Towards the development of inclusive missional congregations: Biblical hospitality as a paradigm for building hospitable communities of faith

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis which I am submitting to the University of Pretoria for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY is my own work and has not been submitted by me for a degree to any other tertiary institution. Included in chapters three and four is foundational material duplicated out of necessity from my Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree from the McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia, completed May 2010. This vital background information served as the basis formulating further study that resulted in this Research Project in Practical Theology

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SUMMARY

This study explores the way that ancient Near Eastern hospitality, as revealed in the Bible, can inform contemporary ecclesial welcome and inclusiveness. The inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons into the life of local missional congregations frames a significant issue facing the Church. The Bible serves as the best resource offering valuable insight for congregations as they begin conversations leading toward the welcome and inclusion of all persons equally into their corporate life. Employing these hospitality texts can educate congregations as they seek to engage the LGBTQQIA+ community and shift toward a more inclusive and welcoming understanding and a more accepting and affirming posture. The ancient custom of hospitality, foundational among nomadic herders and codified within Bedouin culture, offers context that can enable and empower churches to become welcoming and inclusive. A church can be authentically hospitable only if it engages in discernment and achieves clarity about its identity, an absolute necessity in determining a local missional church's congregational ethos.

The question is "how can congregations that exhibit prejudice toward LGBTQQIA+ persons overcome bias and discriminatory practices and become missionally holistic, hospitably welcoming and inclusive?"

This study offers a paradigm from which congregations can engage LGBTQQIA+ persons from a broader biblical hermeneutical perspective. An exegesis of specific biblical references, each one indicating to some degree its influence on ancient Near Eastern hospitality, reveals the various ways that biblical peoples, tribes, and clans related to one another. These same principles and practices can then be applied by congregations as they receive LGBTQQIA+ persons.

This study was carried out through empirical qualitative advocacy research. The qualitative nature of the research paradigm falls within the broader field of congregational studies, specifically within Congregational Development, i.e., "Gemeindeaufbau," as it addresses local missional faith communities and the ways they determine their ministries.

The thesis describes the biblical and cultural background undergirding the ancient custom of Near Eastern hospitality and the way it was practiced amongst a people particularly concerned with keeping covenant and honoring the holiness principles that defined them and gave them their unique identity. This study will provide exegesis and analysis of the way these texts informed their original audience and can continue to inform faith communities of a more excellent way to be in relation with individuals and groups traditionally regarded as unacceptable according to traditional Christian standards, particularly persons who identify as LGBTQQIA+.

Key Terms

Congregational Development

Evangelical

Hospitality

Hermeneutic

Inclusivity

Liberal

Mainline

Moderate

Modern

Postmodern

Progressive

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It has been a long and winding road, an incredibly circuitous process, to reach the completion of this dissertation, a journey that has taken almost ten years from conception to birth. During this final year I have suffered with long-COVID-19, what the Mayo Clinic prefers to call "Post-COVID Syndrome." I say this out of appreciation to my co-promoters who exercised much patience as I worked toward completion. Much of the challenge of this research in Practical Theology is based in the fact that, while PT is a young and evolving discipline, the traditional paradigm for practical theological research did not always match the traditional framework necessary to carry out the study. During this research and writing process there are individuals who have helped in various ways, giving words of support and encouragement, whose input is deeply appreciated and valued in creating this final product.

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DEDICATION

For the Rev. Dr. Jill S. Bierwirth
My Sister by Another Mother

For the Rev. Fredric A. Platé
BFF, Best Friend for Life
Gone Way too Soon!

CHAPTER ONE

FRAMING THE RESEARCH

Throughout the Church's institutional evolution congregations have faced numerous societal issues challenging ecclesial authority and influence. Local missional churches have addressed a plethora of challenges with varying degrees of success, usually finding ways to accommodate new discoveries and shifting opinions driving social consensus. During the last three decades the complexities of human sexuality have moved to the forefront of ecclesial and societal conversations. The issue has become a major point of contention within mainline Christianity, Christian denominations of many stripes struggling under the weight of being forced to engage in debates, discussion, and dialogue addressing matters related to nonheterosexual persons. The results have been mixed with either full acceptance and affirmation, hospitable welcome and inclusion, as the new order of the day for many congregations, or a doubling down denial, other churches refusing to embrace an unqualified invitation to all people, considering nonheterosexual behavior abhorrent or deviant. These polarities have been supported on every side of the equation by invoking the Bible as the final authority, each advocate claiming and quoting scripture to justify and verify an inflexible position on the subject. Some congregations have sought a middle ground, proclaiming a moderate position that is accepting and/or welcoming but not affirming. Historically, the Church has used the Bible to support the denigration and subjugation of women and to support slavery, views that have often relegated persons of color to second class status.

The need for this research first became apparent early in my pastoral career when, in March of 1990, I became Senior Minister of what was then known as the Virginia Avenue Baptist Church. It was my first full-time ministry position. The neighborhood, the mission field of the church, had become one of the most liberal and progressive in the Atlanta metropolitan area though the focus of the congregation had not changed much since its early years. The result was a church that had dwindled to about thirty active members because of local demographics including a proposed highway through the neighborhood and because the congregation had become out of touch with and irrelevant to the "intown" community in which it was located. The parish needed to find ways to become more appealing to its neighbors and an asset within the community. How could I help this struggling congregation learn to speak the language of its progressive constituency?

A significant issue for the congregation was that the church embraced a traditional, conservative theology that not only discouraged persons of LGBTQQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic/Agender, plus [sometimes P for Pansexual is used]) orientation from visiting, much less joining. My first move was to talk with the minister of a nearby Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) to learn about local social dynamics, the first step toward my evolution on this issue, although internally, I had long raised serious questions about my traditional, conservative views. This caring minister was very helpful, taking me by the hand and teaching me the basics, a crash course answering all the questions I did not even know that I needed to ask. The resulting transition toward the inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons evolved rather quickly, though there was a level of reluctance on the part of some within the membership, most resistance coming from the men in the congregation. Upon my arrival, the conservative male leadership in the church expected me to be the gatekeeper, something to which I tacitly approved under duress, but knowing that I would never serve in that role. My plan was for us to embrace the community, not to shun it. Knowing that a paradigm shift was not only in order, but necessary, Under new leadership, I began to engage the congregation in a process of biblical and theological dialogue and education. This process eventually led the congregation to cautiously embrace the prospect of becoming an inclusively hospitable faith community, becoming once again a relevant local missional church. A new sign replaced the old one in front of the building, with a caption that read, “An Inclusive Community of Faith Where Everyone Is Welcome.” The church also changed its name to the Virginia-Highland Baptist Church, and then to

Virginia-Highland Church, to reflect the name of the Virginia-Highland community. The fortunes of the church changed rather quickly after that, with many individuals from the community becoming connected with the congregation.

1.1 BACKGROUND

During my eighteen years as Pastor of the Virginia-Highland Church in Atlanta, Georgia, I was privileged to empower this local missional church to become authentically hospitable and inclusive, and eventually declare itself *Open and Affirming*, an official designation within the United Church of Christ. Virginia-Highland Church became a vibrant and vital, relevant and relational congregation affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists and the United Church of Christ.

1.1.1 The Research Problem

How can churches, and particularly urban churches in the United States, survive, even grow and thrive in the twenty-first century? One answer to that question lies in churches becoming hospitably welcoming and inclusive of everyone. While many local missional churches believe themselves to be unequivocally inviting, their continuing rejection of people of LGBTQQIA+ orientation demonstrates otherwise. For many congregations that have historically excluded LGBTQQIA+ persons of faith, the failure to include members of this people group into full fellowship may result in an inability to remain vibrant and vital, relevant and relational, within their local communities.

These challenges reveal a deeper biblical and theological conundrum, exegetical and hermeneutical issues exacerbating what is already a complex and complicated matter, often creating a crisis of faith for those who feel disparaged, ostracized, or rejected. These restrictive viewpoints are a direct result of carefully articulated beliefs based on the exact specifications of explicitly prescribed exegetics and hermeneutics, forming a targeted traditional or conservative approach to the Bible. Many honest and sincere Christians are persuaded and predisposed to a biblical and theological prejudicial homophobia, complete with a variety of stereotypes, all based on traditional paradigms rooted in their study, understanding, and implementation of the biblical narrative, its content and usage narrowly focused, interpreted, and thus understood.

I, therefore, observe the research problem to be that numerous missional congregations fail to be hospitably welcoming and inclusive, especially concerning persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. This lack of inclusivity stems from a failure to understand hospitality as a major biblical and theological theme.

Many churches claim to welcome everyone but remain exclusivist in theory and practice, specifically toward LGBTQQIA+ orientation based on a narrow interpretation of the Bible, citing specific scripture references that are presumably prohibitive of nonheterosexual behavior. These interpretive viewpoints are grounded in a traditionally accepted biblical hermeneutic demanding a blanket or sweeping assumption about the nature of these specific six to twelve references in the biblical text. For many contemporary congregations, living out their call in Christ and led by the Spirit as missional churches, demand being hospitably welcoming and inclusive as a part of becoming a relevant and relational, vibrant and vital, faith community.

1.1.2 The Research Question

The question is "how can congregations that exhibit prejudice toward LGBTQQIA+ persons overcome bias and discriminatory practices and become missionally holistic,

hospitably welcoming and inclusive?" The answer can be found by engaging an alternative biblical hermeneutic that creates a broader and deeper understanding of the principle of fundamental hospitality as a theological premise inherent within the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Accomplishing this degree of transformation demands intentionality on the part of church leadership, specifically the clergy who engage these issues and guide this level of transformation within the congregational system. This hypothesis acknowledges that the role of clergy is pivotal, vital to the transformational process, as these professionals are the lynchpin in effecting any congregational transition, in this case initiating a local missional church's engagement and embrace of an unapologetic and unqualified inclusive and welcoming posture in creating hospitable faith communities.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the advocacy of biblical hospitality must be guided by the love of God. The parameters of advocacy must be determined by principles of loving and faithful behavior. For some Christians, such parameters may limit the hospitable welcome and inclusion of persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation because of the mistaken belief that nonheterosexuality is a learned behavior, a product of environment or a choice. The Bible warns of the dangers of inviting those living outside the comfortable norms of acceptable behavior into the sphere of a local living environment consisting of an indigenous people, a majority of a specific group, and/or a primary, predominant, demographic. For example, in I Kings (11:1-12:19) the story is told of the unfortunate consequences that befell King Solomon because of his marriage to foreign women who corrupted his faithful worship to God. Common sense is clearly a necessity in navigating this and all ecclesial decisions. This research argues that hospitality toward nonheterosexuals is not outside the realm of acceptable Christian beliefs and practices.

