the repetition of my confession would magnify my chances of forgiveness and restoration to straightness. I was internalizing through a number of biblical verses that I was an abomination,<sup>4</sup> worthy of death<sup>5</sup> and unworthy of inheriting the kingdom of God,<sup>6</sup> shameful and unnatural,<sup>7</sup> for in my American evangelical missionary context in Japan, there was often no commentary on what these verses were truly getting at other than, simply, “the Bible says so. This is the Word of the Lord.”

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<sup>4</sup> Lv. 18:22, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> Lv. 20:13.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Co. 6:9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Ro. 1:26-27.

There was a period of time in high school when I became so terrified about coming to terms with my sexuality. A part of this fear came from the fear of hell, as salvation from hell was a common topic in weekly chapel services at school. Hell felt so close. Another part of it was witnessing the way that my more effeminate classmates were teased, bullied, and ostracized. Terrified that I too could be teased and excluded if outed, I deserted a dear friend of nine years who was already being teased for his supposedly feminine mannerisms and voice. The rejection of this student's dignity and right to thrive in our shared space, which I was guilty of contributing to, nearly ended in his suicide. Shocked at the realization that we nearly lost a fellow classmate, I thought, *surely this can't be right*. There is something wrong about being so scared about my sexuality. *Why were we endangering the lives of our fellow classmates simply because of who they were?*

Regardless of these simmering questions, I remained frightened to even entertain the possibility that affirming such an identity was okay. I would stay awake in bed for hours, repeating and recycling the very same words that a distressed, blood-sweating Christ prayed before his torture, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done."<sup>8</sup> On one hand, there was a comfort in saying these words, knowing that I was praying to a God who knew pain and distress, in the same words of Christ in survival. On the other hand, I felt ashamed to be quoting Christ in my prayer, for his distress was in light of an ultimate sacrifice for humanity, while my distress was about a supposed sin and abomination that I could not shake off. Compounded with this conflict was the increasing frustration of not being "healed", "forgiven", "converted" to my so-called natural orientation despite my dedicated prayers. I was focusing on the first part of Christ's prayer, "if You are willing, remove this cup from Me." However, as I reflect on the second part of this prayer – "not My will, but Yours be

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<sup>8</sup> Lk 22:42, NASB.

done” – I come to realize the depth that this part of the prayer holds. Perhaps there is something to be said about why this cup of suffering was not taken from me and for my will, but rather for Godself to be revealed in the reality of my being.

In my freshman year of college at Calvin University, I came out to my close friends, who then stayed up with me as I called my parents in Japan from the dorm prayer room at two in the morning. From this moment, I noticed that in receiving the embrace of my friends in my vulnerable and authentic confessions, in hearing the affirmations of love from my parents despite their initial shock and grief, through the experience of falling in love, and through accepting and pursuing that love for the first time, deeper dimensions of what brave and full love can feel like were revealed to me – something I had not experienced in my quiet, lonely journey of suppression. The American Franciscan priest Richard Rohr talks about a similar moment of a deeper self discovery when receiving the experiences and support of the world and people around him: “I discovered depths within myself that I never knew were there . . . and it all came from within me!”<sup>9</sup> The truth had in fact set me free to experience a fuller encounter of the nature of God’s perfect love through its reflection in others and in myself. Though I only came out to my most intimate family and friend circles during my college years and remained hidden in the spheres of my life on campus and with family that felt unsafe, the freedom to attempt to fathom this Great Love by way of coming out was something I am grateful for to this day. Furthermore, this process of trusting others and the questions from within me kindled the growing realization of the validity and wisdom of human experience alongside scripture.

Regardless of the fact that I encountered God living within my experiences of coming out, rebirth, and love, the discomfort of living out this new truth in my evangelical Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a forgotten reality can change everything we see* (New York: Convergent Books, 2021), 115.



context remained an obstacle to obtaining a fuller comfort. What was behind the difficulty and discomfort of being gay in an evangelical community? Was it evangelicalism as a whole, or one interpretation of it? Was there potential for harmony between my LGBTQ identity and evangelical theology? What did it even mean to be evangelical? Even as I write this today, my home denomination of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) recently decided to split over clashing theologies on same-sex and LGBTQ matters. While there is hope to be found in the newness of a denominational structure that allows justice work in action to be done, it is also difficult to affirm a wider hope for harmony and healing when denominations continue to split over these issues around who we are.

### *Who is an Evangelical?*

It wasn't until my senior year in college when I timidly asked my college mentor, "are we evangelical?" I not only felt stupid for not knowing the answer to this question after four years at my Christian college but also felt the need to ask, as no one at Calvin University really boldly self-identified as such. This question came amid the news of the suspension and departure of Larycia Hawkins – the first African-American woman to be tenured at the evangelical Christian Wheaton College – for wearing a hijab in embodied solidarity with Muslims, and stating that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.<sup>10</sup> As I saw a fellow sibling in Christ suspended for a theological statement that I did not find problematic, it raised questions about whether I identified as an evangelical Christian myself, and what particular evangelical theologies dominated a space far more diverse than what was presented in mainstream evangelical culture and thought. Was Wheaton College's approach to evangelical Christian theology one that limited

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<sup>10</sup> Ruth Graham, "The Professor Suspended for Saying Muslims and Christians Worship One God," *The Atlantic*, December 17, 2015.

a fuller expression of the diversity of evangelical theologies? If I, too, agree with Professor Hawkins' theology on a shared God of the Book between Muslims and Christians, does that make me un-evangelical?

It is likely that our modern hesitancy to define evangelical Christianity is due to the reality that its theological definition and cultural connotations have formed split perceptions. While the word's "very etymology suggests 'good news' . . . [it] has, in many cases, become lazy shorthand not only for white, rural, conservative Protestantism but also for devotion itself."<sup>11</sup> Even the American evangelical Christian celebrity figure Billy Graham, when asked to define "evangelical," remarked "Actually, that's a question I'd like to ask somebody too."<sup>12</sup> The first Latinized form of the word *evangelium* was first used by Martin Luther, the seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation and namesake of Lutheranism, to refer to non-Catholic churches birthed by the Protestant Reformation.<sup>13</sup> If we choose to define the term "evangelical" based on its etymology ("good news") and its original use by Luther, we end up with a considerably broader definition where various methods and interpretations of Protestantism and the sharing of the good news may be welcome. If we look, however, at the connotations that the word now carries in our modern American context, our scope narrows: "To the pollster, it is a sociological term. To the pastor, it is a denominational or doctrinal term. And to the politician, it is a synonym for a white Christian Republican."<sup>14</sup>

Defining "evangelical" may also be difficult because the tradition lacks a central governing body or figure, like the pope in the Catholic tradition. Perhaps the closest we come to this is the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), of which 40 Christian denominations and

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<sup>11</sup> Matt Brennan, "Commentary: The story we're told about 'evangelicals' is wrong. 'The Black Church' aims to fix that," *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Merritt, "Defining *Evangelical*," *The Atlantic*, December 7, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Merritt, "Defining *Evangelical*."

