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Reevaluating Religion: A Case for Inclusivity of LGBTQ Christians in the Church

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REEVALUATING RELIGION: A CASE FOR INCLUSIVITY OF LGBTQ
CHRISTIANS IN THE CHURCH

By
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all of those who have ever felt victimized or discriminated against for simply being who they are.

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I first want to thank Dr. Jamie Harker for her incredible leadership and guidance throughout this process. Her insight guided me through my writing and research in profound ways that made this thesis exactly what I wanted to portray to my readers on the topic. Her remarkable work and patience with me will always be remembered and will remain one of my favorite memories as a student at the University of Mississippi and member of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College. I also want to thank Dr. Ari Friedlander for his insight into my research and for teaching me in his class the many ways that literature can be interpreted in order to gain a greater insight of the text and its nuances that remain hidden from an untrained eye. I also want to thank Dr. Debra Young for her guidance in this process that improved my writing and research in order to better my thesis. Lastly, I want to thank my parents, Bert and Stephanie Dupree, for their constant encouragement and sacrifices made on my behalf. I especially want to thank my mother for her constant companionship and love that made this thesis possible from the beginning. Without her unconditional love that she shows me every day, I would never have been compelled to write about a group of people in dire need of unconditional love.

ABSTRACT

AMBER ERIN DUPREE: *Reevaluating Religion: A Case for Inclusivity of LGBTQ Christians in the Church*
(Under the direction of Dr. Jamie Harker)

This thesis project is focused on understanding the discrimination that is rampant amongst Southern churches regarding their LGBTQ members and offering solutions to this problem that has occurred throughout the many generations of Christianity. In order to understand this discrimination, three books were consulted for the research aspect of this project. The three books include the following: *Sweet Tea* by E. Patrick Johnson, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore* by Troy Perry, and *Our Tribe* by Nancy Wilson. A Questionnaire was also given to people who identified as Southern, Christian, and LGBTQ in order to gain an understanding of the current sentiments these people have towards their churches and how best to combat the discrimination against LGBTQ Christians. The findings from this research and questionnaire showed that LGBTQ Christians are desperately trying to find ways for the church and its LGBTQ members to cooperate with one another. The findings also showed that LGBTQ Christians have not let the church's discrimination intimidate them, as many respondents were actively seeking to find ways to reconcile their faith with their sexuality. A main conclusion reached in this study is the need for a multi-faceted solution to address the church's problem with its LGBTQ members, as different problems arise in different

types of churches (i.e. African American churches, different denominations, etc).

Another important conclusion drawn from this research is the need for LGBTQ Christians to teach others how to conduct research using the Bible to understand the verses in their context, history, and language for a more nuanced view of the Bible that does not lend to discrimination.

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Introduction

I grew up in a small town outside of Jackson, Mississippi, and attended a very small private Christian school in one of the smallest towns in Mississippi. Upon entering high school, I became best friends with a boy named Jake who had recently transferred to my school. As all high school friendships go, Jake and I had our ups and downs throughout our friendship, yet we still always remained close enough that we could share secrets with one another and seek advice from the other. Upon entering senior year of high school, my friend Jake revealed to me while sitting at a small restaurant that he was gay. This completely surprised me even though I tried to pretend that I was not surprised. Jake being gay completely changed my perspective on life, love, and religion in a matter of seconds. Jake and I both attended the same very conservative and very religious private school. We were both even raised to be devout Presbyterians. My world felt completely shattered that I had a best friend that identified as gay, as this seemed to go against everything I was taught in school and church. This was the time period of our friendship that I distanced myself from him, as I dealt with a whirlwind of different emotions and confusion.

This friendship is what sparked my keen interest in the Christian church and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Christians. I asked myself many times, why does Jake have to choose between being gay and being a Christian? His struggles throughout our senior year of high school also led to me question why the Christian religion is filled with such hypocrisy. Jake was always worried throughout high school that the wrong people would find out about his sexuality, as it explicitly stated in our school's handbook that a student could be expelled for identifying as a member of the

LGBTQ community. This rule constantly bothered me as I finished my senior year of high school. Why was being gay worthy of expulsion? If being gay was considered a sin to the faculty who made these rules, then what about the many seniors who discussed their weekend sexual escapades and their binge drinking? The hypocritical behavior from not condemning these weekend sexual escapades bothered me. I saw Jake struggle with his family during this time over his sexuality, and the whispers of our fellow seniors behind his back did not seem to help the cause. It seemed to me as if I was surrounded by people who thought being gay was so absurd and sinful that one should not even associate with them. I saw many people, especially young men, shy away from remaining to be Jake's friend, especially after rumors started circulating. I sat in Bible class Monday through Friday at 9 a.m. everyday of senior year and listened to my teacher preach to his students about the dangers of underage drinking and premarital sex mixed with the inherent message that we should love others just as we love ourselves. However, the majority of my senior class was engaging in this sinful behavior yet suffered no social or religious consequences like Jake did for being gay. This hypocrisy that I saw everyday throughout high school is what solidified my interest in LGBTQ Christians and the church. Too many people in my senior class were preaching a message of love and acceptance of all humans on the weekends at church camps and Bible studies, all while condemning Jake for being gay and treating him as a social outcast who was engaging in unspeakable behaviors. I became determined to show people that one could be both gay and Christian.

This hypocrisy that bothered me stayed with me throughout my college career and when asked what I wanted to write my honors college thesis for the Sally McDonnell

Barksdale Honors College about, I certainly had a clear idea of what I wanted to research. I decided to investigate the church and its treatment of LGBTQ Christians, particularly in the South, as Southern churches are notorious for not being LGBTQ friendly. I decided to research why LGBTQ Christians still stayed members of the Christian church. This seemed to me a difficult task to do, as so many Southern churches openly discriminate against the LGBTQ community. I also wanted to research how LGBTQ Christians reconciled their sexuality with their religious faith, as many pastors throughout the South have made it abundantly clear that being gay is a shameful sin that is in dire need of repentance. I also wanted to conduct a research project comprised of questions to see what actual Southern LGBTQ Christians had to say about the issues that LGBTQ Christians faced in the church. Southern Christian homosexuals face a brand of homophobia peculiar to the South, and by examining this homophobia from both renowned authors and citizens of the South, the reader can gain a greater insight into why this homophobia still exists and what efforts need to be done by the church to combat this heinous behavior that still continues to wreak havoc upon the Christian churches in the South.

My research was influenced by three authors who have been instrumental in redefining what it means to be gay and Christian. E. Patrick Johnson comprised a book that he titled *Sweet Tea*, which gave an in-depth look into the lives of Southern gay black men and their experiences growing up in Southern church-centered communities. His research was spent conducting interviews with these men and discussing with them the struggles of being a gay black man in the South, where most of their families were predominant members of their community churches. His research was vital in conducting

this thesis project, as his work shows how the African American church and the LGBTQ community have struggled to cooperate with one another. His research was also important because it shows the peculiar homophobia that occurs within the black churches of the South.

The second author that was used for this research was Troy Perry and his book *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*. Perry eventually became a Pentecostal minister until his church discovered the true nature of his sexuality, which was met with much disapproval and an eventual expulsion from the Pentecostal church. This expulsion is what led to Perry's tremendous legacy of becoming the founder of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which was the first church founded for the sole purpose of accepting all members regardless of their sexual orientation or identity. Troy believed his purpose was reviving the church through the apparent outcasts of the Christian faith. Troy throughout his book, regards his church and members as specially chosen by God to lead the way in reforming the Christian church to become a more accepting community of people of all races, genders, and sexual identities. Perry believed strongly that the MCC is the only true Christian church left because his church did not discriminate against any of God's creations. His book also proved to be vital to this research, as his book shows how the Bible can be interpreted many different ways, which can be used to manipulate people or instead to garner love and acceptance for everyone, which is what Perry chose to do. In my experience, I saw more of the former than the latter, and this book is important because it explains how homophobia has continued to be a rampant aspect of Southern Christian churches.