1.1.3 The Research Theme

This study explores the way that ancient Near Eastern hospitality as revealed in the Bible can inform contemporary ecclesial welcome and inclusiveness toward every people group, including, but not limited to people who are differently abled, people of different cultures, ethnicities and races, and people of various gender specifications. Such hospitable welcome and inclusion opposes any form of gender bias, racism, sexism, or xenophobic tendencies. The inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons into the life of local missional congregations reveals a significant issue facing the Church. Numerous resources have been developed and are now readily available to assist churches in exploring this issue. The biblical text offers valuable insight for congregations as they begin conversations leading toward the welcome and inclusion of all persons equally into their corporate life. This study examines both prohibitive texts regarding nonheterosexuality and scriptures that can be interpreted from a hospitality perspective. This comprehensive analysis using a canonical hermeneutical approach to these texts creates a paradigm that can serve as a curriculum educating congregations as they seek to engage the LGBTQQIA+ community, making a shift toward a more hospitably inclusive and welcoming understanding and a more accepting and affirming posture. The ancient custom of hospitality, foundational among nomadic herders and further developed within Bedouin culture, offers context that can enable churches to celebrate diversity and embrace inclusiveness.

1.1.4 The Goal of the Research

A church can be authentically hospitable only if it engages in discernment and achieves clarity about its identity, an absolute necessity in determining the missional ethos of a local church (Hunter 2003; Nel 2015). This study offers a paradigm advocating for an alternative or broader biblical hermeneutical perspective, enabling congregations to engage LGBTQQIA+ persons in terms of hospitable welcome and inclusion. An exegesis of specific biblical references, each one indicating to some degree an influence derived from ancient Near Eastern hospitality, will reveal the various ways that biblical peoples, tribes, and clans related to and received one another. These same principles and practices can then be adopted by local churches as they welcome and include LGBTQQIA+ persons and as they develop and nurture a clearer sense of their corporate identity in the hopes of fostering healthier congregational systems. A local missional church can become a place of authentic hospitality once it is able to make a definitive declaration about its mission and ministry, which demands an intentional congregational process. Malan Nel (2015, 26-27) declares that,

> . . . building up a local church is about building a corporate sense of identity. It is this under-standing that is so often missing even among people who may be enthusiastic about their personal and individual identity in Christ. It is almost ironic how biblical truths about corporate identity are so often interpreted in an individualistic way . . . In finding identity it is all about this corporative self-image of the local church. It is this God-given self-image or understanding that should be rediscovered. This rediscovery will bring meaning to our being. In that sense, we are finding identity in becoming who we already are in Christ.

Understanding its beliefs, practices, and purpose is essential to congregational success in articulating its vision and carrying out any welcoming and inclusive mission with integrity.

1.2 THE PLACE OF THE RESEARCH IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

It is important to recognize the placement of this study within the discipline of Practical Theology. Among the founders of practical theology are Carl Immanuel Nitzsch (1787-1868) [2014 206-207; 2023], a disciple of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) [1750; 2000 35-36, 48-49, 55; 2005; 2014 206-207]. Philip Marheineke (1780-1846) [1837; 2014 206-207], who clarified the distinction between theoretical theology and practical theology (Anderson 2001, 24); and Schleiermacher "who first developed the area of practical theology" (Anderson 2001, 24). Schleiermacher organized theology into three specialized fields, but his threefold paradigm "was quickly supplanted by the fourfold pattern with which we are familiar today" (Anderson 2001, 233). The pattern includes biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology (Osmer 2008, 327). For Richard R. Osmer (2008, 233-234), this pattern contains "four key features" that he articulates (Osmer 2008, 233-234). These include,

1. Theology is divided into specialized, relatively autonomous fields.
2. Each field pursues its distinctive tasks along the lines of a modern research discipline, with a specialized language, methods of inquiry, and subject matter.
3. The goal of theological scholarship is the production of new knowledge.
4. The specific task of practical theology is to relate the scholarship of the other theological disciplines to the work of clergy and congregation.

Osmer (2005, xiv) defines practical theology in this way.

> Briefly put, *practical theology is that branch of Christian theology that seeks to construct action-guiding theories of Christian praxis in particular social contexts.* In part, it focuses on "how to"—how to teach, preach, raise children, influence society, and so forth. But this "how to" is informed by a strongly developed theory of "why to"—why we ought to practice the Christian way of life in certain ways in light of an interpretation of a particular social context and the normative claims of the Christian community.

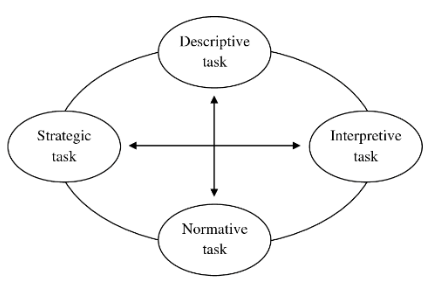
Within the discipline of Practical Theology, Osmer describes six *Strategies of Inquiry* which fall within two categories of research: quantitative and qualitative. These strategies include,

> Life History/Narrative Research;
> Case Study Research; Ethnographic Research;
> Grounded Theory Research; Phenomenological Research; and
> Advocacy Research (Osmer 2008, 50-53).

Osmer then discusses four tasks that can guide practical theological interpretation in formulating responses to various situations that arise within the congregational setting. In concert with these tasks, Osmer also offers four questions representing these four tasks, suggesting that these must be approached when engaging in practical theological research. The tasks including their accompanying questions are included here.

> 1. *The descriptive-empirical task.* Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts. *What is going on?*
>
> 2. *The interpretive task.* Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring. *Why is this going on?*
>
> 3. *The normative task.* Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from "good practice." *What ought to be going on?*
>
> 4. *The pragmatic task.* Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the "talk back" emerging when they are enacted. *How might we respond?* (Osmer 2008, 4).

These four tasks and their accompanying questions are cornerstones in Osmer's design for conducting Practical Theology as both a researcher in the academy as well as ministers attempting to evaluate episodes in local missional churches will need to engage effectively. The four tasks with their accompanying questions are included here. Osmer uses a pragmatic circle or cycle, or as Kevin G. Smith (2010, 101) prefers, "the hermeneutical spiral," to clarify the relationships among these four tasks, each one interdependent with the others.



Using Osmer's paradigmatic guide in discussing nonheterosexual persons in relation to the Bible and the Church, clarity begins to emerge as to ways ministers and scholars may engage what is frequently a controversial subject confronting both denominational and nondenominational churches. "What is going on?" is that many congregations continue exclusionary practices, discriminating against persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation based on biblical theology. The answer to "Why is this going on?" is a determination based on a traditional biblical and theological premise that nonheterosexuality is sinful and is thus a disqualifier for church membership and even attendance. This traditional understanding is born of the idea that human sexuality is based on a choice to be made or is the result of influence and environment rather than being a natural part of an individual's DNA. What ought to be going on is exploring another perspective gleaned from careful biblical exegesis determining a different, perhaps new, hermeneutic that removes traditional barriers to church participation by persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation and thus hospitably welcoming and including them into every aspect of a local missional church's corporate life. "How might we respond?" is found in developing an openness to all persons no matter their sexual orientation, valuing these individuals for who they are and are created to be.

This study will closely align itself with Osmer's understanding of theology, specifically regarding the task of practical theological research. Through the gathering of information from the Bible, and including, when necessary, references to the social sciences. The study will explore patterns and dynamics that build a case for cultivating congregations that are hospitably welcoming and inclusive of all people, and especially regarding individuals of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. Leaning on Osmer's four tasks, the study will primarily focus on the normative task. Using theological constructs, the study interprets missional contexts while examining ethical norms that guide practical theological responses. Each response informs proactive processes toward hospitable welcome and inclusion within local missional congregations.

1.2.1 The Role of the Bible in the Research

David Grumett argues in an Abstract of his article defining the parameters of Practical Theology, that "if practical theology is to be sustainable in the academy it must engage more closely with scripture, doctrine and tradition and in so doing to address, through mutually-generative and mutually-accountable interaction, the whole of material life" (Grumett 2015). Grumett also warns that there are dangers in a purely pastoral understanding of practical theology since there is a temptation to derive this emphasis from secular sources. He also notes that Practical Theology is also closely related to Christian ethics, opening the further possibility that one of the tasks of this discipline might be to study and critique aspects of the secular social and political order (Grumett 2015). Grumett (2005, 5) further observes that "from an historical perspective, practical theology has been understood as a theological sub-discipline focused on pastoral activity rather than on classic theological sources." He then adds, "the assumption has been widespread that a preference for practice at the very least sidelined . . . detailed scholarly engagement with scripture, doctrine, and tradition" (Grumett 2005, 5). Anthony B. Robinson (2006, 46), noting the importance of identity and boundaries, notes that "Like revelation and the nature of Christianity as a revealed religion, the Bible plays an important role when congregations have lost their sense of identity, their center, or their collective memory." He adds,

> But these are not the only issues of congregational health that appropriate clarity about the Scriptures of the church and their role may address. Clarity about the Bible's role also bears significantly on a congregation's sense of vitality and its sense (of) who God is and what God is up to in the world . . . while the Bible has a priestly role in maintaining connection and identity, it also has a prophetic role by challenging us and the worlds we construct and inhabit . . . Acknowledging the diversity within the Scriptures is important . . . there are different testimonies and perspectives . . . diversity and honest tension are present among the various texts of Scripture . . . unity is not conformity! . . . (Robinson 2006, 46-47, 53)

Osmer (2008, 50-53) reminds his reader that the goal of "theological scholarship is the production of new knowledge," and that the practical theologian uses "theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from 'good practice.'" And of course, at the initiation of any Christian theological discourse is the Bible as its primary grounding.

Grumett (2005, 17) chooses the category of differently-abled to illustrate how scripture, tradition, and doctrine might interact in the context of a particular practice, i.e., understanding disabilities from a theological perspective that questions assumptions regarding "definition, significance, and extent." Grumett's illustration provides a foundation for the present study, exploring biblical hospitality in relation to any who are regarded as "others," those who live on the fringes, having been disenfranchised or marginalized by society, including the LGBTQQIA+ community.