<sup>14</sup> Merritt, "Defining *Evangelical*."

roughly 45,000 churches are members. Though the NAE is in no way the sole and central authority of evangelical identity, one can get a sense of what distinctives and characteristics are shared among these denominations: the four primary distinctives of conversionism, or the necessity of a transformational “‘born-again’ experience,” biblicism, or the belief in the Bible as the “ultimate authority,” activism, or the active “demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts,” and crucicentrism, or “a stress on the [redemptive] sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, while other common themes and images arise when we hear the term “evangelical” today, the core shared beliefs within the association are characterized by the centrality and emphasis of Jesus, the Bible, salvific conversion experience, and evangelism.

However, as we look to define evangelical identity beyond doctrinal and denominational definitions, acknowledging that the term carries modern cultural connotations of white, rural, conservative, and republican Protestantism, it becomes clear that evangelical identities that aren’t white, rural, conservative, or republican lose the space to thrive in this shared identity. Race, geography, and political affiliation do not define the original use of the term “evangelical,” as we consider the Black Church predates the United States itself, having forged a unique synthesis of “the religious fervor of evangelical Christianity . . . with the emotive religious traditions brought from West Africa.”<sup>16</sup> Often in direct opposition to white evangelicalism, Black evangelicalism played a key role in propelling the abolition of slavery and strengthening the civil rights movement, in addition to its influence on the arts – gospel, blues, jazz, and even disco.<sup>17</sup> If our definition of evangelicalism plays along with the dominant and limited white evangelical

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<sup>15</sup> “What is an Evangelical?” National Association of Evangelicals, December 20, 2021, <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical>.

<sup>16</sup> Anthea Butler and Jonathan Walton (eds.), “The Black Church,” *American Experience*, PBS.

<sup>17</sup> Matt Brennan, “Commentary: The story we’re told about ‘evangelicals’ is wrong. ‘The Black Church’ aims to fix that,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2021.

narrative, we are guilty of yet again rendering Black evangelical denominations “invisible.”<sup>18</sup> We must also consider the nature of immigrant-majority evangelical Christian communities, and how their communities are also overshadowed by a majority white evangelical tradition.

While it may be impossible to combine all representations of this landscape of traditions to form a single agreed upon definition of “evangelical” as defined by its etymology and shaped by its modern connotations, the invitation to consider what we are missing in our definitions of this scope of Protestantism opens up the possibilities of a wider evangelicalism more receptive to our varied and personal theologies that our lived experiences bring to the table. If you find yourself asking the same question, “am *I* evangelical?” there is validity to your spiritual identity and journey whether you claim that label or not. Though, how might this question widen our considerations to the wide breadth of evangelicalism that may not be evident in the potentially narrow evangelical spaces that you find yourselves in? Perhaps an exploration of what is missing in the broader definition of the term serves as a way to reclaim that evangelical identity when we realize all that being evangelical could or should be, and in fact already is, even if it is hidden or overshadowed by a dominant sect of the movement.

### *History of Threats and Fears*

The powerful and dangerous practice of fearful scapegoating as a means to maintain safe theological stability has been prevalent throughout Christian history, with subjects ranging from nuclear threat, Islam, and LGBTQ+ lives. How has this pattern been perpetuated over time, and what has it done to its instigators and victims? Historians Kristin Kobes du Mez, Kevin Kruse, and author Julie Rodgers illuminate the patterns of fear mongering, the “fabrication of new enemies,” and the maintaining of a sense of urgency and crisis in the language used by many

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<sup>18</sup> Brennan, “Commentary: The story we’re told about ‘evangelicals’ is wrong.”

evangelical leaders in positions of authority.<sup>19</sup> Rodgers, who grew up in the evangelical tradition and was the first openly gay person to be hired at an evangelical Christian college, describes how her spiritual mentor during her teenage years coached her in forming a testimony that portrayed her as “an innocent victim of the secular gay agenda,” which “played right into the fears of conservative audience members.”<sup>20</sup> American evangelist and son of Billy Graham, Franklin Graham, described Islam as “a very evil and wicked religion.”<sup>21</sup> Televangelist Pat Robertson described Muslims as “worse than the Nazis” and evangelical Christian author and founder of Focus on the Family, James Dobson, spoke of Islamic fundamentalism as “one of the most serious threats to American families.”<sup>22</sup> Prior to 9/11, the threat against American Christians was “godless communism,” propelled by the “forces of the anti-Christ.”<sup>23</sup> As Kruse writes about the rising nuclear anxiety of the Cold War, “the Soviet Union discovered the bomb, and the United States rediscovered God.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, it is not wrong for one in the state of helplessness to feel the need to turn to a higher power amid a climate of instability and a sense of precarity of the future. We see a parallel of this kind of response to helplessness in King David’s prayer to God for the destruction of his enemies.<sup>25</sup> However, this turns harmful and dangerous in evangelical Christian spaces when the enemy characterization is inaccurately magnified. The identity, force, or group of people labeled as the “enemy” is “othered” in evangelical Christian spaces, and this enemy mindset dehumanizes the humans caught within the enemy label, especially in Christian spaces where

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<sup>19</sup> Du Mez, 100, 219.

Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 36, 49, 53.

Julie Rodgers, *Outlove: A Queer Christian Survival Story* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Rodgers, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Du Mez, 219.

<sup>22</sup> Du Mez, 219-220.

<sup>23</sup> Kruse, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Kruse, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Ps. 55:15.

“enemy” and “anti-Christ” may be used hand-in-hand. In this use of language, the othered enemy not only becomes less human, but evil and against Christ. Furthermore, the aggressive and militant language used as a combative response to counter these “enemies” promotes a violent and further dehumanizing mindset. Conservative televangelist Jerry Falwell Sr. often used the term “homosexual revolution,” calling for an equally revolutionary reclamation to fight the “moral decay” of America.<sup>26</sup>

As seen in Falwell’s use of apocalyptic and alarmist language, the fabrication of new enemies sustains a sense of vulnerability and a need for protection among evangelical audiences exposed to this rhetoric – danger is everywhere, outsiders are enemies, and national threats called for “unrestrained militarism.”<sup>27</sup> Queer lives and LGBTQ+ narratives have clearly fallen victim to this fear mongering in a number of evangelical spaces, being dehumanized in the pattern described above. In this historical pattern of magnifying threats and fears to mobilize congregations to respond in urgency, the words of 1 John 4:18 appear equally urgent in response: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...” Du Mez suggests that LGBTQ+ issues and transgender rights are particularly threatening to many evangelical leaders due to its unrelatability to the established framework of masculinity and understanding of manhood in many conservative Christian spaces.<sup>28</sup> How might these patterns of fear transform when our communities work to reclaim love unrestrained by fear?