The third primary book used in this research is Nancy Wilson in her book entitled *Our Tribe*. Nancy Wilson is a very close associate of Troy Perry and became an instrumental member of the Metropolitan Community Church, becoming the youngest person ever elected to serve on their Board of Elders. Wilson has also pastored several Metropolitan Community Churches across several states. This openly gay pastor also proved important in conducting this thesis, as her book showed many reasons as to why being Christian and an LGBTQ community member should not be an issue in the church. Her research further proved that being an LGBTQ Christian is something that is not only possible, but something that should be celebrated instead of condemned, which is something I strongly agree with and inspired my personal questionnaire conducted later throughout my thesis.

Each of these books raises the main issue concerning gay Christians, which is the lack of inclusivity in the Christian church. These sources show people who identify as part of the LGBTQ community that also identify as Christians. This presents a problem to society when these LGBTQ Christians are ostracized and cast out of their own churches and communities. The church body, which is supposed to stand for forgiveness and acceptance, is known for making LGBTQ people feel as if they are not accepted and as if something is inherently wrong with them. The church seems to be in a continuous cycle of hypocrisy in regard to LGBTQ members. Many LGBTQ Christians want to be able to actively participate and lead the church but are cast aside and ignored and left to feel as less than human because of the church's actions and behavior towards them. E. Patrick Johnson, Troy Perry, and Nancy Wilson all took it upon themselves to address this problem concerning LGBTQ Christians, and their contributions remain still today as a

profound influence for LGBTQ Christians and also inspired me to question LGBTQ Christians in my community for further research.

Chapter 1

E. Patrick Johnson in his book *Sweet Tea* conducted interesting research with gay black men in the South. He spent his time interviewing these men to prove that members of the LGBTQ community, particularly from the perspective of African American Southern men, were ostracized in the church and had to learn to cope with the many issues concerning LGBTQ people in Southern churches. As seen in Johnson's book, many LGBTQ members of the church are forced to hide their sexualities and true identities in order to procure leadership roles in the church. This presents an interesting dynamic in the church, as hiding one's true self in order to gain acceptance in the church seems to defeat the purpose of Christian ideology, which preaches that God loves all sinners.

One particular man that Johnson interviewed showed the internal struggles these men had to endure because of the shamefulness associated with homosexuality. Johnson discusses interviewing a man named Gerome from Alabama who had a difficult time deciding on if he wanted to be interviewed or not for Johnson's book. Johnson writes, "He shared with me later that he had to pray on it before he spoke with me. His homosexuality is something he hopes God will take away from him, and therefore he was unsure whether he wanted to discuss that aspect of his life" (Johnson, 75). Gerome's hesitation in regards to discussing his sexuality shows the massive stigmatization gay Christians are facing, particularly in the South and inside its churches. This man viewed his sexuality as something that needed to be hidden and as something that he hoped God would discard from his life according to Johnson's narrative. Gerome is one of the many

men that viewed their sexuality as a test that God had given them or a burden that they needed to overcome.

Viewing one's own sexuality as a burden or a test does nothing but force these men to feel as if they are inadequate and do not belong in their own church that preaches love and acceptance to its members quite frequently in its ministering. Hiding their sexuality allowed many of the men in *Sweet Tea* to be able to lead their church choirs and offer their musical and theatrical talents to the church. This particular "trade-off" seems counterproductive when these men are singing songs about love and acceptance from the church and its Savior when they are hiding their true selves in order to gain inclusion in the church. The men that Johnson interviewed made it abundantly clear that these men were very well aware of this "trade off" that was occurring throughout the African-American church. However, not all men had this experience of hiding their sexuality in the church. One man Johnson interviewed named Duncan Teague said:

When it came to gay folks, I'm very careful about this one because I don't buy the mythology that black folks are more homophobic than anybody else. And the reason I don't buy it is because I grew up knowing gay people whom my parents knew, and they were all in the church. And I'm not talking gay, I'm talking flaming queens who ran the choirs and sang the gospel music. (Johnson, 98)

Seeing the acceptance of gay people from Teague's point of view makes the reader question why some gay men are accepted and others were not. Of course, Teague mentions that these gay men were "flaming queens," but he never explicitly states that these men were open about their sexuality in the church. Perhaps churches chose to

ignore a person's blatant portrayal of their sexuality if that person was providing the church with a necessary service, such as leading the choir and singing gospel music for the congregation. Perhaps the congregation did not openly choose to ignore the situation but instead just chose to label these men as being different than the rest. This is a very interesting aspect of intersecting notions and goals of the church that could perhaps be studied to further understand why some people feel as if the church *is* indeed accepting of its gay members and some feel as if the church is not. This transactional relationship proves to be a unique aspect of Southern African American churches concerning their LGBTQ members, as neither Wilson nor Perry address such issues with their congregations.

Another interesting facet of Johnson's book discusses the issues these men faced with coming out to their conservative, Christian families. One narrator stated of his father, "He was just not ready to have not only a gay son, but a flaming queen son who was intelligent and articulate and a Christian and struggling with this" (Johnson, 99). This man openly admits that his father struggled with his son being an openly gay Christian who defined himself as a flaming queen. The man also admits that he himself was struggling with being an openly gay Christian. This man's story brings into question what exactly disturbs people about being openly gay and Christian. Many Christians overtly show their opinion that being gay is a sin, but so are many other things that members of the church choose to do, and yet these members are not ostracized or made to feel inhuman because of their sins.

Choosing to ostracize a particular aspect of someone's life and deem it sinful when sexuality is a natural part of life does nothing but hurt the congregation's attempts

to make their members feel welcome, safe, and as if their church family is just that—a family. Preaching hate dwindles a person’s willfulness to actively participate in the church. This act of churches preaching hatefulness towards LGBTQ members is also another interesting facet of the church that needs to be further studied in an attempt to understand how this affects LGBTQ Christians and their spiritual and personal lives. While spirituality is not a huge part of everyone’s lives, some people take their spiritual lives very seriously, and there are consequences of having such a tremendous aspect of someone’s life negatively impacting their self-esteem and self-worth.

Another interesting facet of these gay Christian men that Johnson interviewed is their way of being gay but not being “out” to their families and communities. Johnson writes, “In general, putting one’s business in the street is something frowned upon in many black communities, including the communities in which many of the narrators grew up and currently live.” As most people from the South probably know, most southerners avoid discussing topics such as sexuality in a direct manner. Thus, many men in *Sweet Tea* have not “come out to their families, even though, by their own acknowledgement their family members “know””(Johnson, 109). Not discussing one’s sexuality with families and communities continues the stigmatization that being gay is inherently wrong and that there is something shameful about being gay. One has to question if the men of this book had families that knew about their sexuality, why did no one ever talk to them about it or suggest in any way that they were still loved and accepted regardless of their sexuality?

Many of the men Johnson interviewed implied that homosexuality was so stigmatized in this community of African-American Southern men that the thought of

even discussing non-heterosexual things was something unfathomable. However, not having an open discussion about one's sexuality and just having your family "know" does nothing to help this problem of intersecting Christianity with the LGBTQ community. Not being able to openly talk to one's family and community about different sexualities leads to assumptions that may or may not be incorrect and also shadows the LGBTQ community with a feeling of shamefulness. However, Johnson also discusses the irony of this situation in which gay African American Southern men do not have an official "coming out" to their communities. He writes:

"The don't ask, don't tell mentality of southern families and communities provides a space for these men to have more freedom to engage one another, for they employ the terms and codes of the South to co-exist with neighbors and family and still express their sexuality. Bringing So-and-So to the family reunion as a 'friend' as opposed to 'lover,' for instance, is a way to circumvent the drama of introducing him as the latter. (Johnson 109)

This may seem like a compromise between the intersection of Christian communities and their homosexual members, but this compromise does not promote a healthy viewpoint or understanding of the LGBTQ community. This yet again promotes an underlying sense of shame and as if the behaviors and actions of these men regarding their sexuality are inherently wrong. One man interestingly enough does not believe in this compromise of the church and its gay members. He says:

"Because my opinion is this: God made me, He made you. They say God doesn't make mistakes. So I'm not a mistake. And I get so sick and tired of people who call themselves heterosexuals, who think that because they're supposedly

heterosexual that they are better or what... I think that they're the worst people, as far as I'm concerned, because they are critical. (Johnson 124)

This shows that not all of these men are content with this "don't ask, don't tell" policy of the Southern Christians.