Andrew Root (2014, 19-20) speaks to the crisis facing churches within an American (USA) context, describing the decline that many mainline congregations are facing, including the impact that dwindling attendance is having on theological seminaries and divinity schools. Many churches as well as educational institutions are being forced to close. Root declares that, amid this changing ecclesial landscape, that "only a more *practical* perspective that connects theory and practice, will provide any way to fortify the structures of local congregations and denominations." A positive outcome of these trends, however, is what Root describes as "the bastard child," that "Practical Theology has experienced a revival of relevance" (Root 2014, 20). Root's point is that Practical Theology has now been able to carve out its own niche, no longer dependent on other theological disciplines to justify its existence. He is careful to point out that the definition and role of Practical Theology remains fluid, though it has clearly distinguished itself from the social sciences, specifically anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Even so, it is because of the evolution of the social sciences that practical theology is being revitalized (Root 2014, 271).

Root's analysis of Practical Theology is solidly based on a traditional biblical and theological, and thus christological, perspective, grounded deeply in the necessity for a realized experience with the Divine that leads to action, thus praxis termed by the author as ministry (*christopraxis*). There are those within progressive Christian circles who would challenge his theories at the point of his demand for an empirical existential religious/spiritual experience. Some progressives would argue that there is a difference between belief and faith in the cosmic Christ of the cross and a desire to follow the man of history, Jesus of Nazareth, citing the parable called the Good Samaritan in support of this position.

1.2.2 The Texts in the Research

This study employs precisely this type of detailed scholarly engagement, combines an analysis of scripture, doctrine, and tradition to provide a foundation for change in praxis. The study will exegete and explore relevant biblical texts in two categories. First, it will discuss those texts often cited in judgment of LGBTQQIA+ persons, exploring the ways these narratives have been misinterpreted outside of their historical-cultural contexts. Second, it will introduce what could be termed hospitably oriented biblical readings (Gen 1-18; Jon; Ruth; Acts 8:26-40; 10:1-43; Lk 10:1-12; Mt 15:21-28) which clearly offer a more inclusive lens through which texts predominantly understood as judgmental of persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation (Gen 9:20-27; 19; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:21; 26, 27; I Cor 6:9-10; I Tim 1:10; II Pet 2:6; Jude 1:7) can be reinterpreted.

1.3 RICHARD R. OSMER'S FOUR QUESTIONS

Osmer offers four questions that provide a framework for practical theological discussion in terms of naming an issue, finding out why it is a concern, describing what should be taking place with the issue, and offering suggestion for ways that the problem might be addressed. Osmer's paradigm delineates a clear structure that allows for a productive process to take place in any congregational setting, helping local churches "build up" their settings through developing and declaring a clear identity while engaging the necessary task of transformational reformation.

1.3.1 What is going on? The Descriptive-Empirical Task: Priestly Listening

Osmer (2008, 32) desires that congregational leadership, both clergy and laity, learn how "to carry out the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation." Pursuant to this goal, he declares that "practical theology invites such students to interpret the texts of contemporary lives and practices, what Anton Boison once called 'living human documents.'" (Osmer 2008, 32-33). This kind of observation and information-gathering answers the question, "What is going on?" The answers gleaned from this type of inquiry reveal present circumstances and situations, while enhancing the ability of leadership to be more attentive to both people and events, providing what Osmer (2008, 33-34) calls a "spiritual orientation of attending to others in their particularity and otherness within the presence of God."

1.3.2 Why is this going on? The Interpretive Task: Sagely Wisdom

Church leaders must identify important features of a given problem or issue as they relate to their congregational constituents. This task demands the ability to discern between theory and practice within a specific context (Osmer 2008, 80). Osmer (2008, 83) describes what he calls *Sagely Wisdom,* and advocates for continuing education for clergy, leading to a *thoughtfulness* embracing emerging and evolving theological understanding. He then observes, "Thoughtful leaders make for thoughtful congregations. This is the grounding point of a spirituality of sagely wisdom" (Osmer 2008, 83).

1.3.3 What ought to be going on? The Normative Task: Prophetic Discernment

Recalling "critical incidents" from his Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) experience, Osmer offers a backdrop for discussing the task of prophetic discernment. He begins by noting *sympathy* as a crucial element of "human participation in God's pathos, God's suffering over the life of the covenant people and creation as a whole." Sympathy must play two roles in prophetic discernment, first in the theological interpretations of specific episodes, situations, and contexts in the present, and second, in the development of a comprehensive theory of divine-human interaction that guides more focused forms of theological interpretation (Osmer 2008, 147). Osmer adds, "In everyday life, for example, interpretation is set in motion when events and relationships bring us up short and require us to sort out how best to proceed," a reminder that relationships are fragile and that divergent viewpoints often directly challenge the fiber of human relationships (Osmer 2008, 148). Leaning on the insights of Don S. Browning, Osmer declares "that practical theological interpretation is best understood along the lines of a *practice-theory-practice* model, which begins when there is a problem in congregational practice" (Osmer 2008, 148). Issues involving human sexuality and the inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons are cases in point. It is the third task that the challenge of becoming a hospitably welcoming and inclusive missional congregation is juxtaposed in relation to traditional hermeneutics and interpretation of the Bible, this process driven intersection creating tangible teachable moments allowing the potential for a new way forward among churches willing to explore new meanings in terms of their inclusivity. Osmer's theory is a reminder of the relational role always demanded in cultivating missional churches, empathy and sympathy a hallmark of caring and compassionate congregations.

1.3.4 How might we respond? The Pragmatic Task: Servant Leadership

The pragmatic task of practical theological interpretation includes "forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable" (Osmer 2008, 148). Practical theology is helpful by offering models of practice and "*rules of art* providing a general picture of the field in which church leaders act" (Osmer 2008, 148). Rules of art offer "specific guidelines about how to carry out particular actions or practices," with an emphasis on *leading change*… "not only within the external challenge of a changing social context, but also the internal challenge of helping congregations rework their identity and mission" in the context of contemporary culture (Osmer 2008, 148). Osmer advocates for the servant model of leadership as the best way to bring about significant change.

Succinctly stated and for the purposes of this study, the answers to Osmer's four questions are: (1) many churches are exclusivist; (2) the reason for their exclusive practices is their subscription to a traditional biblical literalism that upholds historic Church teachings; (3) a new biblical hermeneutic is needed to provide a new theological paradigm for missional churches in our postmodern, post-foundational age; and (4) one option is to create new curriculums that provide a broader or different biblical hermeneutic through a depth of exegesis that spans the whole of the biblical narrative, including prohibitive texts.

1.4 METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

This study was carried out through empirical qualitative advocacy research. The qualitative nature of the research paradigm falls within the broader field of congregational studies, specifically within Congregational Development, i.e., "Gemeindeaufbau," literally translated from German as "community building," as it addresses local missional faith communities and the ways they determine their ministries. The research also functioned within the framework of Osmer's (2008, 50-53) strategy of *Advocacy Research.*

This strategy is grounded in an explicit political agenda and seeks to contribute to social change. It is practical and collaborative, carrying out research *with* others rather than *about* them. It often focuses on social issues currently being debated in the public domain and seeks to give voice to perspectives overlooked or misrepresented in such debates. It also focuses on issues emerging in social transformation. The goal of research is to shape an action agenda for change (Osmer 2008, 53). This study employs scholarly engagement, combining an analysis of scripture, doctrine, and tradition to provide a foundation for change in praxis. It is at this point where theory meets practice as matter of Practical Theology. In so doing, the study will exegete and explore relevant biblical texts in two categories. First, it will discuss those texts often cited in judgment of LGBTQQIA+ persons, exploring the ways these narratives have been misinterpreted outside of their historical-cultural contexts. Second, it will introduce what could be termed hospitably oriented texts which clearly offer a more inclusive lens through which predominantly judgmental narratives can and must be reinterpreted.

1.4.1 The Research Model

There are numerous research models for studies in practical theology, each one well-established, but no one of these models is sufficient on its own. Although Woodbridge's EDNA (Exploratory, Descriptive, Normative, Action) model in some ways echoes Osmer's model, Woodbridge (2014, 90) contends that Osmer's work "needs to be adjusted to meet the requirements of doing theology optimally and scripturally." He cites Rolf Zerfass (1974), a pioneer in the field, who "defines a model as 'a set order of signs and interconnections which should correspond to a certain number of relevant characteristics within reality, in real circumstances'" (Woodbridge 2014, 90). Woodbridge (2014, 92) notes that the Zerfass (1974) model ". . . places the step of theological tradition before the situation analysis" interrelating "theological tradition, praxis, situation, analysis, practical theological theory, and redefined praxis." Kevin Smith finds the Osmer model lacking scriptural content and integrity but acknowledges that Osmer comes at his approach from a liberal Protestant perspective while Smith prefers a conservative, evangelical approach (Smith 2010, 112).

Noel Woodbridge (2014, 111) writes that "according to Zerfass, biblical, historical, and systematic theology form the basis for constructing and testing a theory of action," leading to "a reinterpretation of scripture and to a revision of the theory to form a new theory." Basil Leonard (2000, 11), citing the input of Heyns and Pierterse, and later modified by Dingemans, states that "Zerfass developed a model for the theory-praxis reflection process that has become widely known in theological circles."

One of the appealing features of Woodbridge's EDNA model is that it "is grounded in evangelical theology, in which the Bible serves as the normative basis and standard for all Christian conduct and church practice" (Smith 2010, 93). Grounded in what he calls the "Christian philosophy of life," these characteristics satisfy the concern of many critics of practical theological research, reflecting Heitink's definition that Practical Theology is the "empirically oriented theological theory of the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society" (Smith 2010, 94). Woodbridge's ideas are especially helpful in recognizing the potential influences of this study in biblical hospitality on local missional churches.

In his book on Practical Theology, Ray S. Anderson (2001, 266-283) includes a chapter titled "Homosexuality," in which he discusses the inherent challenges of missional ministry with LGBTQQIA+ persons. Anderson presents the usual arguments pro and con, and then offers five summary statements, the final one declaring that, ". . . a theological and pastoral approach to the issue of homosexuality within the church must consider a wider spectrum of biblical teaching than the few texts that condemn specific homosexual acts" (Anderson 2001, 271). In his concluding remarks, he then provides five summary statements.

Anderson chooses not, however, to clarify this "wider spectrum," leaving this task to other scholars. It is this "wider spectrum of biblical teaching" about homosexuality that will be explored in the research. To become authentically missional, I maintain that contemporary churches must move beyond traditional views and values regarding human sexuality and embrace scientific discovery, understanding that sexuality is a matter of anthropological, biological, and sociological science and not theology. This broader approach to the Bible offers a more expansive understanding of all human beings as created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*).