### *On Masculinity*

Remaining hidden, ashamed, yet dedicated to “fight” and “conquer” my sin through prayer and works in my childhood, I grew up noticing these militant, combative words and

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<sup>26</sup> Du Mez, 97.

<sup>27</sup> Du Mez, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Du Mez, 241.

themes throughout the tradition I was surrounded by. Du Mez writes about American evangelical movements that have over time found ways “to define Christian manhood in a manner that sanctified aggression,”<sup>29</sup> in slaveholding, World War I, and the character of the presidency, to name a few.<sup>30</sup> This movement in the early 1900s to “‘re-masculinize’ American Christianity” in response to a belief that the future of white American civilization was at stake,<sup>31</sup> insisted that the faith was essentially militant, warlike, and called for evangelicals to “take the offensive, before it was too late,”<sup>32</sup> as proclaimed at the first meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942. Even as we look today at the trend of militant masculinity within the evangelical Christian landscape, it is not surprising to see that “more than any other religious demographic in America, white evangelical Protestants support preemptive war, condone the use of torture, and favor the death penalty.”<sup>33</sup> As a queer Christian who felt very much out of line from my community’s expectations of standard masculine identity, I was afraid to be around men, particularly hypermasculine men, as my own male identity felt unnatural, lacking in the wider community’s expectations of maleness, of “sanctified aggression.”

Du Mez writes extensively about the many influential evangelical Christian leaders who perpetuated aggressive masculine interpretations of scripture within the tradition, such as Eric Metaxas. Through his conservative radio outlets, speeches, and written works, Metaxas pointed to John Wayne’s “toughness and swagger” as the answer to “what makes a man great.”<sup>34</sup> Evangelical Christian author John Eldredge also writes on militant masculinity, arguing that “God created all men to long for ‘a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue,” and uses Matthew 11:12 to justify what he claims is natural male design, “that being a warrior is

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<sup>29</sup> Du Mez, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Du Mez, 16-18.

<sup>31</sup> Du Mez, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Du Mez, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Du Mez, 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Du Mez, 243-4.

essential to being a man.”<sup>35</sup> However, Calvin University professors Mark Mulder and James K. A. Smith are quick to point out that what Eldredge claims is God’s natural creation of man is in fact ascribing to the moment of the Fall, as “war, conflict, and enmity resulted from human’s sinfulness,” and not from God’s loving design.<sup>36</sup>

Focus on the Family founder James Dobson also contributed to the perpetuation of a narrow and binary understanding of gender, arguing that “men drive self-esteem by being *respected* [and] women feel worthy when they are *loved*.”<sup>37</sup> Not only does this narrow the possibilities of the depth of human relationships that we see in God’s own dynamic and radical love for us – a love not bound to gender roles and restrictions – but statements like these allow for people to entertain and act on the conclusion that women do not need respect, and that men do not need to feel worthy by being tenderly loved. So much is lost when roughly half of a community is not guaranteed that equal dignity and respect, and roughly the other half of the community fears that longing for worthiness of tender love threatens their manhood.

Du Mez also writes throughout her book about the conservative Christian preference for and reverence of American presidents and presidential candidates who embody these images of militant, heteronormative masculinity that have been perpetuated over the years in the broader evangelical Christian cultural context.<sup>38</sup> Aligning with this preference, evangelical Christians were generally infuriated by leaders like Jimmy Carter, whose “wimp factor” was elevated by the absence of that familiar hypermasculinity, and “he wore cardigans and he smiled too much.”<sup>39</sup>

My inability to carve out a space for my male identity within these bounds of sanctified aggression not only made me feel afraid, but invisible. In the same way that the movement to

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<sup>35</sup> Du Mez, 174-6.

<sup>36</sup> Du Mez, 176.

<sup>37</sup> Du Mez, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Du Mez, 17, 271.

<sup>39</sup> Du Mez, 102.



“re-masculinize” American evangelicalism promoted spaces that more easily embraced violence, the sense of invisibility experienced by many Christians who don’t identify with this same hypermasculinity is a form of violence in the erasure of diverse identities. Furthermore, hypermasculine and militant themes perpetuated in the evangelical male playbook does not only erase the diversity of masculine experience across LGBTQ+ identities, but even places unhealthy pressures and expectations on straight, cisgender men and women in evangelical traditions as they are told who they *can’t* be, despite the lack of Biblical grounding in these expectations. Fear appears to take grounding instead, threatening diversity into silence.

### ***On Silence and Invisibility***

#### *Violent Silence and the Sin of Indifference*

The sense of invisibility that I felt amid the expectations of masculinity in the church was compounded by the silence of my home congregation on all matters LGBTQ+. The territory was rocky, the topic was taboo, and the uncertainty of the path ahead magnified the fear. The words “gay,” “same-sex,” “queer,” and “trans” felt like blasphemy – profanity unworthy to be uttered in a house of God. I can still feel the intensity of my chest tightening, my breath stopping, and my shoulders flinching at the sound of these words in the rare moments that they surfaced in conversation. I name this silence violent because of the lives of LGBTQ+ people that have been threatened and taken because of it. How we use language impacts our being, as Judith Butler argues, because we are, among other things, linguistic beings: “Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be?”<sup>40</sup> Of all the many ways God made us to express and encounter all that is around us, God made us beings of speech, song, and voice. In the same way that language has the power to lift up or injure our

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<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1-2.

being, when we feel silenced and invisible at the hands of language and how it is withheld, our nature as linguistic beings is injured by this linguistic ostracization.

A church's indifference to the urgency of lives at stake also contributes to the perpetuation of queer invisibility. As Episcopal priest Liz Tichenor writes, "Too often the church has said, 'Yes, we support you, but it's not quite the right time' or 'Yes, we're moving in that direction, but you need to be patient.' The call for patience is all too often a veiled call for continued complicity with oppression."<sup>41</sup> While this indifference may feel gentler to us than outright condemnation or ostracization, it perpetuates a sense that LGBTQ+ inclusion and survival does not take priority over the comforts of the way things are for the majority of the congregation whose lives aren't at stake.