This man argues that God does not make mistakes, therefore he is not a mistake and neither is his sexuality, a natural part of being a human being. He also criticizes people who think they are better than him based solely on the fact that they define themselves as heterosexual. This man's opinion is perhaps the opinion and stance that the pulpit should make more often in sermons if complete acceptance ever becomes the Christian church's goal for its LGBTQ community. If a pastor continually preaches that God does not make mistakes, then why should any LGBTQ member of that church think of themselves or their sexuality as a mistake, as their inherent sexuality is a natural part of themselves created by God?

This man also discusses another problem regarding the Christian and LGBTQ divide in the church. He acknowledges that many people think they are better than these gay members simply because they define themselves as heterosexual. However, the Bible teaches repeatedly that all humans are created in God's image and are equal in God's eyes. If this is true, and is an aspect of the Bible preached to the congregations, then the notion that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality does not withstand the inherent teaching that all are equal. One man even mentions to Johnson that in a heated argument with a woman, she refuted to him that "at least I'm sleeping with the right sex" (Johnson 133). This is a baffling statement when considering that the woman discussed was not married, as countless churches teach that any form of sex before marriage is a sin.

The hypocrisy that exists between the divide of the church and the LGBTQ community is astounding. There is no such thing as the “right sex” when the Bible teaches that all humans were created by God and sexuality is a gift from God. One man even uses an example from the Bible to explain why he thinks being gay should not be an issue in the Christian church. He says, “And even after David assumed the kingship and Jonathan and his father died in battle, the news got back to David that they had died. And David lamented, saying that Jonathan’s love for him surpassed the love of women” (Johnson, 152). David and Jonathan throughout the Bible never had an explicit homosexual relationship, but many verses of the Bible certainly denote a relationship that is deeply affectionate and perhaps has some romantic aspects to it. However, David and Jonathan are superb examples of the love that can exist between two males, which proves a relationship between two males should not be deemed sinful or shameful in the church. While some mentioned previously are accepting of hiding their significant other as a “friend” around the religious community to avoid drama, others in Johnson’s book have clearly expressed they want nothing to do with hiding their sexuality and their partners for the church’s sake and their community’s acceptance. This proves that a solution to the church and its acceptance of LGBTQ members needs to be a multi-faceted solution.

Interestingly though, these men argue that as time progresses, the church for African American gay men has not become slowly more progressive but has been doing the exact opposite. Johnson himself argues that fundamentalism sets churches and their congregations up for failure in regards to its gay members. He writes, “Some believe it is fundamentalism that sets moral standards even its followers cannot uphold, and certainly the scandals surrounding fallen televangelists like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart seem

to provide evidence of this” (Johnson, 182). This shows that perhaps the church’s problem with homosexuality seems to be rooted in upholding standards that no human is capable of doing, even the pastors themselves. This leads the reader to address how the black church has failed its members, particularly gay members, in regards to becoming more accepting as a society as a whole and of the reality of human sexuality.

Johnson argues that the black church as a whole has been a cornerstone for African American community life in regards to black thought on politics, spirituality, and morality in America. Without this cornerstone, these men would lack a community space that offers guidance in all aspects of life. As the reader can see from this statement, the black church has a massive influence in the African American community on how aspects of society are perceived and regarded throughout the community. However, unfortunately, the black church has been using this influence for furthering rhetoric that demeans the experiences of homosexual African American men of the South. He says, “Slowly shifting from a tolerant don’t ask, don’t tell policy to one of explicit condemnation, the black church, more than any other time in its history, seems to be turning its back on any of its own: gays and lesbians” (183). This proves to be extremely interesting, as one would think that as society as a whole progresses, so would the church community in regards to acceptance and tolerance of human beings. However, one has to wonder what exactly is keeping these gay men in the church. Johnson argues the answers are complex.

Many of these men saw the church as an extension of their home and a place of comfort and refuge. The church provided them with a sense of belonging and a sense of community as a child, and ironically, would later reject them as adult members of society

based on their sexuality. However, as discussed earlier, the church continues to exploit members for its benefit when these gay members have gifts of talent to offer the church. Johnson writes, “Ultimately, it [the church] is a contradictory space, one that exploits its creative talents of its gay members even as it condemns their gayness, while also providing a nurturing space to hone those same talents” (183). Does the church recognize this hypocrisy in regards to its gay members? Some men expressed to Johnson throughout the book that they reconcile this hypocrisy because their minister lists homosexuality as a sin with other sins such as drinking, adultery, stealing, and cheating. However, this still exudes a problematic situation, as often members who do engage in activities such as drinking and adultery are often neither ostracized nor condemned in such an extreme manner as gay members are. Rarely, if ever, are there protests against people who cheat on their spouses or have a drinking problem in the church. However, some men do not find a way to reconcile this hatred with their spirituality.

One of the men previously discussed, Gerome, told Johnson that he has not at all reconciled his spirituality with his sexuality and is still today praying that God will take away his homosexuality. This proves that there are members of the church today that still have a deep-rooted self-hatred of their sexuality and do not accept themselves because of what they hear from the pulpit. Many gay members of the church provide the church with choir leaders and theatrical performances while its members silently deem them sinners and protest against their sexuality. Johnson argues, “black gay men have surmised that the church is a place to express their talents in performance sites that don’t necessarily compensate for the church’s homophobia but at least counter its effects” (185). This argument that Johnson makes proves that many of the members of the church are settling

for a mere social acceptance of their sexuality in the church. The members will willingly accept their sexuality when these gay men provide some type of service the church needs. One has to wonder, however, would the church even remotely consider accepting these men if they did not have musical or theatrical capabilities? These men have grown up in a church that tells them Jesus loves them the way they are and that Jesus created them the way that they are. These men grew up singing the same children songs that teach Jesus loves all the children of the Lord. There is no logical reconciliation for teaching this to children of the church only to abandon them and condemn them as adults because of their sexuality.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of this entire situation is the fact that the majority of these men are still active Christians and want to engage themselves in a church that is full of acceptance towards them as a whole person, not just if they have the ability to sing choir songs or act in a church play. This is a major facet of LGBTQ Christians that led to a question of my personal questionnaire in Chapter 2 that explores why exactly these people want to remain in the church. If the church constantly preaches a message of acceptance and love for all, the church then has to accept and love its gay members, which the black church is clearly not doing towards these men according to Johnson. One pastor named Nancy Wilson once so emphatically stated to her readers in a book entitled *Our Tribe*, “When did the church break your heart?” This one short sentence proves just how damaging and heart-breaking it is to not be accepted by a community that one has shared their lifetime experiences with and chose to love only to have that love not reciprocated. This proves that the church is doing more harm than good by choosing to not accept the LGBTQ members for who they are. These LGBTQ members have grown

up in churches that taught them to “love one another as yourself,” only to be condemned and ostracized, and even cast out of the church, as was the case for the founder of the MCC, Troy Perry. Will the church ever come to terms with the members it is losing by its own message of hatred?

The irony of the situation is that this has been occurring for decades in the Christian church, which is purely astounding. More than likely every man that Johnson interviewed could tell their audience the moment they realized that the church had broken them, that they had heard a message full of hatred one too many times, or perhaps they had heard one too many demeaning comments from their fellow Christian church members. Or perhaps they just had a simple moment when they realized that the church was never going to fully accept them in a way that could fulfill their spiritual needs. This leads to a situation that is problematic for both parties. If the church continues to preach a message of hatred and condemnation to its LGBTQ members, the church will continue to lose members of this group and continue to preach a message of pure hypocrisy. If the LGBTQ members of the church continue to sit and hear messages of hate from the pulpit, these members will continue to have that moment of brokenness exhibited by the church.