To become authentically missional, while embracing scientific discoveries accepted as normative by twenty-first century critically thinking people, contemporary churches must reevaluate traditional views and values regarding human sexuality. The welcome and inclusion of all persons into local missional churches, and specifically persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation, is a matter of social justice. The welcome and affirmation of all persons is an issue that stands on its own merit and stands clearly within the basic requirements of a gospel based on love and acceptance. It is imperative that the Church arrive at the realization that it needs repentance and forgiveness for its response to the LGBTQQIA+ community, a diverse group in themselves who are also children of God. Local Churches must learn the incredible gifts these individuals possess, gifts that by and large have traditionally been ignored or resisted by the larger Church.

1.4.2 Limitations and Assumptions

Although this study advocates for the unqualified welcome and inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons into every aspect of congregational life, and offers a synopsis of opposing Christian viewpoints, the limits of comprehensive analysis regarding conservative perspectives must be recognized and acknowledged. A brief overview of the seven to eleven texts assumed to prohibit non-heterosexual behavior is presented to acknowledge the traditional basis and bias supporting historically negative perspectives, while bolstering arguments for openness and affirmation. A thorough analysis of the texts, revealing hospitality as a biblical/theological standard intended for the inclusion of all marginalized persons, will form a significant aspect of the study. However, a comprehensive examination of non-heterosexuality from the perspectives of anthropology, biology, genetics, and sociology would be too cumbersome to be helpful in this context, but these disciplines are referenced when needed for clarification.

1.4.3 An Overview of the Research

This thesis describes the biblical and cultural background undergirding the ancient custom of Near Eastern hospitality and the way it was practiced amongst a people particularly concerned with keeping covenant and honoring the holiness principles that defined them and gave them their unique identity. The study provides an overview of the biblical narrative, highlighting some of the most transparent of the texts that illustrate the theme of ancient Near Eastern hospitality. This study will provide exegesis and analysis of the way these texts reflected the cultural milieu of their original audience and can continue to enlighten faith communities of a more excellent way to be in relation with individuals and groups traditionally regarded as unacceptable according to traditional Christian standards, particularly persons who identify as LGBTQQIA+.

1.4.4 Concepts and Chapter Content

Throughout this study a variety of concepts will be presented as part of the research. Each of these terms will be defined in detail as they inform and impact the research problem and question. These terms include but are not limited to LGBTQQIA+ evangelical, hermeneutic, hospitality (inclusive and welcoming), liberal, mainline, moderate, postmodern, and progressive. The chapter content will address the challenges confronting missional congregations that choose to explore becoming hospitably welcoming and inclusive churches. The third chapter will examine the six to twelve specific texts in the Bible that presumably speak to nonheterosexual behavior, many of these narratives passing references at best. The fourth chapter will then provide specific examples of various texts throughout the biblical narrative that can be described as hospitable in nature, many of these texts inclusive of people the Hebrew Bible refers to as aliens, foreigners, or strangers. This chapter will conclude with a survey of hospitality as a biblical and theological theme. Chapters five and six are devoted to a qualitative practical study of the way that clergy engage the issue of hospitably welcoming and including persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. By and large the discoveries confirm many preconceptions about the predisposed leanings of clergy, each pastor cultivating a hospitably welcoming and inclusive environment within the church they serve. That being acknowledged, the insights gleaned from the interviews have much to contribute to the larger Church and to local missional congregations.

1.4.5 Previous Research

Much material has been produced in recent years addressing non-heterosexuality and the Church. Volumes abound that support a rationale for churches becoming places of hospitality and welcome (Bess 1995; Geis and Messer eds. 1994; Ogletree 1984). Still other sources rely on science, presenting genetic, biological, and anthropological evidence supporting non-heterosexuality as an orientation rather than a byproduct of environmental stimulus or as a lifestyle choice or a preferred behavior (Blair 1991; Greenberg 1988; Jones 1966). Today, studies in science support the theory that somewhere between one and ten percent of the world's population is of LGBTQQIA+ orientation at any given point in history. (see Bagley & Trembley 1998; Bailey 2016; Bieber 1965; Billy et al. 1993; Binson et al. 1995; Branch 2016; Chandra et al., 2011; Cook 2021; Diamond 1993; Fay et al. 1989; Gagnon & Simon 1973; Gates 2011; Gebhard 1972; Gebhard & Johnson 1979; Gonsiorek et al. 1995; Hamer 1994; Harry 1990; Herbenick et al. 2010; Hewitt 1998; Hunt 1974; James & Yarhouse 2000; Janus & Janus 1993; Kinsey et al. 1948; Kinsey et al. 1953; Laumann et al. 1994; LeVay 2011; McWhirter et al. 1990; Mosher et al. 2005; NSSHB findings; Patterson & D'Augelli; Pietropinto & Simenauer 1977; Rogers & Turner 1991; Rosario 1994; Sell et al. 1995; Smith 1991; Taylor 1993). Some works recount personal testimonies from LGBTQQIA+ Christians giving witness to their struggle, the internal pull that convinced them beyond the shadow of all doubt that their sexual orientation has always been a part of their created being, reflecting the *imago Dei*, the image of God, intrinsic to the human creature (Glaser 1988: Umans ed. 1988; White 1994). They are convinced that they are who they are, created just as they are. In addition, as practicing Christians, many LGBTQQIA+ persons long to be a part of mainstream, "mainline" faith communities. While volumes of books provide exegetical analyses of the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures, articulating the contextual and cultural nuances associated with the Bible and homosexuality (Brawley ed. 1996; England and Winterbottom 1998; Spong 1992), there seems to be very little research exploring the way that the ancient custom and practice of Near Eastern hospitality influences much of the biblical narrative as it relates to the gathering of others. Thus, when conversations arise around the issue of "Homosexuality and the Church" or "Homosexuality and the Bible," these hospitality texts, for the most part, are left out of the discussion. Quite simply, they are usually ignored altogether.

1.4.6 Framing the Research

This study examines the ancient custom of Near Eastern hospitality and its impact on the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures. First practiced by the nomads and eventually codified by the Bedouins, giving it definition that remains constant to this day, the influence of this cultural phenomenon without question informs and impacts all the sacred writings of the Near East. Ancient Near Eastern hospitality provided a way for strangers to practice a form on détente in their encounters, a way of assuring protection between parties that could be adversarial in nature. Described as a specific event in this narrative history Herman Gunkel (1997, 193) uses the phrase "Islamic Orient" to describe this part of the world, while other writers use the synonym, "Near East." For the purposes of this study and for consistency, the terms Near East or Eastern will be employed to refer to that part of the world that makes up the Levant, Mesopotamia, and North Africa. In similar readings, the term Middle Eastern is often found, though it is considered by some to have a negative connotation, a pejorative term usually reserved as a contemporary designation. This study explores the ways that specific biblical texts illustrate hospitality and can serve as a curriculum, a valuable resource, for congregations that are considering the hospitable welcome and inclusion of all persons into their communal life, specifically the way these texts can impact the invitation of individuals who identify as LGBTQQIA+. This study will engage the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures, examining the ways they illuminate the theme of ancient Near Eastern hospitality and the way these texts can be used to educate congregations regarding their engagement of different people groups, specifically LGBTQQIA+ individuals. This ancient custom provides a template, a foundation enabling churches to formulate a theology of inclusion where diversity is not merely tolerated, but rather is embraced as well as celebrated. The concept of hospitality allows congregations to formulate such a theology from a biblical perspective which is an imperative in many congregations. In an ideal ecclesial world, the debate about non-heterosexuality would never be considered a theological or ecclesiological problem and would never be disguised as such. However, as an episode from the *Living the Questions* series declares, "Bad anthropology creates bad theology." This quote is taken from *Saving Jesus Redux.* I would argue that "Bad biology creates bad theology."

1.5 THE CASE FOR BUILDING HOSPITABLY WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE MISSIONAL CHURCHES

In the early and mid-1990s, homosexuality was frequently described by American Baptist, USA pastor Tony Campolo as the "hot potato" issue confronting the contemporary Church (Campolo 1988, 105-120). Campolo has frequently used the podium and the pulpit as his platform, calling to awareness and to account this image in countless lectures, sermons, and presentations, keeping this issue at the forefront of denominational and congregational conversations. Along with independent Christian organizations, numerous denominations have subsidiary groups or auxiliaries with resources that focus on LGBTQQIA+ issues **(see** Ch. 6, 257-258).

Despite the controversial nature of this issue, many congregations have made the decision to explore the possibility of welcoming LGBTQQIA+ persons into their congregational life and for the churches that have done so, the process toward the inclusion of these individuals has been richly rewarding. In an ongoing effort to destigmatize the term “Queer,” many persons of non-heterosexual orientation have chosen to proudly describe themselves in this way, wearing the label as a badge of honor. In making this choice, the journey toward becoming welcoming and inclusive has been a life-giving, richly rewarding experience reflecting the kinds of peace and social justice issues characterized by the mission and ministry of Jesus. For many Christians, extending hospitality by welcoming all persons into the life of the Church is a basic requirement, a minimal expectation. However, for many of these same Christians, the conversation shifts when the topic of inviting and including the LGBTQQIA+ community into their churches is raised. For these churches, the welcome and affirmation of LGBTQQIA+ persons into their congregational life is considered anathema, tantamount to committing heresy. For these churches and their congregants, to even consider welcoming and affirming LGBTQQIA+ persons into their congregations would be the equivalent of condoning the sin of sodomy. Therefore, it is a discussion that is completely off limits. For many traditional, conservative, or fundamentalist Christians these are non-negotiable convictions. And in fairness to their position on the matter, their beliefs are supported by what they understand as a clearly defined biblical hermeneutic, based on a long and traditionally held interpretation of the apparent condemnation of non-heterosexual practices described in the Bible, behaviors that are thus believed to be abhorrent, or described as “deviant” according to Pope Benedict. In many congregations and denominations, the LGBTQQIA+ issue serves as a litmus test for membership. Many local churches have been excluded or “disfellowshipped” because they have become welcoming and inclusive of LGBTQQIA+ orientation.