In each of our human journeys for visibility and home, what happens when we don't see ourselves in the channels we consider sacred? At first, a question like this never arose in my mind, as missionary kid Manato would hear the classic "go and make disciples of all nations"<sup>42</sup> at church, and think, *I'm doing that!* Seven-year-old Manato would hear Christ's words, "let the little children come to me,"<sup>43</sup> and would know, *I have a place in God's world.* And the Sunday school favorite, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,"<sup>44</sup> assured all of us that our faith in Christ alone would grant us an eternal place in the kingdom of God. Home in the church felt more distant as I began to see less of myself in the scripture that was quoted at me.

Continuing on the topic of language's role in violence, indifference, and erasure, many Protestant Christian schools have attempted and failed to maintain the visibility and genuine

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<sup>41</sup> Dani Gabriel, "Why I led a renaming ceremony for my young transgender congregant," *Sojourners*, May 22, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Mt. 28:19, NIV.

<sup>43</sup> Mt. 19:14, NIV.

<sup>44</sup> Jn 3:16, NIV.

experience of queer students on their campuses when navigating questions of sexual orientation and gender identity with faith. Those of us who identify as LGBTQ+ and have attended an evangelical Christian university have most likely come across these sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) statements with unease, to say the least. The Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) statement on SOGI, which is commonly used as a template for evangelical Christian higher education SOGI statements, opens with an affirmation that “every person must be afforded compassion, love, kindness, respect, and dignity,”<sup>45</sup> and denounces harassing and hateful behavior. However the statement also describes the image of God as being represented in the complementarity of the binary male and female genders, which is not only a confined understanding of the image of God, but perpetuates a dangerous sense of invisibility toward our intersex, nonbinary, and transgender siblings.<sup>46</sup> The ADF’s SOGI statement also associates an ambiguous sense of queer expression of affection with bestiality, incest, pornography, and adultery,<sup>47</sup> further distancing LGBTQ+ members of these institutions from trusting their aforementioned commitment to compassion, love, kindness, and dignity. When evangelical Christian institutions craft these statements to “proactively defend against discrimination lawsuits,”<sup>48</sup> those of us who feel labeled by these statements as sinful, immoral, and “other”, question whether there is any loving wonder in these statements, or if it is a façade of love, imperfect, that is driven by fear.<sup>49</sup>

Elevating and illuminating queer experience in evangelical Christian spaces by way of narrative is important because of the significant impact that poor and/or lack of care in these spaces has on LGBTQ+ students. If over 98 percent of LGBTQ+ youth in the United States have

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<sup>45</sup> Julia Smith, “SOGI Statements and LGBT Student Care in Christian Schools,” *International Journal of Christianity and Education*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, 2.

<sup>49</sup> 1 Jn 4:18.

experienced homophobic language, and over 90 percent of them feel distressed by this experience,<sup>50</sup> and only 50 percent of LGBTQ students at Christian institutions like Calvin University feel emotionally safe,<sup>51</sup> our livelihood and life itself is at risk and in need of care amid the violent silence. In his book *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World*, Cláudio Carvalhaes offers a prayer of solidarity with people who face oppression perpetuated by ignorance and the “sin of indifference” of those who fail to see wholeheartedly the humanity of all souls. Perhaps we may hold this prayer close as we hope for renewal and healing in places that have injured us or are hurting us in this moment:

God of hope,  
 God who opens hearts,  
 Our people are suffering  
 because they don't have documents,  
 they have been oppressed, abused,  
 hurt, scared, despised.  
 They live in anxiety every day.

Our people are suffering  
 because of lack of confidence,  
 strength, courage, support.  
 They have been isolated,  
 detached from society.  
 Our people are suffering;  
 they suffer from the sin of indifference.

Others are ignorant to our pain.

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<sup>50</sup> J. G. Kosciw et al., “The 2019 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation’s schools,” *GLSEN*, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, 5.

They do not see the ways they hurt us.<sup>52</sup>

### *Divine Revelation in Silence*

At the same time that silence can be felt as violent and harmful as described above, silence can also be a gift when it cultivates life and makes space to listen and remember. In other words, our experiences of weaponized silence should not turn us against silence as a whole, but rather reclaim the beauty that silence can cultivate. Psalm 62 illuminates the quiet hoping, waiting, and listening for the divine: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.”<sup>53</sup> In the practice of contemplative prayer, people make space to dwell on a word or passage from scripture, repeating and waiting in silence, surrendering to the revelations that can surface in this silence.

Harvard anthropology and religion professor David Carrasco also talks about silence, and how one can “hear the silence” when it is shared in community by a group of people.<sup>54</sup> Over the past few years many of us have joined together in silence to honor and remember the countless lives lost and fallen victim to Covid-19, and we have held the heavy silence at vigils for victims of police brutality, racism, war, homophobia, and transphobia, and we have even found ourselves speechless – either inspired or horrified by the words of religious and political leaders in the past few years. The volume of these heavy, collective silences – we can hear it. In moments when we cultivate a collective willingness to dwell in the silence, we open channels for connection and understanding, a space to wonder and encounter messages in the silence.

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<sup>52</sup> Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2020), 75.

<sup>53</sup> Ps. 62:5, NRSV.

<sup>54</sup> David Carrasco, “Mapping the Course: Ways of Being Religious,” HDS 3160: Religious Dimensions in Human Experience (class lecture, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, January 24, 2022).

God appears in our silences, as we see in Elijah's encounter with God in 1 Kings 19. God did not speak to Elijah through the mountain-splitting winds, nor through the rock-crushing earthquakes, nor through the fire. Yet after the gusts, shakes, and blazes, Elijah *heard* God in the "sheer sound of silence."<sup>55</sup> Despite the violent silencing we may feel among humans and earthly congregations, the spirit of God is not silenced in that human act. God still speaks to us in our experiences of silence and silencing. What do *you* hear in that silence?

### *Reclaiming Silence*

To feel seen by another is powerful. It is lifesaving. When our church communities and spiritual congregations fail to see and know us, it may be easy for us to forget how *God* sees us: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up."<sup>56</sup> *O Lord, you see me. You see it. All of it.* Though I say these words with confidence today, part of me wishes that I could have been seen like this when I was younger. Of course, I was cared for, loved, seen, and respected by those around me, but I was a refraction of an image of me that felt palatable to the preferences of a re-masculinized Christian movement.

In a space where LGBTQ+ youth often feel alone and unseen, perhaps these words feel heavy and relevant as they did to me: "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"<sup>57</sup> My hope is that with these valid pleas for visibility come also the holding of the assurance that we are already worthy as we are: "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made."<sup>58</sup> We see it. We see it. We see it.

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<sup>55</sup> 1 Ki. 19:11-13, NRSV.