No member of the Christian church expects to have their heart broken by the church, but that is exactly what has happened to LGBTQ Christians who just want full acceptance of the way that God made them. This also leads to another systemic issue. Where do LGBTQ Christians go to form a fellowship with a church that does love and accept them for who they are when the mainstream churches are ostracizing them and condemning them on one aspect of their lives? These members cannot continue to sit in a room every Sunday filled with hate towards themselves and their fellow LGBTQ

members. This leads to nothing but self-hatred as seen in the case of Gerome, who still prays to God everyday that he will wake up and not be gay. This is harmful in all aspects of a person's life to willfully wish they were not who they are based upon a message given to them by a pastor who is supposed to love them and teach them.

This is exactly why the exiled preacher Troy Perry began his journey to form a church community that was accepting and loving of the LGBTQ community and wrote of these experiences in *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*. Perry, identifying as gay himself, had been married to a preacher's daughter before being ostracized by the Pentecostal church and forced out when his sexual preferences for men were discovered. He then moved to California where he began an intensive study that proved to his fellow Christians and members of society that being gay was in fact, not a sin, but something God actually destined these people to be in order to further the work of His Kingdom. This philosophy that Perry preached led to the formation of what became known as the Metropolitan Community Church, a church that had nothing but love and acceptance for LGBTQ members who needed and wanted a place to worship their God without having to feel the sense of shame and worthlessness their former churches had given them.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating concepts that has occurred with the intersection of Christianity and the LGBTQ community was this founding of the Metropolitan Community Church. When Troy Perry saw a desperate need for a church that accepted people regardless of their sexuality, he created this church to fulfill the spiritual needs of these people who had been rejected by their former church families. Perry constantly questioned Christianity's view of gay people and desperately searched for answers in the Bible. In his book *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*, Perry asks his readers

“What did Jesus say about homosexuality?” Perry answers this question in his text and says, “Jesus said nothing. Not one thing” (Perry, 40). He even goes a step further and states that Jesus was “more interested in love.” He states that what Jesus condemned was “lust, no matter in what form lust occurred” (Perry, 40). Perry continues and says, “In my entire Bible I counted 362 admonitions concerning sexual behavior between men and women, and many of those were never mentioned by holier-than-thou preachers. On the subject of homosexuality, however, I could find only a total of six references in the entire Bible” (39). Perhaps Perry in these statements has a concept of Christianity that needs to be explored more thoroughly.

Perry uses the very weapon that Christians use to deny members of the LGBTQ community, the Bible, to show his readers that rejecting people for their sexuality is not condoned in the Bible. Perry argues that Biblical scholars for many years have chosen to use passages of the Bible that furthered their anti-LGBTQ messages and did not fulfill the needs of their listeners. He states, “To condemn homosexuals, many denominations have intentionally misread and misinterpreted their Bibles to please their own personal preferences, remembering only verses to suit themselves, forgetting and ignoring many other scriptures” (39). To some, this may seem like an outlandish claim, but one also has to wonder if there is some truth behind Perry’s arguments that he dedicated his life to prove. Many Christians take what their pastors say about sexuality as a finite statement, but perhaps this is hindering the progress of the Christian religion. The lack of questioning a leader’s words and statements leads to a dependency that hinders any type of progress in the church that could potentially lead to more inclusivity of the LGBTQ community. If people take what their pastor says as a finite statement without doing any

research or studying of the Bible themselves, they are giving the power of the church to only a few people, who, regardless of their status as a minister, could use this lack of knowledge for manipulating an entire congregation. This abuse of power is easily seen in other aspects of the world, such as politics. These exact abuses of power by an elite few can also be seen in the church by studying the works of Troy Perry.

One interesting facet of Troy Perry's founding of the MCC is his deliberate usage of miracles to prove that God has chosen him and his congregation to lead people to Christ. Early in the book, Perry discusses one of his church members speaking in tongues. Another member of the church was capable of interpreting the message and stated what was said. The interpretation stated, "I have called you, my children. I have established you to be my church. If you will listen to me and follow my precepts, you will continue to grow" (55). This statement proves to be very interesting as the Metropolitan Community Church continued to grow tremendously, planting churches all across the nation. Perry makes this very presumptuous claim about his church yet manages to prove himself, also, as miracles are represented as a way to legitimize the Metropolitan Community Church.

Perhaps even more interestingly, Perry uses direct language from God himself. His church member, through the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, gave the congregation words from God himself. Perry's use of miracles and the acts of speaking in tongues came from his heavily influenced Pentecostal background, which was marked with regular occurrences of speaking in tongues and the usage of miracles. This proved to be an interesting parallel that Perry uses to show his readers that God has destined himself and his followers as God's chosen people. Perry writes, "It is because the

membership of the Metropolitan Community Churches derives from nearly every Christian denomination or sect imaginable that our understanding of scripture is so vast and richly varied, like a beautiful country quilt. For that reason alone, it was essential we continue as Jim had said, bound by devotion to God and the Holy Spirit” (54). Perry blatantly uses his conglomeration of different people to his advantage and to show his readers why they are to be set apart from the rest of the Christian churches as a shining example.

While many conservative Christians might claim this is outlandish, maybe Perry does this to parallel the outlandish claims that conservative Christians had served him for years regarding the church and sexuality. One particular woman that used bizarre claims to condemn the homosexuality was a woman named Anita Bryant. Perry had a difficult time with this woman who used a select few scriptures to condemn the LGBTQ community. Troy, however, decided that he would also use a select few scriptures that would better his defense to stand up for the LGBTQ Christian community. Troy uses an interesting comparison of these people that are preaching anti-LGBTQ messages across the nation, particularly in a community in Miami. He writes, “The animals in this city not only aren’t sleeping—they’re loose in the streets and about to eat us! Our enemies are taking the language of Scripture and running wild with it” (Perry, 145). This quote from Perry proves to be rather interesting as he compares these anti-LGBTQ Christians to animals that seek to disempower activists seeking equality and justice for the LGBTQ community. Comparing them to animals implies that these people are driven not by love or compassion or genuine understanding and concern for the spiritual lives of these Christians, but rather by animalistic instincts such as a need to dominate, control, and

devour. When Perry states that he himself even feels as if these people are trying to eat them like animals, he seems to imply that these people are driven by an insatiable need to fill their enormous appetite. Their appetites, imply Perry, are only being fulfilled with hatred for the LGBTQ Christians who seek to empower their fellow members seeking a spiritual connection that does not condemn them because of their sexualities.

Perry addresses this disconnect between Southern people and Christian LGBTQ members when discussing issues he had encountered with his own family. Perry grew up in the South and encountered upon his coming out as gay many problems with his family that were also discussed by the men of Johnson's *Sweet Tea*. He writes that he was his family's favorite of all the cousins and nephews growing up, but once he came out to his family as homosexual, they asserted a distant feeling between himself and the rest of the family. He writes, "But when I came out as a homosexual person, it was their reason to turn off the warmth. Not that they did not want to see me. They did—but our relationship became so polite. The extreme politeness that Southerners can assume better than anybody else!" (188). This shows the intense emotions that concern people of the South when discussing issues regarded to LGBTQ people. Perry grew up as a family favorite only to be distanced from his family when disclosing his sexuality. His family, instead of greeting him with love and warmth, became distant and polite; a type of politeness that Perry acknowledges is infamous in the South for being associated with rudeness and a type of ingenuity.