1.5.1 Summary

To survive and even thrive in a postmodern, twenty-first century world congregations must find ways to become hospitably welcoming and inclusive of all persons, including persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. Many churches claim to welcome everyone, but their core beliefs and internal practices indicate otherwise as they proffer an exclusivist posture toward nonheterosexual persons. A careful reading of the Bible reveals that there are mixed reviews, a lack of consensus, regarding traditionally narrow interpretations of scripture that advocate against welcoming and including this significant segment of the population, sexuality now understood to be a biological orientation and not a choice. It is true many honest and sincere, faithfully believing, Christians continue to exhibit a prejudicial bias toward the LGBTQQIA+ community based on a traditional theological perspective. The core theory in this research is that even the most intentional missional congregations fail to be inclusive based on these historically affirmed positions. These continually reinforced and time-bound stereotypical viewpoints are exacerbated by advocating for a specific biblical hermeneutic that fails to embrace hospitality as a primary theological theme in the Bible.

1.5.2 Revisiting the Research Question

The pivotal question for missional churches seeking to become more inviting and welcoming in theory and practice is, “how can congregations that exhibit prejudice toward LGBTQQIA+ persons overcome bias and discriminatory practices and become missionally holistic, inclusive, and hospitable?” An answer can be found in exploring an alternative biblical hermeneutic that cultivates a deeper understanding of hospitality as a fundamental biblical theme revealing a theological premise inherent within the Judeo-Christian scriptures. This seismic transformation, this substantive level of change or reformation, demands intentional work by both clergy and laity, requiring the heavy lifting that must be undertaken by church leadership. This solution places the impetus on clergy persons giving leadership, to be at the forefront of this kind of education and congregational process. The results have unlimited potential in terms of churches attaining their missional goals and objectives, specifically undergirding church restarts and revitalization, in any context opening new avenues of growth of both numerical and spiritual gains. Any initiative toward building openly welcoming churches, must begin with the Bible because the Bible will always be authoritative for local missional congregations.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATING HOSPITABLE LOCAL MISSIONAL CHURCHES

This chapter explores the ways that biblical hospitality can serve in developing a practical theological model enhancing the ministries of local congregations engaging their communities as local missional churches. This purpose of this chapter is to provide the framework, the parameters, from which this study in Practical Theology focuses on biblical hospitality as it informs a theological response, specifically the ways congregations can become hospitably welcoming and inclusive missional churches. The necessary components for enabling missional praxis are discussed, including the need for developing and maintaining a clear ecclesial identity while creating opportunities to live into that cultivated ethos. The likelihood of conflict arising during a church's search for a missional identity is also explored. In this discussion of building and developing local missional churches, specifically in the way they hospitably extend an inviting welcome and unqualified inclusion to all persons, Nel's comprehensive theories serve as the background for the practical aspect of the research. Nel's analysis supports the hypothesis that identity is an essential element in any developmental or transformational process undergirding congregational reformation. The comprehensive emphasis of Nel's theories regarding identity as necessary for building up local missional churches through reformational processes serves as the impetus for this study, his analysis thorough and groundbreaking. As a study in Practical Theology, Osmer's (2008, 4; 50-53) "normative task" drives the engine of this research, focusing specifically on advocacy, not only for building up local missional churches through reformative processes, but specifically advocating for the hospitable welcome and inclusion of persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation.

The assignment at the core of Osmer's (2008, 4) "normative task" addresses the question, "what ought to be going on?"

2.1 IDENTITY INTEGRITY

In his discussion of the primacy of identity driven churches Malan Nel declares, "It is a matter of *being* and not so much of *doing* missions. We eventually *do* because we *are*" (Nel 2015, 11). As both Israel Galindo and Victor Hunter indicate, identity issues are at the heart of many problems and systemic challenges that face congregations. Hunter (2003, 7) declares, "there really is a crisis in pastoral clarity and ecclesial identity, and the crisis in one feeds the crisis in the other." Israel Galindo (2004, 130-131) declares,

> I believe that one of the most critical dynamics of the hidden lives of congregations is the formation of a corporate identity. And I believe that the element missing in the lives of most congregations is a clear sense of their identity, leaving them with the inability to answer the question, "Who are you as a congregation?"

He adds, "Identity has to do with a congregation's understanding of itself as Church and as a unique corporate body of believers" (Galindo 2004, 116). Galindo (2004, 130-131) makes the case that,

> one of the most critical dimensions that a congregation needs in order to be viable and healthy is a strong sense of identity. Congregational leaders who want to help a congregation discover and articulate its identity will give attention to the three sources of a church's identity: its corporate memory, corporate values, and corporate relationships . . . Having a clear identity allows a congregation to act with integrity. With a strong sense of identity, members will have the capacity to make decisions consistent with who they are and based on their shared values. They will be able to make difficult decisions based on principles and beliefs rather than expediency or anxiety.

Galindo's observations are helpful for congregations that authentically seek to engage an intentional process toward becoming hospitably welcoming faith communities, to become holistically inclusive.

Nel (2015, 205) states that "developing a missional local church as a ministry is indeed a process of reformation. It is a ministry aimed at continuing reformation within the congregation." Nel (2015, 25) notes that "building up a missional local church, cultivating missional churches is about *being*, the real *essence* and *life* of the church – a movement of and in life." According to Nel (2015, 205), reforming practices include "growth, maturing, and self-reliant spiritual functioning," all taking place within "the general laws of social mechanisms" (Nel 2015, 206). He notes that "fresh expressions of church are not only legitimate expressions, but they may also be more legitimate because they attend more closely to mission task, . . ." (Nel 2015, 206-207). Nel (2015, 25) cites Dwight Zscheile (2012, 1, cf. also Nel) who observes, "At the heart of the missional church conversation lies a challenge: to recover and deepen the church's mission in all of creation." Citing Zscheile (2012, 5-6, cf. also Nel) again,

> The missional church conversation started with a recognition that the church's relationship to its surrounding culture in the West had changed: the era of functional Christendom or a church's culture was over, and the primary source of the church's identity and vocation could no longer rest on social centrality. By "missional church" I mean a church whose identity lies in its *participation in the triune God's mission* in all of creation. In the view of missional ecclesiology, it is God's mission that has a church, not the church that has a mission (Nel 2015, 25-26).

Both Nel and Zscheile remind their readers that the Church now operates in a post-Christian, post-denominational, postmodern age and that reformational shifts are necessary if local missional congregations are to survive and even thrive. At the heart of any substantive change leading to congregational transformation is the development of a clear sense of corporate ethos, that individual churches learn or discover their unique identity and create processes that bring their goals to fruition while making transparent these realized objectives. This ecclesial definition illuminates a specific church's purpose, the very reason for its existence, often a reflection of its denominational affiliation but always a product of its local context, all these factors "thus determining one's raison d'être," its determined mission (Nel 2015, 27), what Nel (2015, 52) also describes as a church's "true nature." Nel (2015, 28) asserts that "developing a missional local church is not concerned about the continued existence of a given institution. Rather, it implies a deep concern about whether and how a given institution is fulfilling God's purpose for it." Connecting with the paradigm guiding this research, Nel (2015, 29) claims that "the identity of the church, in the light of Scripture, supplies not only insight into its raison d'être or mission but determines it. Identity driven churches have a purpose." This is the point at which missiology and Practical Theology intersect, each one informing and impacting the other. Nel (2015, 38) declares that "this is what a practical theological and missional perspective on ecclesiology is about; asking the what, why and how questions," echoing the guidelines put forth by Osmer in his definition and description of Practical Theology. Finally,

> Developing a missional church is primarily about purposefully guiding the congregation towards understanding and intentionally seeking its own identity. Those in the church who reach this point can do two things: first they can help draft the mission for the church (that which originates in its identity), and secondly help to draft the statement of identity and mission of a given congregation at a given time in a given situation (Nel 2015, 29).

In describing churches as communities of faith Nel (2015, 48) cites Christopher J. H. Wright (see Wright 2010, 28-29, cf. also Nel) who chooses the metaphor "God's people" instead of "church, asking the pivotal question "What kind of people are we?" Wright "uses the image of a postman where *who he is* does not matter as long as the job gets done. For the church it does matter: integrity, justice, unity, inclusion, and Christlikeness, 'holy'" (Nel 2015, 48). Wright then declares that "there is no biblical mission without biblical ethics. . ." (Nel 2015, 48). The role of the Bible cannot be underestimated in developing identity and creating a missional ethos that drives the functions of the local congregation. Nel (2015, 150) asserts that "it is part of developing a missional local church to lead a congregation to better biblical insight into the relationship between service leaders (offices) and the congregation."

Nel (2015, 207) reminds his reader that "the ministry of developing a missional local church demands a thorough consideration of the theological precepts for being a church," with the understanding that congregations at their core are a "theological reality." He reminds his reader that "missional congregations while clearly form a specific cultural context, think uniquely and differently (Nel 2015, 126). Nel's work also intersects with this research, in that "the exegesis of the Bible and the exegesis of congregation and community are always equally important in developing a missional local church; they are just not evenly authoritative and normative for the congregation" (Nel 2015, 207). Nel (2015, 207) "pleads for an approach that never regards the congregation as a social domain that can merely be manipulated" by outside factors and influences. A congregation must own its missional identity before it can become sociologically relevant. Nel (2015, 208) is quick to point out that "for many the term *change* has become a negative one" and yet it is necessary to sustain a viable organism. Nel (2015, 208) adds that "change is about constant, yet responsible, reformation in the congregation's life and operation that demands "modification of thinking, attitudes and functioning." Successful reformation takes place through what Nel calls "agogy," a term describing "motivation" as part of an intentional process guided by leadership (2015, 210). Nel (2015, 50) points out that there are myriad metaphors "used to describe the dimension of reformation in the congregation," including renewal, revival or revitalization, refounding, rekindling, or reactivation. Perhaps the best image is put forth by Darrell L. Guder who describes it as "the continuing conversion of the Church," which is also the theme of his book on the subject. Nel identifies three psychological needs in which intrinsic motivation occurs and thrives. These three "innate psychological needs are: 1.) the need for competence; 2.) the need for relatedness; and 3.) the need for autonomy." Nel (2015, 213) then clarifies that "These processes need to be facilitated from beginning to end with a theological basis. . ."