<sup>56</sup> Ps. 139:1-2.

<sup>57</sup> Ps. 13:1, NIV.

<sup>58</sup> Ps. 139:14, NIV.

***On Wonder****Expanding Scriptural Encounters*

What does scriptural authority mean to us? Does it sound safe and secure, limiting, or a combination of both? Growing up as a queer, evangelical Christian I wondered about the implications of believing in a God-inspired Bible, especially when the word-for-word interpretations of this wholly infallible collection of holy books appeared to denounce a sexuality that I was fearfully coming to terms with. In Romans 1:26-27, Paul describes in his letter the “unnatural” and “shameful” same-sex lusts that “God gave them up to,”<sup>59</sup> and it appeared to not only limit and condemn the relationships that I felt drawn to, but framed the understanding of same-sex attraction as a punishment from God. Sunday sermons on the topic of the decline of civilizations affirming queer love further reinforced the restrictive and threatening theological frameworks that dominated evangelical Christian communities. Richard Rohr speaks on the need to question our often limited approach to engaging with the Bible, pointing to this same chapter in Romans, just six verses prior: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – [God’s] eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. . . .”<sup>60</sup> To Rohr, and to many in the Catholic Franciscan tradition, “*creation is the First Bible, and it existed for 13.7 billion years before the second Bible was written.*”<sup>61</sup>

How liberating this is for the validation of the lived experiences of queer folk! Rohr invites us to reimagine the scope of scripture as extending beyond the limitations of the sacred words of the written Bible, revealed in the creation and life around us that came before the compiling of the Biblical canon. Lucky for us, this expansive approach to understanding the scope of “scripture” is not just a Catholic, Franciscan worldview. Evangelical traditions strongly

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<sup>59</sup> Ro. 1:26, NRSV.

<sup>60</sup> Ro. 1:20, NIV.

<sup>61</sup> Rohr, 12.

value scriptural, textual authority, and these words of Romans 1:20 are an invitation to acknowledge divine revelation beyond the Book. Even the Gospel of John acknowledges the limits of scripture in encountering and conveying the fullness of Christ's life: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."<sup>62</sup> If we are to truly take Biblical truth seriously in the evangelical tradition, we must make space to wonder about the universe-sized gap that is missing in the account of Jesus's life, acts, and words, as our scripture tells us that it only scratches the surface. Here, John reminds us that our extra-biblical experience is valuable, for only a sliver of Christ has made it to our text.

John Calvin, a theologian often quoted and celebrated within my evangelical Christian community, also affirmed the essence of the divine presence in living creation: *sensus divinitatis*. And in 1 Timothy 4, we hear that "everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."<sup>63</sup> Little by little, it becomes more difficult to simply write off LGBTQ+ identity as an abomination. If we come to embrace, or to entertain at the very least, that creation reveals God's goodness despite the reality of our fallenness, dignity returns.

Biblical scholar Peter Enns argues that while the Bible is often described as "*holy, perfect, and clear,*" it is in fact more broadly "*ancient, ambiguous, and diverse,*" and should be understood as such.<sup>64</sup> There is certainly space for us to approach the Bible as a "personal love letter," but not without the equal acknowledgment that we are living 3,000 years after King David's life and words – *ancient* words intended on "asking *their* questions and seeking *their*

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<sup>62</sup> Jn. 21:25, NRSV.

<sup>63</sup> 1 Ti. 4:4-5, NIV.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works* (New York: HarperOne, 2019), 5.



answers, oblivious to our own questions and concerns.”<sup>65</sup> There is certainly space for us to acknowledge the common themes and overarching central messages in scripture, but not without acknowledging its *diversity* also – diversity in the sense that with Biblical writers living at “different times, in different places, and under different circumstances,” there are naturally “conflicting and contradictory voices” throughout scripture.<sup>66</sup> Claiming scripture to be clear and perfect makes it difficult for us to make sense of why scripture justifies “both slavery *and* its abolition... both keeping women subordinate to men *and* fully emancipating them... [justifies] violence against one’s enemies *and* condemn[s] it... [and justifies] political power *and* denounc[es] it...”<sup>67</sup> These all contribute to the reality that scripture is far more ambiguous than we might want for it to be in our personal lives today. Luckily, this mystery of contradictions cultivates space for wisdom.

For example, I have personally felt a narrative within my childhood Christian communities focusing overwhelmingly on seemingly clear-cut verses like, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,”<sup>68</sup> and these verses were interpreted in a direction of proving the infallibility, perfection, and clarity of scripture. While this is certainly one direction to take this passage, it limits the possibility of what “God-breathed” actually entails. What might we discover if we let ourselves wonder about the breath of God in scripture (and beyond it)? How might our exploration of the divine be expanded when we allow wonder and uncertainty breathing room?

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<sup>65</sup> Enns, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Enns, 8-9.

<sup>67</sup> Enns, 10.

<sup>68</sup> 2 Ti. 3:16-17, NIV.

In his book *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs*, Enns goes even further to suggest the dangerous implications of Christians thinking we know all of the answers in our interpretations of scripture and the world around us. “The Adam and Eve story is about what happens when knowing is elevated above understanding.”<sup>69</sup> In many evangelical Christian traditions, the Fall is a key defining aspect of our understanding of our current state of the brokenness of humankind, and it may be jarring to consider how the Fall was in fact caused by the human desire to establish a secure, easy, and often shallow sense of certainty, over the deeper call to trust, wonder, and accept the ambiguous, diverse, and unknown. Understanding is much less of a finite journey than knowing, as it leaves space for wisdom to continue to grow, while ingesting knowledge draws conclusions too soon.

Uncertainty is unsettling. If we return to that 2 Timothy passage, we know exactly what to work with if we conclude that “God-breathed” means that each word of scripture has been directly inspired by the voice of God, without fail or loss in translation, and thus if we are called to use scripture as a means for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” we can simply reference the words we see on our NIV, NRSV, or KJV pages as prescriptive solutions to our questions. The certainty and clear-cut method of this approach, however, disregards all of the space between, under, and above the words, that can only be explored with a willingness to wait for the unexpected, squirm with the contradictions, and surrender to the reality of a truly ambiguous, ancient, and diverse scripture, full of contradictions, shaped by its context, and releasing glimmers of wisdom far from the clear-cut rulebook-style Bible that we might find only an immediate gratification in.

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 104.