This presents a problem for LGBTQ members, particularly in the South, that is often not addressed in regards to their coming out to their families. These people who identify with the LGBTQ community come out to their families but are not cast out of

their families or even condemned in an outright manner. Instead, they are slowly distanced from the family and met with an insincere politeness when they used to be wholly accepted and greeted with genuine kindness and acceptance, much like the men of *Sweet Tea*. Yet, not very many people seem to discuss this problem that keeps occurring within the Southern LGBTQ community. How does one go from being fully loved and accepted to being met with a distant polite manner from one's own family? The transition seems to be emotionally polarizing and could possibly have detrimental effects on the lives of these LGBTQ people, especially when these people have grown up in a Southern culture that places such a massive emphasis on family values. This proves that Southern LGBTQ Christians and the acceptance of their communities have a massive amount of room for improvement within these relations. When LGBTQ Christians are raised in families and communities that put such an extreme emphasis on maintaining family and religious traditions, being distanced could prove to be emotionally traumatizing and lead to self-harm or self-hatred, which does nothing but contradict the very Christian messages that these Southern Christian members preach to their communities.

One of the obvious solutions to this problem is to eliminate this fear of discussing sexuality within the church and families of the churches. Sexuality is too often stigmatized in the church and Christian home as a topic that should rarely be discussed, if discussed at all. Additionally, when this topic is discussed, it is often addressed only in terms of heterosexuality and condemns anything and everything that deviates from this strict definition of what sexuality should be—the marriage and sexual union of a man and woman for procreation. The insincere politeness exhibited to these Christian LGBTQ members of the South stems from a disconnect of communication that often starts within

the boundaries of the church. The families of these members are taught that something is inherently wrong with their loved one and attempt to push away from this loved one in hopes of sparing themselves from a complete and total breakdown of communication with this LGBTQ member. Yet, by sparing this loved one of complete and outright rejection, these family members, through their insincere politeness and willingness to distance themselves, speak volumes on their opinions of Christian LGBTQ members. This does nothing to garner a relationship between the church and LGBTQ members but further hinders education about LGBTQ members and the acceptance of them.

This insincere and distant politeness also continues to further the hatred of outright anti-LGBTQ churches that openly preach messages of discrimination. If churches and families continue the practice that distancing themselves from LGBTQ members of their communities and churches is acceptable, these LGBTQ members will continue to leave the Christian church, search for acceptance elsewhere, resort to unhealthy personal views about themselves, or perhaps even resort to self-harm or unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with the silent rejection of their sexualities by their communities and families. This practice seems extremely homophobic in nature, as rarely, if ever, do people distance themselves from other family or church members for the multitude of other “sins,” such as alcoholics and heterosexual couples that engage in premarital sex, that occur within the church. Homosexuality is specifically condemned, and its identifiers are distanced from their communities and forced to accept their inequality and rejection from their communities they grew up loving. How does one openly communicate that they feel rejected and unequal in a community that greets them with insincerity blanketed under the disguise of Southern manners? While outright

rejection and open hatred are inherent problems of the church in regards to its LGBTQ members, this silent rejection is also harming its members' self-acceptance and spirituality and seems peculiar to churches in the South who put such heavy emphasis on politeness and manners.

In addition to Troy Perry, Reverend Nancy Wilson, who became a pastor in the Metropolitan Community Church, also proved to be a vocal leader for the allies of LGBTQ Christians. Wilson also proved to be a vital part of the MCC along with Troy Perry himself. Wilson, like Perry, also writes in her book entitled *Our Tribe* about her beliefs that being a member of the LGBTQ community and a member of the Christian church is not a problematic situation at all. She also addresses the abandonment and the rejection that has been so heavily discussed earlier in *Sweet Tea* and *Don't Be Afraid Anymore* and admits that this is an extreme problem within the church. She writes:

Clearly, rejection and abandonment are at the top of the list. Rejection and abandonment by our families, churches, synagogues, government. But also high on the list for me is the damage caused by slander. There is no explicit condemnation of homosexuality among the Ten Commandments in the Bible, but there is a commandment against bearing false witness against your neighbor.

(Wilson, 26)

This short passage of Wilson's book expertly sums up one of the main issues concerning the church and its LGBTQ members. So many of these members have been ostracized by their families and churches because of their apparent sinful ways, yet, as Wilson writes, not anywhere in the Ten Commandments is homosexuality explicitly condemned. If homosexuality is not condemned within the Ten Commandments, then what exactly is a

Christian supposed to guide their moral lives by if the Ten Commandments are not enough for condemnation?

LGBTQ Christians are subjugated to Old Testament scriptures that could arguably be considered very obscure verses in the Bible that have little to no relevance to modern society. There are many obscure verses in the Bible that suggest things such as having sexual intercourse with a female during menstruation is sinful and unacceptable, yet rarely, if at all, do people acknowledge this verse and condemn people for this behavior that would widely be considered private. So, what exactly is making the people of the religious right so obsessed with monitoring the behavior of LGBTQ people when there are verses scattered throughout the Bible that monitor almost every aspect of a person's life from their sexuality to their dietary restrictions? Surprisingly, no one in the Christian community seems to discuss these verses. The people who so often identify as anti-LGBTQ tend to pick and choose what verses and sections of the Bible to use in order to condemn the LGBTQ community while ignoring other facets of the Bible in regards to commandments and laws that Christians are subject to following.

Wilson writes, "So, what many gay and lesbian people have heard of the Bible is someone else's interpretation. Warmed-over, left-over, biased views of the Bible are a constant undercurrent in American popular culture" (114). Wilson attempts to address these concerns when she writes, "Society's hatred and loathing of homosexuals is really about the collective shame, guilt, fear, and self-hatred in our culture at large, especially as these related to issues of sexuality" (Wilson, 32). Wilson predicts that the hatred surrounding homosexuals in society and the church is stemmed from a self-hatred, perhaps because of an inability to understand someone that is different from one's own

self or even inherent refusal to attempt to understand. People tend to fear the unknown, which is easily proven by this overbearing fear of homosexuality within the Christian church.

Wilson continues to write on this subject and discusses the unfair treatment of homosexuality in the church and addresses the inability of these ostracized people to cope with this rejection from their families and churches. She writes:

I know many gays and lesbians who have been forbidden to have any contact with their own siblings' children because of the assumed toxicity of their presence or influence. Or other gays and lesbians who have been publicly outed, humiliated, vilified, and literally driven out of a church meeting or Bible study, or pastor's office, or confessional. Many gay and lesbian individuals do not have the resources internally to cope with these experiences. Some do not understand that this is a result of homophobia. They really believe they must deserve it, even if they can't figure out why. (Wilson, 33)

This short passage by Wilson speaks volumes about what LGBTQ Christians are struggling with and dealing with in regards to their churches. A religion based on love and acceptance is currently driving people away and referring to them as demonic because of the belief that homosexuality is something so inherently evil that these people do not even deserve to sit in a congregation full of other sinners.

Not only is this homophobia affecting these people's spiritual lives, it is also affecting their lives with their family, as Wilson stated some of these people are not allowed to be around their nieces and nephews because of their sexuality, which is also seen prevalently in *Sweet Tea* and *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*. Wilson also acknowledges

herself that these people often do not have the skills to cope with such hatred and rejection. She writes that these people think that they deserve this treatment, even when they themselves cannot justify these actions and cannot figure out what they did to deserve this treatment. If the Bible teaches to its believers that all humans are sinners, then how can any human being have a right to drive away people wishing to be an active member of the church? Wilson expertly creates a space for gay people in the Bible that gives them a place of acceptance that has for so long been kept from them. She teaches her congregation of the MCC that forgiveness is key in maintaining a healthy relationship with a religion that demonizes homosexuality. She writes:

Gay and lesbian people have long had the opportunity to develop our capacity for forgiveness. We are one of the few minority groups whose members do not necessarily share their minority status with their families. Many gay men and lesbians have been rejected, punished, and excluded by their families and churches, as well as by the larger society. In order to live, gay men and lesbians have had to learn how to let go, grieve, and forgive. In order to embrace the Bible joyfully, many people will have to forgive the Bible, as well as forgive those who have used it to hurt and punish and ostracize them. (Wilson, 113)

This is a profound statement by Wilson, and perhaps she is right—there may not be any other way to reconcile the two without forgiveness. This also contrasts with her fellow associate Perry, who did not so much preach forgiveness as much as collective action on part of his congregations.