Nel (2015, 214-216) delineates four interrelated dynamics that affect present situations as these processes are undertaken. They include *memory*, as the congregation reflects on former "the good old days"; *change*, as current trends in the congregation encourage reformational processes to be engaged; *conflict*, a natural byproduct or inherent reaction when reformation becomes necessary; and *hope*, "the strongest of the four dynamics," a reminder of the faith and love within the local missional church that allows for a positive outcome, ameliorating the fear and anxiety that comes with transition and transformation. The gospel plays a role in initiating theological discussion, which are a normal part of reformational ecclesial conversations and debates. Nel (2015, 218) describes real change in the congregation as "a journey" motivated by movement while creating and nurturing new attitudes and behaviors within the congregational system. He adds that travelers must "*extricate* themselves in some way from the place where they are and follow a *given route* to a *new place"* (Nel 2015, 218).

Nel (2015, 221) declares that "*developing a missional local church* . . . usually starts with an awareness of a practical problem," and "a *thorough theologically informed motivational phase* is therefore of crucial importance for the involvement of the whole congregation in this process." This process leads to "the drafting of a congregational mission" statement, "a theological task" that "is the starting point for strategic planning" (Nel 2015, 221). Nel (2015, 222) articulates phases in the process of strategizing as motivation, unfreezing, developing a mission statement (explaining the congregation's identity), analysis of the congregation, planning a strategy, and then implementing that plan. Once objectives are reached, evaluated, and stabilized, the process is repeated. Nel (2015, 223-224) states that "understanding and enjoying identity is basically what is meant by *motivation*," which is indeed an ongoing and purposefully "identity-driven" reformational process. Nel (2015, 226) reminds his reader that "motivation is essentially about leading people towards recognizing" their God-given identity from a corporate perspective, with individuality taking a lesser or subordinate role in congregational dynamics. The congregation must discover its ethos, by answering basic questions such as "Who am I? What do I believe? What is my relationship with others or how do I relate to others?" (Nel 2015, 226).

Considering Nel's questions, there is more to congregational identity than its successful functioning as it must also understand itself as led by the Spirit, with Christ as its cornerstone. However, Nel (2015, 227-228) warns of the danger of congregants reasoning that "God and the Bible are unchangeable" because such a mindset limits "understanding of what God has in mind for the church." Nel (2015, 228-229) insists that congregants. . .

> always *become (change), are (being)* and *do* in accordance with what God wants to do in and through them. There should therefore all the more be sensitivity in the congregation to being contemporary (relevant). The congregation is after all within God's mission within a given age. . . How the congregation changes, becoming more and more in line with God's will, sets the world an example . . . When a congregation discovers its identity, . . . it will embrace change in accord with God's intention. It can be either a change back to basic principles, or . . . a dynamic movement towards some new idea and/or action. But it is always about *responsible reformation, renewal* or *change. . .*

Significant change always requires paradigm shifts. Nel (2015, 212) cites Augusto Rodríguez who describes the context of paradigm changes, noting,

> Paradigms changes-shifts have their beginnings at worldview level. That is, paradigms begin to change when people's worldview begin to change. Deep-

> level changes at this time have already begun to take place at the micro-paradigm level. People began to revise the meaning of things according to their set of assumptions and values, and even though the end product of change will be a radical one, it is usually slow. However, the "transformational" process has already started.

Rodríguez's comment is an admission that many substantive changes within congregations are initiated by cultural conversations taking place in contemporary society, the accusation of accommodation often named because of this naturally occurring phenomenon. The Church lives in the tension between being influenced by and accepting conventional community wisdom and maintaining core values, many traditions that have stood the test of time. Finding a healthy balance is paramount to church's honoring historic creeds and doctrines while not becoming intractably subservient to them. The case can be made that the hospitable welcome and inclusion of persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation into the life of local missional churches is a classic, quintessential, example of this oft repeated dynamic.

One challenge to the hospitable welcome and inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons into every aspect of local missional congregations is how to address, accurately and appropriately, the fallacy that radical ecclesial hospitality means nothing more than accommodating contemporary societal norms. Dealing successfully with the nuances around this misconception requires quality leadership, both clergy and laity, serving as mindful catalysts through every step of the change process, knowing when to accelerate and when to decrease speed (Nel 2015, 231). "The leaders then become a kind of 'change agent,' . . . creating an atmosphere conducive to a motivation that bears fruit, while simultaneously creating discord, as more individuals begin to share their personal perspectives" (Nel 2015, 232). Nel (2015, 232) suggests that "This bestowed and enriching variety creates room for . . . insights and contributions without members ever needing to coerce or manipulate one another" because "what binds them together is stronger than that which separates them" (Nel 2015, 232).

Having listed the theological incentives undergirding the desire for reformational change, Nel, citing the work of Kennon L. Callahan, offers six motivating factors present within every congregation. These include *compassion*—a sense of empathy, caring, sharing and mutual support; *community*—a sense of happy togetherness, of belonging, and of being one family; *hope*—a focus on the realm of God that is continually coming among us; *challenge*—including a sense of achievement and fulfillment; *reasonability*— including appropriate analysis, logical thinking, and sound judgment; and *commitment*—dedication to a task and accountability for that task. (Callahan 1987, 76ff.; Nel 2015, 233). Nel (2015, 234) also observes "that estranged members and people outside the church are attracted to congregations where a spirit of compassion, community and hope is communicated rather than a spirit of commitment." Nel (2015, 242) asserts that "reformational change only takes place within a climate of trust" developed under strong and skilled leadership, and "in which members feel safe and entrust themselves to one another." Conflict is an inevitable part of the process, best engaged through theological activity.

> The question is . . . not whether there is going to be conflict, but what is to be done with it. . . When the reformation of the congregation is involved, tension is sometimes created by the mere fact that the leaders and members expect conflict to arise . . . They are often in principle opposed to anything that can disrupt a sense of the congregation's harmony.
>
> Although . . . peace and harmony in the congregation are always something to strive for, it is only half-true that there should always only be harmony. To maintain this position of harmony at all costs is to choose death. . . (Nel 2015, 234-235).

Nel notes that education is key, for "it is only the awareness of ignorance . . . that makes a person face the possibilities of acquiring new knowledge" (Nel 2015, 235). At the heart of education is committing to "a process of continual change" as a new people (Nel 2015, 235). Nel (2015, 236-237) opines,

> Where some choose the status quo, there are always members who have serious problems with that choice. It is more realistic to say that conflict is possible and that any conflict contains the potential for growth and development . . . the possibility of conflict (should be) expected . . . differences of opinion then serve to shape the members in a cause that is greater than any individual preferences or convictions . . . Naturally, a deeper spiritual life and a new depth in gratitude and obedience accompany this kind of willingness in the congregation.

For Nel, the primacy of quality preaching and worship, and the necessity of quality in planning and implementation of these congregational practices can be core values that empower churches to develop their missional calling. Nel concludes by describing the necessary components for creating a congregational mission statement that not only defines the essence of the local missional church but also articulates what it sees as its mission and ministry in both generalities and specifics.

2.1.1 The Function of Practical Theology

One of the ways that Practical Theology functions is found in the methodology or the processes by which the Bible and Doctrine inform and impact ecclesial praxis, the ways that local missional churches carry out the tasks of congregational mission and ministry. While it has long been established, that study of the Bible should and will lead to a change of perspective in terms of both heart and mind, it can be argued that this is indeed a general assumption. It is by and large accepted as a given, a truism, that transformation is understood to be a direct byproduct of any serious encounter with the biblical narrative. An applied practical theological approach to a critical engagement of biblical exegetics and hermeneutics creates a paradigm by which the results or outcome are specifically articulated, making praxis, and thus ministry, a priority that includes recognizable, tangible, goals and objectives.

Otherwise, Bible study is conducted solely for the experience, merely for the sake of studying the Bible and can be thus argued that any level of examination of the biblical narrative is reduced to an academic or devotional exercise, rendered the equivalent of intellectual calisthenics.

Traditionally, the structure of Practical Theology has been confined to the social sciences, heavily influenced by the fields of anthropology, psychology, and sociology. While this trend remains at the center as a core value, as a key component within practical theological research, some practitioners have advocated for enhancing the role of the Bible and Doctrine as instruments befitting practical theological engagement. The incorporation of the biblical narrative at the intersection of a variety of life settings separates the Bible, as well as other sacred writings, from other literature. The Bible continues to be integral in developing belief and serves to stimulate faith formation. While this research is less concerned about whether the Bible is read and studied, the way the biblical narrative is approached when it is engaged makes a huge difference. This is especially so when the issue of biblical interpretation is related to issues of hospitable welcome and inclusion, specifically the ecclesial invitation to persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. In certain contexts, lives are at risk, are literally at stake, based on a traditional understanding of the presumably prohibitive texts that on a surface level appear to forbid nonheterosexual behavior. In the final analysis, it is a matter of interpretation and thus a matter of a more holistic exegetical, hermeneutical approach.

Though his book focuses on religious diversity, Robert Wuthnow makes a salient point that informs this study in Practical Theology. He writes, “Although churches are guided by many considerations, including the condition of their finances and the interests of their members, theology is generally the underlying principle that governs the kinds of programs that are considered appropriate or inappropriate" (Wuthnow 2005, 237). This study reveals that not only is mission and ministry, purpose, determined and dictated by theology, based on biblical exegesis and interpretive hermeneutics, but theology also influences parameters regarding the hospitable welcome and inclusion of specific individuals and people groups.

Describing the role of theology, Joseph A. Bessler adds, "In the kind of revolutionary, postcolonial age in which we are living, basic questions about the nature of a discipline are where the action is" (Bessler 2020, 3). Though the conversation began as a discussion about systematic theology and theologians, it resulted in greater emphasis being placed on the goals of theological conversation and study directly leading to theology's practical application. As a constructive theologian, Bessler notes, "The term *constructive* theology has emerged as theologians themselves realize that theologies are deeply contextual constructions, reflecting not only their generation but their cultural location" (Bessler 2020, 4).

Justin DaMetz, in an article on the "Theological Features of American Civil Religion," cites Bessler's work regarding theology and culture, noting the odd mix at play in American Christianity as "that of the simultaneous affirmations of both intense tribalism and welcoming universalism" among a threefold paradigm he develops (DaMetz 2017, 1). He cites an essay by Bessler, "Does Constructive Theology Matter?" in which Bessler addresses five parts necessary for structuring the Christian story, including affirmation, problem, proposal, vision, and future. Bessler (DaMetz 2017, 3-4) lists,

> (1) the inherent created goodness of the human person and human culture;
>
> (2) the estrangement from that created goodness, frequently discussed in terms of "the Fall," which haunts our individual and collective histories;
>
> (3) the redemption of our individual and collective existence by an heroic and selfless redeemer who calls us from the old to the new, from failure to renewal, from despair to hope;

> (4) the formation of the beloved community in faith, empowered by grace to be a transformative presence in the world; and
>
> (5) the vision of the *telos* or goal of a transformed creation, when God will establish a "new heaven and a new earth" and be "all in all."