*What Could Be*

Wonderment is crucial in the church's commitment to cultivate the full embrace of the humanity and beauty of all of God's children. Sikh American activist and educator Valarie Kaur writes that "wonder is where love begins, but the failure to wonder is the beginning of violence."<sup>70</sup> If this is true, it is an urgent call for all of our beloved communities to remain constantly curious, aware, and patient with others whose experiences, identities, and realities are different from ours. Whether this sense of wonder crosses over boundaries of class, gender, race, sexuality, culture, or ability, the willingness to look at another and wonder, "you are a part of me I do not yet know,"<sup>71</sup> is crucial in our ever-growing process to love, and to prevent the violence that the disregard for this wonder sows. As a Christian, I receive these words from Valarie Kaur with holy envy, but am also reminded that my tradition speaks to this practice as well; the foreigner, the stranger, "the least of these"<sup>72</sup> is cared for, all equally worthy of this care and wonder. Today, as a queer Christian, I long for Christian congregations and institutions to receive the LGBTQ+ experience with wonder, and I wonder how this wonder might change how these communities navigate issues of sexuality and gender, not only theologically and theoretically, but through the humble encounter of lived experience shared by fellow siblings in their communities. How would coming out—an experience that is terrifying for so many—feel if those who received it received it with wonder rather than responding to it with weapons of fearful prayer, and invocations as swords to combat a part of their community that they do not yet know? I invite us to approach with a sense of wonder the potential that lies within our current understandings of scriptural encounters and biblical authority, theological frameworks that currently feel prescriptive and restrictive, and the rituals and hope that we can reimagine in order

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<sup>70</sup> Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (London: Aster, 2020), 11.

<sup>71</sup> Kaur, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Lv. 19:34; Dt. 10:19; Ez. 47:22; Ze. 7:9-10; Mt. 25:31-40; Ro. 12:13.

to move us forward in this sacred journey of LGBTQ+ affirmation in evangelical Christian spaces.

### *Cultivating a Theology of “Yes”*

I hope that this shift of seeking understanding by way of an open dwelling in uncertainty – this reorientation toward wonder as opposed to a scramble to certainty – makes space to reimagine the aspects of our religious and spiritual experiences that may feel restrictive and limiting. For many queer folks in non-affirming Christian communities, the messages of what we cannot do and how we cannot be often feel far more pervasive than messages of who we *are* and who we *can* be. Richard Rohr voices his concerns about theological frameworks that start “*with a no instead of a yes, with a mistrust instead of a trust,*”<sup>73</sup> particularly with the emphasis on original sin and total depravity (the belief that human nature is thoroughly corrupt due to the Fall of Adam and Eve). These perspectives, when lacking engagement with a healthy counterbalance of frameworks of celebration and elevation, manifest misguided theologies of mistrust and suspicion, as discussed previously on the pattern of fears and threats as theological foci in evangelical sermons and movements.<sup>74</sup> My hope is that evangelical Christian theologies may make space for these “yes” theologies, to explore the possibilities that come with the proclamation that “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected.”<sup>75</sup> Every life, sacred, reflecting the essence of God, must not be rejected, silenced, or shut out by a false and shallow sense of certainty.

### ***Forward, Together, in Wonder-Filled Reimagination***

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<sup>73</sup> Rohr, 62.

<sup>74</sup> Rohr, 63.

<sup>75</sup> 1 Ti. 4:4-5, NIV.

*Thresholds, Rituals, and Milestones, Together*

I pray if a prayer has been used as a sword  
 against you and your heart, against you and your word,  
 I pray that this prayer is a plowshare, of sorts  
 that it might break you open, it might help you grow.

—Spencer LaJoye - *A Plowshare Prayer*<sup>76</sup>

While we wonder in hope of the potential of healing and inclusivity that sacraments hold when reimagined in the context of our queer experience, there is a need for us to simultaneously recognize the many practices and sacraments in our church life that may have left us confused, harmed, traumatized, and excluded. “Pray the gay away” has become a common phrase, in book titles, personal story-telling, and in practice itself. In their song *A Plowshare Prayer*, LaJoye illuminates that there is much work to be done for us to recognize the healing beauty of the practice of prayer that has simultaneously been used to wound and exclude. What other sacraments, practices, and rites within our evangelical communities have the potential for healing, yet have carried at the same time a history of harm in the name of faith and love? In this section I will explore the significance of thresholds, the parallels between the experience of coming out with the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and baptism, and the possibilities for churches to reimagine and expand what loving rituals for LGBTQ+ experiences can look like alongside these traditional rituals.

Around our world we encounter various traditions marking significant turning points in their narratives by way of how they mark time. The Islamic tradition marks 622 C.E. as the epoch of the Hijri era, elevating the significance of the Prophet Muhammad’s establishment of the first Muslim community (*ummah*) in Medina. The Coptic Christian tradition begins counting

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<sup>76</sup> Boston-based folk/pop artist Spencer LaJoye is a graduate of Calvin University (‘15) and their music has healed and inspired many, including queer and Christian folks who find resonance in LaJoye’s lyrics and message.

its calendar years from 284 C.E., memorializing the year that the Roman emperor Diocletian came to power and the beginning of mass tortures and the executions of Christians. For this reason, each year is prefaced with “the Year of the Martyrs” (*Anno Martyrum*) in the Coptic tradition. The Japanese Imperial Shinto tradition marks the beginning of each emperor’s reign with a new title and year, the most recent era having commenced in 2019, or *Reiwa 1*, with the enthronement of Emperor Naruhito. And of course, this calendar year named 2022 that many in the Western world may consider as standard marks 2022 years after the birth of Christ, a historical and prophetic threshold significant to many in Christian traditions.

I am fascinated by the communal and cultural emphasis on milestones, markers, chronology, and periodization because of the role of meaning making it plays as people explore the significance of the thresholds that separate the eras before and after these moments. Furthermore, these practices of recognizing thresholds, eras, and new periods happen not only on a societal, cultural level, but in personal life journeys as well. How is this universal practice found in the meaning making of our own narratives? I write this after having coffee with a fellow gay friend who also grew up in a non-affirming evangelical Christian tradition. He described how he often categorizes and reflects on his life story in the context of “life before coming out” and “life after coming out,” as so much of his personal expression was set free, his sense of freedom reborn, his awareness of vulnerability realized, and society’s response felt – sometimes painfully and sometimes warmly – in this threshold moment.

The Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng describes the act of coming out as a “central sacrament for LGBT people.”<sup>77</sup> As with the sacrament of baptism, one walks forward from their closeted life and is born into a new life of openness.<sup>78</sup> Both can be vulnerable and transformational life

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<sup>77</sup> Patrick Cheng, *Radical love: an introduction to queer theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 120.