The three authors previously discussed all made major efforts to attempt to understand the divide that continues to grow between LGBTQ Christians and the

Christian church. The authors not only proved that the church has driven its LGBTQ members away, but also that the church has a tremendous journey to embark upon in order to become fully accepting of its fellow members who identify as LGBTQ. The authors of these three books make many attempts to try to understand why the church has become so discriminatory in regards to its LGBTQ members, but this question remains largely unanswered by these three authors and still remains unanswered today. The church is in desperate need of finding a solution to reprimand its members who have spread a message of hatred and find a way to promote a unifying message of love and acceptance for its LGBTQ members. This is obviously easier said than done, but a first step is garnering support for the Biblical message that all people are sinners and are all loved by God, because this message is clearly not being used in regards to the church's LGBTQ members. One conclusion I have drawn from these authors is that the church as an entity needs to be willing to embark upon this journey of accepting LGBTQ Christians. However, these authors do not foresee this in the near future, and neither do I. Each of these authors showed that rejection is blanketed under Southern manners, and Jake is a superb example of this, who was still politely greeted each day from teachers and friends, but slowly distanced further from them. In order for effective change in the near future for LGBTQ Christians, the church needs to openly admit its wrongdoings towards LGBTQ Christians, and LGBTQ Christians need not to accept polite Southern manners tinged with hatred when they deserve the full acceptance given to other members of the church.

Chapter 2

In order to put some of my theories about the LGBTQ community and the Christian faith into practice, I conducted a questionnaire comprised of ten questions that asked people who identified as LGBTQ to discuss some of their concerns and issues they have had with their faith, church, or Christian religion in general. The questionnaire was conducted using the Qualtrics system, as this proved to be the easiest form of communicating with respondents of the questionnaire and also for gathering data. This was a voluntary self-reporting questionnaire that was limited to Southern citizens over the age of eighteen who identified as both Christian and LGBTQ. The questions given to the respondents were open-ended questions that allowed each person to elaborate on any topic or aspect they chose. The questions were intended to gauge the disconnect between LGBTQ Christians and the church that had been discussed in each book used for this thesis. The questions also sought to determine that discrimination is *still* a rampant issue that plagues the Christian church and is not merely a problem that has “died out.” Lastly, the questions intended to retrieve feedback from people who identify as LGBTQ Christians and what they personally think has gone wrong in the church regarding its LGBTQ members and their suggestions on how to improve this disconnect. The following questions were asked in the questionnaire:

1. How old were you when you realized that your sexuality was not heterosexual?
2. What label, if any, do you choose to use to identify your sexuality?
3. How do you choose to reconcile your sexuality with Christianity, particularly since many Christians are aggressively anti-LBGTQ?

4. Have you ever felt victimized or discriminated against from a person who also identifies as a Christian?
5. Does your family know about your sexuality?
6. What were your thoughts and/or concerns when you came out to them?
7. How old were you when you came out to close friends and family?
8. Do you find it difficult to reconcile your faith in Christianity when many members of your faith are anti-LGBTQ?
9. Do you agree that the verses pertaining to homosexuality in the Bible have been misinterpreted through the many generations of this religion?
10. What are some ways that Christianity could improve upon to become more LGBTQ friendly?

These questions provided an in depth insight into how people who identify as LGBTQ and as a Christian perceive themselves and others in a religion that is notorious for being anti-LGBTQ. All of the questions will be addressed throughout this chapter, but first, some striking and concerning issues will be discussed that were shown in the data gathered throughout this questionnaire.

The first question of this questionnaire asks the readers to identify how old they were when they realized that their sexual orientation was not heterosexual. Of the thirty people that are considered in this questionnaire, two people recorded that they were younger than nine years old when they realized they were not heterosexual—these readers were five and seven years old when they realized that they were not heterosexual. These two readers who realized their sexual orientation were definitely outliers in this questionnaire that was conducted. Another outlier of this questionnaire was a person who

stated that they did not realize their true sexual orientation until they were thirty-four years old. However, while these three outliers are an unusual age to realize one's sexual orientation, the majority of the responders stated that they were around adolescence when they realized that their sexual orientation was not defined as heterosexual. The term adolescence in this questionnaire will denote the age range between twelve and seventeen.

This data proved to be what I had expected of this particular question. The outliers were not predicted, but as there were only three of them, my expectation that the majority of people would be around the stage of puberty when they realized their actual sexual orientation proved to be a true statement of this questionnaire. The majority of respondents were between the ages of twelve and seventeen upon realizing their LGBTQ status, however, one has to wonder what exactly these three outliers could denote for a further study. Perhaps the two responders who were younger than nine show that some children are capable of recognizing their non-heterosexual feelings well before the age of puberty. This also denies claims that being LGBTQ is a choice, as someone as young as five or seven is in no way able to consciously decide a sexual orientation. The one outlier who was thirty-four upon realizing their sexual orientation perhaps further enhances the notion that sexuality is fluent and perhaps even a changing nature of a person's life. These three outliers could perhaps lead to a further study that examines the link between a person's age and discovering their true sexuality. However, because the majority was in the adolescent stage, this seems to imply that people begin to recognize their LGBTQ status upon puberty and around the time an average person would start dating and entering adulthood.

The second question of the questionnaire asks readers to identify what label they choose to use in regards to their sexuality. This simple question actually proved to be very interesting, as an unexpected outlier occurred in this section of the questionnaire. Twenty-nine people (ninety-seven percent of respondents) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, but one person did not identify as any of these—they identified as asexual. This made me question my sole usage of LGBTQ, as I had originally predicted the usage of labels only used in this acronym. This made me realized that perhaps my sole usage of the acronym LGBTQ is changing in today's culture. This shows how important a small plus sign can be in regards to asking people to define their sexual orientation, as an acronym might not always be able to define human sexuality. The sole fact that asexuality is left out of many questionnaires and discussions in regards to sexuality and gender perhaps sheds further light onto how diverse human sexuality really is and shows that people should be more aware of a person's identity in order to properly include the complex depths of human sexuality. .

Question three of the questionnaire proved to be where answers started to become more diverse and intriguing. Question three asks the readers how they choose to reconcile their sexuality with Christianity, particularly since so many Christians are aggressively anti-LGBTQ. Two people stated that they had no reconciliation for the two, prompting me to wonder if perhaps they just accepted their fate of what Christians preach to them—that they are doomed to hell. In my earliest predictions I thought that people might give very detailed answers to this question, as reconciling one's sexuality with an aggressively anti-LGBTQ religion seemed difficult to me. However, this definitely proved to be an

untrue hypothesis, as many readers stated that reconciling the two was not a major issue for them, as they saw God as a forgiving entity who saw all sin as equal.

One person wrote, “I feel like god doesn’t judge who you are no matter what. As a Christian the only one who can judge me is God, not homophobic hypocrites who are so called Christian.” This person re-emphasized many of the statements previously made in Chapter One of my thesis—that Christians continually seem to fall back on their word preaching that God is the only one who can judge a person for their sins. Another person seemed to echo this sentiment when they wrote, “I have chosen to ignore everyone’s opinion because I cannot change who I am. Also, if these said Christians would do their research, they would understand that it is not a sin to be gay. No one can help who they love.” This proved to be yet another sentiment that reiterates that LGBTQ Christians are longing for a church that understands that Christians are not to judge others but to love and accept all people for who they are. In this section of the questionnaire, there were a few outliers who had a more negative perception on how people choose to reconcile their faith and their sexuality. One person wrote, “I choose mostly to hide my orientation, especially around people of the religious community.” Another person chose to say, “I am very disappointed seeing so many evangelicals who are so vehemently against homosexuality.”