DaMetz adds, "We see here the same moment of affirmation, problem, proposal, vision, and future, in the familiar Judeo-Christian story recounted in Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation" (DaMetz 2017, 4; see Bessler 2009, 135-148). "In short," he says, "tribalism coexists with universalism, albeit uneasily at times" (DaMetz 2017, 6). DaMetz (2017, 9) affirms that "Christianity also has a strong role to play in the American affinity for universalism."

> This isn't to whitewash or minimize the history of cultural appropriation and erasure that runs through the story of the American melting pot. Many people have been made to feel, by either explicit or implicit means, that certain features of their heritage and culture aren't welcome here. This most often applies to people of color, those who most often live in the global south or east. Thus, the selective melting pot has all too often become a tool for the continued supremacy and privilege of those who are of white, European, and Protestant Christian backgrounds . . . American ideological openness to difference and diversity doesn't always make it into our actions, of course. There is a long history of intolerance and enforced conformity, both via policy and social pressure, towards minority and marginalized people groups in our country. But our question here is about the shape of American political thought, not necessarily practice; thus, we can take at face value the American rhetorical affinity for universality (DaMetz 2017, 6, 9; see Haidt 2013, 287).

Echoing Haidt's validation that there is a conservative tilt in the American political scene, DaMetz acknowledges that "conservatives more effectively trigger a wider range of moral foundations than liberals do, causing their authority to be perceived as more legitimate," America undoubtedly "strongly influenced by theological and sacred ideas" (DaMetz 2017, 14). Finally, DaMetz invokes Robert Wuthnow who demonstrates that Americans certainly exhibit a strong "ideological commitment to diversity and the acceptance of difference, even if we fail to apply that attitude in our policies and practices" (DaMetz 2017, 8; see Wuthnow 2005, 75-76).

Summarizing these various dichotomies and discrepancies, Bessler (2020, 4) offers this insight,

> What theology studies, therefore, is not only the tradition—previous understandings and interpretations of Christian faith and orthodoxy—but also the multiple, emergent trajectories of human experience, culture, and language in the present. The task of theology is not only to engage the study of classic texts, such as the Bible, and of favored eras of the past in the way that much Protestant and Catholic theology has done even in the modern period, *but to offer protocols for how faith should be understood and lived in the present-moving-into-the-future* . . . engaging the increasingly diverse discourses and cultural settings of the modern and now postmodern world . . . except by the persuasiveness of their arguments . . . theologians cannot force ecclesial bodies to embrace their proposals for a feminist, ecological, liberationist, or deconstructive theology. At best, theologians can persuade people of faith and good will that addressing these issues of cultural and global concern lies at the heart of living the gospel of Jesus in our time and place.

These discoveries have spurred advances in scholarship that have the innate capacity to "open up new interpretations that both challenge old understandings of the faith and open up new possibilities," not only in traditional areas of theological inquiry, but in other fields such as "philosophy aesthetics, and ethics. . ." (Bessler 2020, 4-5). This is an essential task of practical theologians.

In her analysis of an interfaith systematic theology, Kristin Johnston Largen (Largen 2013, 175-176) declares,

> Of the many things the Christian church says about the human being, there are three affirmations that stand at the core of any Christian anthropology. Sequentially, they are as follows: first, human beings are created good, in the image of God . . . Second, human beings are fundamentally, profoundly, and inescapably sinners . . . Third, human beings are justified and forgiven in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; in Jesus Christ, humans are both empowered and freed to live a life of love, in service to one's neighbor for the glory of God. Together, these statements form the core of what Christians affirm

> to be true about human nature . . . Christianity asserts that human beings find their core meaning and purpose in relationship to God. Yet the way in which this meaning is sought and found varies greatly from time and place. Therefore, while humanity's quest for meaning and self-understanding is perpetual and timeless, the shape of the quest itself is dependent to a large degree on the context: the where and the when of the questioner. This means that while there certainly are similarities across continents and centuries, each society and generation has the responsibility to frame the question of human existence in its own way . . . the quest for meaning has taken on a deeply existential character . . .

While the thrust of her work is directed toward interfaith conversations, the content in her theoretical principles can certainly be broadly applied to numerous situations that at a minimum demand tolerance and ideally recommend acceptance and affirmation of various people groups. In her discussion of the "meaning of human existence and life," these three components are at the center of her thesis, her conclusion being that despite sin, what some prefer to call the reality of evil in the world, that humanity is "inherently and indelibly good" (Largen 2013, 177). Largen (2013, 177-178, 188) suggests,

> However, while this profession of human goodness might sound nice in theory, one might well ask for more specifics: in what way, specifically, is human goodness visible, demonstrable; and here we need something more than merely a murky reckoning of individual and/or corporate acts of wickedness and deceit. To what evidence can we point that demonstrates ontologically, rather than merely epistemologically, human goodness? As one possible answer, I suggest that one of the primary ways in which Christians are able to observe and affirm the inherent goodness of humanity is in human uniqueness and diversity . . . a strong theological consensus has emerged in the twenty-first century affirming that the most constructive and compelling way to understand the meaning of humanity's creation as *imago Dei* is through the concept of relationality. Humanity bears the image of God in our fundamentally relational existence. Echoing the triune communion of persons, human beings do not simply *have* relationships; instead, it is accurate to say that human beings *are* relationships: that is, human identity—both individually and communally—comes into being only in and through the myriad network of relationships that create us. There are many different ways to articulate this reality in Christian theology. . .

2.1.2 Missional Hermeneutics

To provide for a clearer definitional scope of mission and missiology, a discussion of the nature of "missional hermeneutics" is in order. Guder (2015, 58) cites the comprehensive analysis by David J. Bosch on the subject, declaring, "There is a growing conversation among biblical and missiological scholars today around the theme we have come to call 'missional hermeneutics.'" Bosch adds, "One might describe its basic presupposition in an adaptation of Prof. (Rudolf Johannes) Pesch's statement: '[T]he entire New Testament is a mission book,' and that is certainly a core tenet undergirding any understanding of "missional hermeneutics" (Guder 2015, 58). Guder describes "this way of reading the New Testament documents . . . as the Christological formation of missional practice. It is a crucial meeting and interaction of Christology and Missiology. The texts, in their diverse ways, tell of Jesus Christ" (Guder 2015, 58). He says,

> The New Testament documents are addressed to communities of believers. They are living in the light of the resurrection and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. The diverse testimonies written to and for them serve their continuing formation for their distinctive vocation, which is to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. The Gospels, in particular, are not merely passion stories with long introductions. The narratives of the earthly ministry of Jesus focus primarily upon the calling and formation of the disciples. The communities for which they were written have responded to the gospel of God's love made concrete in the suffering, death, and raising of Christ. Now, as they carry out their own missional vocation, they join the original disciples in the process of formation for that vocation. . . (Guder 2015, 58).

Guder (2015, 59) adds,

> The focus upon a missional hermeneutic appears to open up ways of understanding and engaging Scripture not burdened by some of the controversies that have polarized Christians for so long. If we read both the Pauline epistles and the four Gospels through the lenses of a missional hermeneutic, there does not seem to be a compelling reason to pit them against each other. In their distinctive and complementary ways, they are forming

> witnessing communities to be faithful to the same Christ in the living out of the same calling. . .

While this is only one of many hermeneutical approaches that can be applied to the biblical narrative, this narrow approach certainly offers a perspective on biblical exegesis that allows for a synthesis of the Christian scriptures, leading toward a better understanding of mission and missiology. Greg McKinzie cites Michael Barram for a definition of missional hermeneutics. He says,

> At this point, I would define a missional hermeneutic as an approach to the biblical text rooted in the basic conviction that God has a mission in the world and that *we read Scripture as a community called into and caught up by these divine purposes.* This affirmation, which is at once disarmingly simple and dauntingly comprehensive, provides the requisite missional framework and context for asking critical questions. Christian congregations caught up in the *missio Dei* read the Bible from a social location characterized by mission. From this "location" every interpretive question becomes a "missional" question (McKinzie 2017, 163).

Participation by the church is a prerequisite, not just one among many hermeneutical streams, but rather is the "*locus theologicus* of the church that rightly perceives the subject matter of Scripture, that approaches the canonical narrative of God's mission rightly as the church's ongoing story, and that rightly understands the purpose for which it is formed and equipped by Scripture" (McKinzie 2017, 163). According to Barram's premise, what this means is that "there is no ecclesial interpretation except that of the sent church" (McKinzie 2017, 163). McKinzie (2017, 163) responds by noting that unfortunately, "the obvious difficulty with this assertion is that the church frequently interprets Scripture without reference to, much less participation in, God's mission," a major misstep of missional theology. A helpful way of understanding missional hermeneutics is "J. Todd Billings's notion of 'functional theology,'" noting "everything the church does and does not do points to its functional theology, the theology that is exposed by the actions (and omissions) in the lives of its members . . .

Theological reasoning is inescapable because action is inescapable. . . One of the concrete skills of theological hermeneutics is learning how to discern the specificity of one's own theological hermeneutic" (McKinzie 2017, 164).