<sup>78</sup> Cheng, 121.

moments where one is “dying to one’s old life and [is] being born again into a new life.”<sup>79</sup> And as with baptism one is never guaranteed an easy, protected, and safe life by way of this sacrament, but it is a dedication regardless of the known and unknown future, and a commitment shared in community with a loving congregation. And as with coming out, the commitment and dedication of one’s baptism is strengthened when one is surrounded by a supportive community. This sense of community and oneness is palpable in the partaking of the Lord’s Supper as well. Despite our many denominational and ecumenical differences on the particularities and implications of the sacrament, “the denominations do agree that participating in the sacrament of Eucharist signifies belonging to the larger body of Christ.”<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, Cheng argues that rituals like the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper and baptism “[anticipate] the ‘eschatological life’ in which ‘gender and the sexual identities built upon it are rendered non-ultimate.’”<sup>81</sup>

My hope is for churches to explore the possibilities of how LGBTQ+ lives can be affirmed, dedicated, and collectively supported by way of ritual. As seen in the Lord’s Supper and in baptism, rituals are powerful collective affirmations of threshold-crossing, where one is not only able to make meaning of their personal experiences and commitments, but is reminded also that they do not go about it alone. Reverend Liz Tichenor, the Associate Rector of All Souls Parish, shares about leading a renaming ceremony for a young transgender congregant in her church, also referencing that “being known and seen in community is crucial.”<sup>82</sup> She refers also to baptism, confirmations, weddings, and ordinations as some of the rituals that affirm visibility in community, noting that “we haven’t had anything for people who have transitioned to change their name or ask that we use different pronouns for them. It’s important for the church to affirm

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<sup>79</sup> Cheng, 121.

<sup>80</sup> Cheng, 122.

<sup>81</sup> Cheng, 123.

<sup>82</sup> Gabriel, “Why I led a renaming ceremony for my young transgender congregant.”

that identity, and name it as good,” especially because of how vulnerable they are in spaces that do not support them.<sup>83</sup> If we cultivate a church where queer and trans Christians may find meaning in the reconstructing, reimagining, and reclaiming ritual to reground their place in their beliefs and community, a place where they deserve to be fully recognized as reflecting the image of God, not despite their identities but because of them, we are carrying out the work of Christ whose love was far from binary and restrictive.

Facing any moment of change and transformation, crossing any threshold, whether in one’s personal narrative or a community’s, is scary when faced alone, and difficult to make sense of without a companioning community. Even in a sacrament of coming out, LGBTQ+ experiences of this threshold vary with every narrative. The act of coming out can be an experience of isolation – that in one’s commitment to living or simply coming to accept an open truth, they are set apart from their past relationships and communities, grieving loss amid the commemoration of this new life. For others it is a series of coming-outs, cycles of opening up and closing back in, a returning to new beginnings and rebirth, re-emerging from the waters after moments that felt like drowning. For others it is the long-awaited freedom to breathe the clear air after a previous life submerged and suffocating. With each life comes a vastly unique experience. Sadly for many of us who were raised in non-affirming and/or hostile evangelical Christian communities, the same loving, communal companionship extended to us in our baptismal rebirth, eucharistic commitment, and other life-markers, is retracted upon learning about how we experience love and our body. Our faith communities fail when they turn away, rather than make sense of life with us, and our often shared experience of lonely threshold-crossing is worth holding and honoring now, especially if one’s bravery has been mislabeled as selfish, sinful, or even demonic.

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<sup>83</sup> Gabriel, “Why I led a renaming ceremony for my young transgender congregant.”



I know that as I came to terms with my sexuality alone, I carried a prolonged grieving of believing that I could not reconcile my LGBTQ+ reality with my evangelical Christian tradition – a tradition that still grounded me in community, values, and identity, speaking to where I came from. While holding these identities together and staying in a tradition that does not generally accept and make space for one’s identity is certainly not felt by everyone, “many LGBTQ students choose to attend colleges matching their spiritual identity as evangelical Christian and also want their ‘queerituality’ . . . to be recognized and given space for expression on campus.”<sup>84</sup> This prompts the question of if and how our evangelical faith communities can hold the journeys and thresholds of all of its congregants as a loving community, without the perpetuation of a theology and culture that makes LGBTQ+ youth feel unwelcomed. If the evangelical tradition values and honors the work of Christ, who countered calls for exclusion, competition, and rejection of the marginalized with acts of welcome and fellowship, there certainly is space for the church to transform its current expression of evangelical Christian theology.

### *A Hope that Births Courage*

How do we move forward from here, especially if we feel unseen and stuck in spiritual spaces that don’t affirm us? If we are to start somewhere, perhaps we find solidarity with King David. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? . . . How long must I bear pain in my soul...”<sup>85</sup> The six short verses of Psalm 13 get straight to the point, straight to our hearts that might be feeling this same tiredness and helplessness. In just these six verses, the question “how

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<sup>84</sup> Kevin Snow, “Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning or Queer Students at Evangelical Christian Colleges as Described in Personal Blogs,” *Journal of College Counseling* 21 (2018): 58.

<sup>85</sup> Ps. 13:1-2, NRSV.

long?” is mentioned four times. “How long, O Lord... How long will you hide your face from me... how long must I bear pain... how long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”<sup>86</sup>

David’s questions to God are bold, because it challenges the promises of God and God’s very nature. Throughout scripture we read about God’s promise that God will always be with us. Deuteronomy 31:8 comforts us by the promise that the Lord goes before us, will be with us, will never leave us or forsake us. Thus we do not fear and are not dismayed. In the book of Joshua, God promises, “just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.”<sup>87</sup> And the Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus’ often quoted promise, “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”<sup>88</sup> And in Numbers 6 God looks upon us: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”<sup>89</sup> Despite the richness of these promises of God’s companionship with us found throughout the Bible, David’s struggle to feel God’s presence remains. “O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face?” David’s authentic and honest expression of fear, sadness, and anger makes space for our vulnerable and marginalized experiences as queer people to feel a sense of solidarity in struggle.

Throughout this paper we have dwelled on pains, fears, and the urgency to reclaim the basic need to breathe and be. And as we attempt to move from our current realities to ask how we move toward the hope of what can be, that hope can feel helpless if all that is around us is overwhelming. Psalm 13 is a good reminder for us that regardless of God’s truth and promise, we may often very strongly feel that the opposite is the case. Despite these many verses from Deuteronomy, Numbers, and Matthew that proclaim God’s faithfulness and unfailing closeness,

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<sup>86</sup> Ps. 13:1-2, NRSV.

<sup>87</sup> Js. 1:5, ESV.

<sup>88</sup> Mt. 28:20, NIV.