These responses to Question 3 show that many LGBTQ Christians are striving to find ways to reconcile the church and their sexuality to come together as one and leave behind the hatred the church is so infamous for spreading. No person should ever have to feel as if they have to hide their true selves just to be able to feel as if they belong in their church community or family community. Many suggested that Christians should research

and study the Bible more in order to discover for themselves that identifying as LGBTQ is not a sin. However, this renders the question of what is the best way to teach Christians a further in depth study of the Bible that proves to them that being gay is not a sin. This is something that needs intensive studying and researching in order to better the communication and understanding between the Christian community and its LGBTQ members.

Question four of the questionnaire asks readers if they have ever felt victimized or discriminated against from a person who also identifies as a Christian. My original expectation was that the majority of people would say yes. This proved to be true, as every person but one stated that they have felt victimized, which was also shown to be a problem in each of the books used for this research. Interestingly, the one person who had never felt victimized or discriminated against by their fellow Christians was the one person who identified as asexual. There are many reasons why this could be the case-- this person has never discussed asexuality with his fellow Christians, asexuality is deemed as something a priest or minister would need in order to fulfill their duties, or perhaps people just do not know enough about this particular sexuality to comment or disapprove. However, with the exception of this one outlier, the fact that the remaining twenty-nine readers answered yes is quite eye-opening, as it shows victimization and discrimination against LGBTQ Christians is still frequent in the Christian religion, which is surprising, assuming that as a society progresses so would the church. All except one person had admitted to feeling the pain of discrimination because of something that is completely natural and an unchangeable part of human beings.

What are the consequences for twenty-nine out of thirty people feeling victimized by their fellow Christians? The obvious consequence for these LGBTQ responders is a feeling of rejection from their fellow Christian community. While this is a small questionnaire, one also has to wonder does this prove to be true if conducted on a larger scale? Is it true that the majority of LGBTQ Christians have felt victimized and discriminated against at least once by their fellow Christians? A further study of this would prove if discrimination and victimization from fellow Christians against LGBTQ Christians is as rampant as suggested in this questionnaire. Taking this research question even further could garner the answers to questions such as: Is discrimination particularly worse for one form of sexual identification than the other? (i.e. Are transgender people more discriminated against than gay people?) And what are the limitations to only researching Southern churches and its problems with discrimination? Do churches in considered more liberal areas of the country experience this same rampant discrimination against its LGBTQ members?

Question five asks readers to state if their families know about their sexuality. I expected the majority of answers to be yes, just because of the sheer age group of people that was asked to take this questionnaire, as all of the respondents were over eighteen, and one would expect them to be mature enough to be open with their families. However, this did not exactly prove to be true. Six out of thirty people said their family did not know about their sexuality—that is twenty percent of the people who took this questionnaire. That means that these people likely still have fears and reservations about revealing their sexuality to their families and loved ones. While it is encouraging that eighty percent of people had acknowledged their sexuality to their families and loved

ones, the twenty percent that had not is a relatively high percentage that was not expected of this questionnaire, as every person who completed this questionnaire was above the age of eighteen. This perhaps shows that fear of rejection and condemnation is still an issue that needs to be addressed among the LGBTQ Christian community.

A further study of this question could also prove to be beneficial to understanding the difficulties LGBTQ Christians are faced with coming out to their families and communities. LGBTQ Christians are faced with a unique circumstance when coming out to their families and communities, as these people are inherently aware that their religion as a whole is not very accepting of the LGBTQ community. Perhaps being an LGBTQ Christian could be linked to why some of the responders still were not out to their families and communities. The fear of rejection and judgment could inherently delay a person feeling comfortable enough to discuss their sexuality with their close friends and family, which is exactly what Perry faced while hiding his true sexual orientation for so long from his family and church community, ultimately being cast out for his secret sexuality.

Question six of the questionnaire asks readers to identify any thoughts and concerns they had when they chose to come out to their respective family members and loved ones. I had no expectations or predictions for these answers, other than the obvious fear of rejection by their families and communities. While some people did have this fear, the majority of the answers were more complex than this. Six of the respondents stated that upon revealing their sexuality to their families, their families did not agree with it and did not support their sexuality because of their religion. This was an expected answer, however, none of these answers mention outright rejection, so perhaps these

people just had to encounter disapproving family members. There were two outliers who stated that their families were happy upon discovering the true nature of their loved one. This was, quite frankly, an unbelievable answer that I would not have predicted from this questionnaire, especially more than one of this type of answer.

This is obviously an ideal situation, where coming out to one's family and loved ones is a celebrated experience that revels in a person embracing their true selves. However, another group of people, four to be exact, did not have these experiences, and discussed the negative consequences they endured because of coming out to their families. This was expected yet revealed much about the unique challenges LGBTQ Christians face in their communities. One person wrote, "They cannot stand the fact that I am a homosexual, taking away my invitations to family gatherings." Another person wrote, "They [my family] said things like 'you are possessed by the devil and 'you are going to hell.'" Another person wrote, "Even after I explained to her that I did not think it [being gay] was a sin, she still does not agree with it and we hardly speak now." These answers prove that the LGBTQ Christian community and the church have a long way to go until acceptance is achieved for its LGBTQ members. Being possessed by the devil and excluded from family gatherings should not be consequences of revealing one's sexual identity to their family and loved ones. As one can see, the answers and responses to this question proved to be mostly marred with negative connotations. The nuances of the answers differentiated between disappointment and anger and sometimes a mixture of both.

This particular question of the questionnaire conducted on a larger scale could perhaps reveal to the Christian community how better to respond to a loved one coming

out as a member of the LGBTQ community. While there are necessarily no right or wrong ways to accepting a loved one who discloses their LGBTQ status, there are certainly better ways to address the issue at hand if a family or community is not ready to accept a person for their sexuality. While celebrating someone coming to terms with their true selves and recognizing that God loves them for who they are is obviously an ideal situation for LGBTQ Christians, there are also many steps that can be taken to progress and improve from an inherent rejection and “you are going to hell” mentality when talking to a fellow Christian who happens to identify as LGBTQ. Perhaps a study to find ways to discuss and approach disapproving communities and families could help guide LGBTQ Christians on how to discuss their sexuality with their loved ones without having to be afraid.

Question seven of the questionnaire asks readers to reveal how old they were when they chose to come out to their family and friends. My original prediction was that most people would have come out in their late teenage years, especially considering that the majority of the people who completed this questionnaire are residents of the South, which is notorious for not being LGBTQ friendly. I assumed people would wait until college or late high school to reveal their sexualities to their families due to their nearing adulthood, impending move from home or beginning to establish serious romantic relationships. However, unlike what I predicted, the answers were quite varied. There were two outliers that stated they came out to their loved ones at ages eleven and thirteen. There were three other outliers who stated respectively that they came out to their families at ages 23, 26, and 30. The majority of the questionnaire—25 people—stayed true to my predictions though, and came out to their families at around late high school

and early college, which is defined in this chapter as the range of ages fifteen to nineteen. Coming out to one's family seems relatively common around this age range perhaps because the onset of puberty is over and one is becoming more self-aware and coming into their sexual awakening. The outliers who came out to their loved ones at a later stage in life perhaps shed a light on how people are still fearful and concerned about discussing their LGBTQ status with their trusted communities and loved ones even in their late twenties.

Question eight of the questionnaire asks readers if they find it difficult to reconcile their faith in Christianity when many members of this faith are anti-LGBTQ. This question is different from question three in that this question examines if this reconciliation between their sexuality and religion is a difficult experience. I expected the majority of people to say yes, as even I sometimes find it difficult to reconcile some of my behaviors with that of the Bible, much less something so notorious and broadcasted as human sexuality. However, as proven to be true of other questions in the questionnaire, the answers were varied. Five people out of thirty stated they that they did not find it difficult to reconcile their faith and their sexuality. One person went as far to even state, "I am firm in my sexuality and my faith." These five participants, constituting 1/6th of respondents had no problem reconciling their faith with their sexuality, but that is by no means the majority of participants.