<sup>89</sup> Nb. 6:24-26, NKJV.

we may still feel that God is absent, as we work through our fear, our sadness, and our anger. God may still seem distant regardless of the promises throughout the scriptures that God will never leave us. And this overwhelming sense of feeling deserted, or punished, or unheard, or left behind, or hurt, is magnified when we feel this smallness in the shadow of power. David voices this same helplessness in his struggle: “How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? ... My enemy will say ‘I have prevailed’ ... my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.”<sup>90</sup> What might be “exalting” over us, causing us to cry out, “how long?” Powers that silence and restrict the exploration of the fullness of divinity, church leaders who choose theologies of certainty over vulnerable commitments to wonder in uncertainty, and physical and verbal violence that lead people to feel that living is impossible, are a few ways that power might be felt here.

Amid his overwhelming sense of hopelessness, David looks to the unseen possibility in hope: “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise, for he has been good to me.”<sup>91</sup> In these words, David doesn’t find an answer to his persistent plea of “how long?” Rather, he directs his heavy heart toward hope. He accompanies his fear, sadness, and anger with a hopeful gratitude and wonder. He embraces the heaviness of his grief and struggle, and looks to God’s truth in hope. As David shifts from despair and frustration to words of trust, praise, and hope, nothing about the state he is in has changed. The threat of his enemies still looms over him. He remains uncertain about the future of his hardship. Yet the orientation of his spirit has shifted towards hope. Most of us think of the idea of being hopeful as a state of feeling optimistic. But for those of us who truly feel overwhelmed, hopeless, angry, disoriented, and fatigued about our current state, it would be of poor taste to say that we

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<sup>90</sup> Ps. 13:2-4, NRSV.

<sup>91</sup> Ps. 13:5-6, NIV.

simply have to *feel* hopeful all of a sudden. Is hope truly limited to *feeling* optimistic? Can we still actively *hope* with our heavy hearts?

In his reflections on hope in a book titled *Disturbing the Peace*, Vaclav Havel, the first democratically elected president of the Czech Republic after the fall of communism, invites us to think more broadly about the idea of living in hope amid despair. Especially in hopeless and overwhelming times, hope isn't meant to be found in the world right now, but rather somewhere beyond the horizons" of the current moment.<sup>92</sup> Havel describes it beautifully when he says that hope "is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons."<sup>93</sup> We grow roots in the soil of the world that *will* come, and not in the dry ground that we find ourselves in. Furthermore, hope and optimism are not always the same thing. The beauty of hope is not limited to optimism, but rather goes beyond the simple *feeling* good about the future – that everything will just work out fine. If it is hard to *feel* hopeful, or to *feel* hope, we can instead *face* hope. When disoriented, we orient ourselves toward hope. We *anchor* our hope. This hope is an act regardless of the emotion. Anchored somewhere beyond the horizons of our world of overwhelming concerns, we actively continue to hope. So I invite us to expand our understanding of hope as a practiced act, done out of a sense of trust for what is to come, rather than looking for the feeling of optimism to qualify and validate our hope. I believe that when we reframe hope more as a *practiced* act, rather than an optimistic mindset to drive our action, it allows us to revive energy into the driest parts of our world that need this work of hope. For me personally, when I continue to witness the systemic racism that violently targets black lives, and the pandemic that continues to kill, overwhelm, and divide, I am further overwhelmed by the

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<sup>92</sup> Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hviždála* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 181-2.

<sup>93</sup> Havel, 181-2.

ugliest, widespread apathy that keeps these injustices alive and thriving. And in all honesty, it is hard for me to sustain my heart in optimism. But this is why it is important for us to pursue hope as a *practiced* act, a responsibility to work for something that is good, instead of searching for confidence that might not be there quite yet. As Havel writes, “[Hope] is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”<sup>94</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This exploration encountered theologians Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng, Rev. Dr. Cody Sanders, and Richard Rohr, OFM, historians Kristin Kobes Du Mez, Kevin Kruse, and spiritual leaders and caregivers Julie Rodgers, Cláudio Carvalhaes, Rev. Liz Tichenor, and Valarie Kaur, each of them inviting our world to recognize our cultural shortcomings and institutional sins, expand the theological limitations we have put on our religious identities, and reimagine the future of a church that fully sees every soul as worthy as God would. My hope is that we may feel hopeful in this progress despite the hopelessness and loneliness that may still overwhelm many of us. Through the sharing of my own story here, I hope you may have found points of connection and moments of solidarity to your own story, and that you may find the courage to speak your own sacred story – whether it be to a friend, your congregation, your family, or even to yourself. I know it took me a long time to simply find the courage to tell myself the story of who I was.

Your story is sacred because our understanding of who God is does not have to be confined to scripture, though it may overwhelmingly feel that way. As Rev. Cheng reminds us, theology draws upon four sources: scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.<sup>95</sup> While

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<sup>94</sup> Havel, 181-2.

<sup>95</sup> Cheng, 11.

evangelical Protestants characteristically rely heavily on scripture, theology is impossible if it is not lived and reasoned with.

In exploring the term “evangelical,” we come to realize not only the political and cultural factors that have influenced a seemingly biblically-grounded reality, but the perpetuation of fear, threats, and masculinity that often make spaces unbreathable for queer folks, as LGBTQ+ people have been scapegoated as subjects of fear within these spaces. Recognizing these realities, we explored both the violent impact of silence and invisibility, as well as the way the sacred works in silence, and our invitation to take agency of the silence and invisibility that has often hurt us. Furthermore, we explored how the Bible itself acknowledges its limits, and encourages the exploration of extra-biblical divine realities within ourselves and of Christ. From our reflections on silence and invisibility, we explored the breathing room that an invitation to wonder can cultivate. We explored in wonder the possibilities of scriptural authority and discovery and the freedom from restrictive and prescriptive theologies when we wonder about the potential of theologies of “yes”. Finally, we witnessed the workings of thresholds, rituals, blessings, and sacraments, and how they have the power to reinforce communal love and affirmation. We end with a call to action for these communal sacraments and rituals to extend to the affirmation of LGBTQ+ experiences, approaching this call perhaps with a weary hope. Yet Havel encourages hope in times of hopelessness as more than a feeling, but an active orientation of the spirit and of the heart.

I leave us with the words of Louise, a fellow queer person who grew up in Christian spaces that challenged her in her life journey. Perhaps her words speak both to Christians who have yet to wonder about the vastness of God’s creation and love and the people who reflect it, and to queer people who may feel alone, stuck, and discouraged where they are: “The world is

bigger than you think it is... Think of everything you haven't seen yet and everything you haven't done and everything you haven't experienced."<sup>96</sup>

Whether it be peace, healing, freedom, or love, may it reach you and fill you.

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<sup>96</sup> Sanders, 132.

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