The majority of participants stated that they did find it difficult to reconcile their faith in Christianity when its members are so aggressively anti-LGBTQ. One person wrote, "The idea did concern me when I was younger—the idea of going to hell because I did not like men upset me." This shows that the fear tactic of going to hell is still

prevalent among Christians in using this to try to scare LGBTQ members into adhering to social norms of sexuality in the church. One person had a rather interesting answer in regards not to Christianity as a whole, but in Christian denominations. This person wrote, “I find it has not been difficult within the Catholic faith, but I have had difficulty outside the denomination.” This renders the reader to question if perhaps certain denominations should be addressed in regards to its stance on LGBTQ members instead of the Christian church as a whole. This could further research into discovering if denominations independently of the Christian religion as a whole could benefit LGBTQ Christians more by addressing certain denominations’ beliefs and concerns independent of another denominations. Perhaps this shows that other denominations should learn from how the Catholic Church is addressing the need of reconciliation and acceptance of LGBTQ members and the church,

Question nine of the questionnaire asks readers if they agree that verses of the Bible pertaining to homosexuality have been misinterpreted through the many generations of Christianity. I expected the majority of people to answer yes, which was ultimately proven true. Only two people out of thirty answered no to this question. That is only about seven percent of the people who completed this questionnaire. The remaining ninety-three percent answered yes, which shows that LGBTQ Christians are extremely aware that verses throughout the Bible have been misconstrued and used to discriminate against LGBTQ Christians in the church. Bible verses used only to shame a group of people seems rather antiquated and could easily be compared to verses of the Bible used to limit women and slaves in the nation’s previous history. This practice of using verses to limit the rights of a certain group of people is rather inhumane and as the questionnaire

shows, ninety-three percent of the people who completed this questionnaire feel as if Bible verses have been manipulated for use and misconstrued.

A study on a larger scale of this question could perhaps render interesting information for LGBTQ Christians as a whole. If ninety-three percent of the people in this questionnaire agree that Bible verses have been misconstrued through generations, perhaps a study on a larger scale would render the same results. This could show LGBTQ Christians that they are not alone in questioning why people still aggressively use Bible verses without fully understanding their context in order to discriminate against people.

The final question of the questionnaire, and perhaps the most telling, asks the readers to identify some ways that Christianity could improve to become more LGBTQ friendly. I originally had no expectations for these responses, as I hoped to learn from these people what exactly they feel like the church could do better in order to improve the relationship between the church and LGBTQ members. The answers given in this question are quite varied and hard to categorize into groups. One category that could easily be identified, however, were the answers that implicated the members of the church needed to stop being hypocrites and stop judging others while continually preaching a message of love and acceptance of all.

Some of the answers were rather telling, though. One person wrote, "I think Christians need to focus on their mission of love and not on condemnation of judgment. This should be obvious but seems to be ignored and neglected." This answer stood out from the others because it offered a solution to the hypocritical mentality of many of the members of the church. This person suggested focusing on their mission of love and not condemnation of others. Focusing on love instead of hate seems rather obvious, but as

this person stated, it does seem as if this notion is rather neglected and ignored within the church. One person confirmed earlier notions that the Bible is often taken out of context and needs to be reconsidered in order for LGBTQ acceptance in the church. This person suggested, “I think as Christians, we should be less judgmental of people and more accepting. We need to stop taking things out of context and actually do research. We need to remember that the Bible was written in a completely different time.” Regardless of people’s answers, one theme is quite common—the need to stop judging others. This theme repeatedly occurs throughout this questionnaire and renders readers to ponder how is one to stop the continual judgment that has plagued the Christian church, particularly the church’s LGBTQ members. The MCC proved that LGBTQ Christians can become leaders of the church and eliminate discrimination in congregations. Both Perry and Wilson spent the vast majority of their lives proving that this was possible and created a lasting foundation for LGBTQ Christians to find support in fighting against the discrimination in the Christian religion.

Conclusion

Conducting this thesis showed me that LGBTQ Christians have been discriminated against for too long, and with the help of people like Troy Perry and Nancy Wilson, are finally able to gain a religious space that is safe and accepting of them regardless of their sexualities and identities. The Christian church has proved to be a place full of hypocrisy and rejection as seen in the questionnaire conducted from LGBTQ members who identify as part of the Christian church. This thesis started with one boy who expressed to me his concern with being gay and attending a Christian school that openly stated expulsion upon a student rendering their LGBTQ status, and led to the study of tremendous Christian leaders who decided that no longer would they tolerate a Christian church that denied them full acceptance.

The questionnaire I conducted proved my biggest fears were true—that still people feel rejected and discriminated against by their own family and church communities. The Christian church is in desperate need of a solution to bridge the gap between its LGBTQ members and its members who protest their acceptance. Many of the questionnaire answers implied that many LGBTQ Christians want other members to study the Bible for a more nuanced understanding of what the verses really mean to show them that being gay is not a sin nor is it something one needs to hide or be ashamed of in order for acceptance. However, until the church recognizes this divide that causes so many Christians to lose faith in themselves and the church, the hypocrisy, rejection, and discrimination will only become a larger problem for LGBTQ Christians. Nancy Wilson summed up this thesis excellently in a small paragraph in her book *Our Tribe*. She wrote:

I believe that it is essential for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals to take back the Bible. If we are not included among the stories and characters of the Bible, then it cannot be our book. It is also important for heterosexuals not to see the Bible monolithically either but to see the people of the Bible as they must have been: as varied and complex in their sexuality as human beings are today. As gay and lesbian biblical scholars come out, do the scholarship, and pay the price, the texts will be healed. Meanwhile, we must boldly begin to ask the questions, make suggestions, and go too far. (Wilson, 164)

I strongly agree with Wilson's statements and conclude that LGBTQ Christians need to take back the Bible as their own and create a narrative that includes them. More LGBTQ Christians need to study the Scriptures in context in order to heal the texts and the people that they have been used to harm. Wilson is also right in that LGBTQ Christians need to boldly ask questions without fear. Asking questions leads to discoveries that have the potential to completely change how LGBTQ Christians and the church interact with one another. Wilson tells her followers to "go too far," but perhaps there is no such thing as "going too far," as these people are in desperate need of healing and acceptance from a church that has discriminated against the LGBTQ community for so long. Wilson alludes to LGBTQ Christian scholars paying a price, what exactly is the price is determinant upon the individual, but that price is a small one compared to the many generations of misconstrued Scriptures, rejection, and discrimination allowed to continue in the church.

Southern Christian homosexuals face a peculiar brand of homophobia in the South. By examining this homophobia unique to the South discussed by Johnson, Wilson,

Perry, and the questionnaire respondents, the reader can gain a greater insight into why this particular Southern homophobia still exists what changes need to be made in order to procure a safe and welcoming church community for its LGBTQ members. Each of these authors and questionnaire respondents greatly expressed a need for change—a change that results in a permanent reconciliation between the LGBTQ Christians and the church. LGBTQ Christians should not have to settle for inclusion in the church that is marred with rejection disguised as Southern politeness. These members deserve the equality of membership just as non-LGBTQ members retain. If the church refuses to make these changes that have been so prevalently discussed throughout, they risk losing membership not only to their LGBTQ members, but also to their families and friends who support them regardless of their sexualities and do not want to see a loved one cloaked in shame from the pulpit. My friend Jake, who so readily gave up on the Christian church upon their treatment when his sexuality was revealed, is a prime example of the hurt and rejection the church has shown to its members and the consequences that stem from this rejection. While many LGBTQ Christians are still willing to remain a part of the church, such as the men who agree to a transactional acceptance in *Sweet Tea*, Jake and some of the questionnaire respondents indicate that no church or community is worth losing one's self-respect and self-worth.

LIST OF REFERENCE

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