Summarizing the advent of missional hermeneutics, McKinzie (2017, 157) observes, "Recently, scholars suggest that the emerging practice of missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation." He develops his essay by arguing that "(1) the church's participation in God's mission is constitutive of Christian theology and (2) theological interpretation should be reoriented accordingly" (McKinzie 2017, 157). McKinzie (2017, 157) explains his premise by noting, "If theological interpretation embraces the ancient way of faith seeking understanding, missional hermeneutics clarifies this as works seeking understanding—a praxeological hermeneutic in which participation in God's mission is an epistemological precondition of faithful interpretation." If these missiologists advocating for missional hermeneutics as a hermeneutic for doing biblical exegesis and theological reflection, systematic theology, it becomes apparent that the Bible becomes an essential aspect of practical theological study, i.e., Practical Theology. McKinzie (2017, 157) cites the work of Michael J. Gorman who asserts, "missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation," his groundbreaking work "the first major scholarly monograph to emerge from the missional hermeneutics movement. . ." McKinzie (2017, 158) notes that if Gorman is correct there are clear implications for "the practice of theological interpretation of Scripture. . ." adding, "unlike typical construals of theological interpretation, missional hermeneutics is essentially praxeological." His "thesis, therefore, is that *missional hermeneutics is a radical reorientation of theological interpretation because participation in God's mission is constitutive of Christian theology"* (McKinzie 2017, 158). Missional hermeneutics allows for "the *essential practice*" of theological interpretation, filling the void that is sometime commensurate with traditional exegetical methods (McKinzie 2017, 158-159). McKinzie infers that there is a gap between the scholarship associated with systematic theology, referencing Murray A. Rae's "methodological atheism," what McKinzie politely calls, "*methodological faith*," and a devotional or spiritual faith nurtured by the biblical narrative and congregational involvement. Hays reminds his reader that faith is a necessary perspective to interpreting and understanding the Bible, carried out within the confines of the Church. Hays agrees with Hector Avalos, Hays (2007, 10) noting, "the intense academic study of the Bible really is *not* important outside of faith communities." Hays describes theological exegesis not in its traditional forms of understanding, but rather as "a complex *practice*," the point at which biblical exegesis and theological exegesis intersect with practical applications, comfortably found in the disciplines of Practical Theology and Missiology, assuming them to indeed be distinct entities. It is necessary to approach "scripture with eyes of faith" while "seeking to understand it within the community of faith" (Hays 2007, 11). Hays then proposes twelve identifying marks supporting his astute conclusions. McKinzie (2017, 159-160) adds,

> If Gorman is right that missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation, then missional hermeneutics is also a set of practices. However, the development of missional hermeneutics has been framed most influentially by George Hunsberger as four "streams" or "accents" among its advocates: "These accents have made proposals regarding the *framework* for a missional hermeneutic (socially located questions), and the interpretive *matrix* of a missional hermeneutic (the gospel as the interpretive key)," Together, they contribute to the development of "a robust missional hermeneutic" . . . what holds these streams together as a single robust missional hermeneutic is the doctrine of the *missio Dei*. David Bosch articulated what became the fundamental point of departure for missional theology: "The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit sending the church into the world." To restate the four streams of missional hermeneutics more clearly in these terms: the framework is the canonical narrative of God's mission, the aim is ecclesial

> formation for participation in God's mission, the approach to the text is the social location of participation in God's mission, and the interpretive matrix is the gospel of God's mission.

McKinzie (2017, 160) notes that his working definition of missional hermeneutics, with the "caveat that the *missio Dei* is a controlling theological assumption," employs these three streams, cultivating, "(1) a perception that the gospel of God's reconciling mission in Christ through the Spirit is the subject matter of Scripture, (2) an approach to the text of Scripture as the canonical narrative of God's mission, and (3) a disposition in readers of Scripture as the church equipped to participate in God's mission." He then summarizes, "The articulation of these interpretive aims in terms of the *missio Dei* is the basic challenge that missional hermeneutics issues to theological interpretation of Scripture" (McKinzie 2017, 160).

2.1.3 Hospitality as a Missional Hermeneutic

McKinzie chooses hospitality as an excellent example illustrating missional hermeneutics as a form of theological interpretation. He selects this ancient custom as an "exemplary category" from among the many congregational practices that might define a local church's mission and ministry to make his argument about location and context. Hospitality provides an excellent example of this theory as it is put into practice. McKinzie (2017, 166) hypothesizes that "a survey of missional literature suggests that hospitality is 'a preeminent missional practice,'" and cites a host of authors who support this idea. He says,

> Hospitality framed by missional theology is neither merely fellowship within the community of faith nor simply a warm welcome for visitors to church gatherings and events. Both fellowship with one another and kindness to visitors are good, but in the language game of Christendom theology, the former tends toward exclusion and the latter tends toward attractional models of evangelism. The missional practices of hospitality, by contrast, are those of a congregation actively engaged in seeking and embracing the stranger in its neighborhood or local context. Hospitality comprises contextual practices of loving the stranger, such as welcoming the marginalized into the "private" lives

> of the community, sharing resources, and, of course, eating together. Moreover, the missional practices of hospitality are not a church-growth strategy. They are an "essential ecclesial posture"—an expression of the life of a people graciously welcomed by God and sent to extend the same welcome in turn. Finally, to restate the point of practices in the present discussion, hospitality within a missional language game is *formative.* By engaging locally in contextual expressions of hospitality to the stranger, congregations cultivate a missional imagination. In this way, the church *becomes* a social location in which participation in God's mission is theologically constitutive, and in turn the community of faith reads Scripture anew. In other words, the practice of hospitality is not merely the result of the church's (I would add emerging and evolving) theology and biblical interpretation but is an example of participation in God's mission before and beyond the church by which the church learns to speak of God and read Scripture together (McKinzie 2017, 166-167).

In these comments McKinzie makes a cogent argument supporting the case for biblical exegesis and hermeneutics as foundational to this research in biblical hospitality and Practical Theology. His working idea is that "missional hermeneutics assumes that not only the capability of putting the text into play but also *actually putting it into play* is at stake hermeneutically, not merely as a hermeneutical result but as what disposes the reader to the text's formative work" (McKinzie 2017, 171). At its core it is all about interpretation! McKinzie (2017, 171) cites Stephen Fowl, "a well-known proponent of readerly formation in theological interpretation." Fowls says, "given the ends toward which Christians interpret their scripture, Christian interpretation of scripture needs to involve a complex interaction in which Christian convictions, practices, and concerns are brought to bear on scriptural interpretation in ways that both shape that interpretation and are shaped by it" (McKinzie 2017, 171). Fowl also pinpoints hospitality as a defining example of this hermeneutical role, the subject being described as "a significant dimension of missional praxis. . ." (McKinzie 2017, 173). Leading to friendship, Fowl asserts that these conversations begin within local congregations, acknowledging that "the 'others' in whom hospitality allows one to read the Spirit are

Christians. Thus, Fowl makes the case that hospitality among Christians is vital for readerly formation, but this stops short of attributing the same formative role to missional practices" (McKinzie 2017, 173). Clarifying Fowl's argument, McKinzie (2017, 173) states,

> One could easily assume that by "others" Fowl refers to those who are not the hermeneutically engaged church community, particularly when he mentions "welcoming strangers" (*Engaging Scripture*, 119). He states clearly, however: "The only way to counter the privatizing tendencies of contemporary church life, which make it unlikely or impossible that Christians would be in a position to testify about the work of the Spirit in the lives of their sisters and brothers, is to enter into friendships with them" (p. 117). As Fowl applies his hermeneutic to the contemporary discussion of homosexuality in the church, it becomes apparent that his project as a whole is meant to address churches large enough, or at least privatized enough, that the members who are in theological conflict about homosexuality are effectively strangers to one another and in need of practices such as hospitality and reconciliation.

McKinzie (2017, 177) concludes his thesis by declaring, "that, because participation in God's mission is constitutive of the church's theology, it is necessary to reorient theological interpretation of Scripture . . . Missional hermeneutics add another: embodied faith is participation in God's mission." He adds, "In this sense, missional hermeneutics accepts that the complex practice of theological interpretation is 'a way of approaching Scripture with eyes of faith and seeking to understand it within the community of faith' but insists that faith seeking understanding is *works seeking understanding*" (McKinzie 2017, 178). McKinzie (2017, 178) notes that "this entails both commitment to embodied participation and intentional practices of reading and theological reflection in light of those experiences of God's mission." In conclusion, McKinzie (2017, 178-179) summarizes,

> *Missional* reading of Scripture needs to arise out of our *missional praxis*. As we (re) learn the Bible as a means of (re)aligning with God, we will discover that the practice of mission will enhance our understanding of Scripture. There is no way forward unless we are actively and intentionally present in the world. . . As we seek to implement a missional reading of the Bible, it is imperative that we actively engage in missional activity. There is something of a hermeneutical

> circle in this process. A missional reading ought to fuel the actual practice of mission; the practice of mission brings the Church back to the Scriptures. . . Participation in God's mission is not merely a call the text makes on the church through a missional reading but is the *locus theologicus* that finally occasions a missional reading. The church's "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thess 1:3) should become works seeking understanding—a missional hermeneutic of embodied participation that is an epistemological precondition of theological interpretation.

It should be noted that McKinzie also values the role of the Rule of Faith as a "missional phenomenon," noting the importance of the contributions of the early Church Fathers in developing doctrine and the creeds, believing the tradition is also essential in developing the parameters of any missional hermeneutic. There would be numerous postmodern progressives who would take issue with that presumption, though it is a salient argument that has merit and should be acknowledged.

McKinzie (2017, 171), observes that a missional hermeneutic is "what disposes the reader to the text's formative work." McKinzie (2017, 171) cites Stephen Fowl (1998, 8), who says, "given the ends toward which Christians interpret their scripture, Christian interpretation of scripture needs to involve a complex interaction in which Christian convictions, practices, and concerns are brought to bear on scriptural interpretation in ways that both shape that interpretation and are shaped by it." Fowl also pinpoints hospitality as "a significant dimension of missional praxis . . ." (McKinzie 2017, 173). For Fowl, the practices constituting hospitality are meant to address interpretive differences among Christians on issues such as nonheterosexuality in the Church.

2.2 HOSPITALITY: A POSTMODERN PRIORITY

Any research in Practical Theology must acknowledge the necessity of naming the challenges presented by postmodernism, this new era that that has replaced the modern age, and thus is an essential aspect of this study. The conversation is especially vital when discussing building up local missional congregations and even more poignant in a dialogue about churches seeking to become hospitably welcoming and inclusive, an invitation that usually demands intentional reformational processes. Hospitality as intended toward those often defined as "the other" is a leading characteristic of postmodern concerns facing many contemporary churches. The bottom line is that postmodernity is a permanent twenty-first century reality whether its trends, ecclesially and societally, are accepted or avoided and/or ignored.

Continuing this discussion of hospitality as an excellent example of a missional hermeneutic, McKinzie's conclusions lead directly into the absolute essentiality of creating hospitable climates today, both locally and universally. Once again, the subject matter of the research problem within the field of Practical Theology is clearly on display. A significant aspect of building local faith communities is found in their connection with the ancient Near Eastern custom of hospitality. Not merely understood from a contemporary industry perspective, hospitality is a biblical, theological discipline, a practice begun by nomadic herders and subsequently codified by the Bedouins who took this sacred image to a higher level. Today, hospitality has not only come to be understood as the act of extending welcome and inclusion to an individual or people group, but also extends to the advocacy of social justice to any number of persons who are regarded as living on the fringes of society, including any who are disenfranchised or marginalized in any way, and those who are regarded, in the language of the Hebrew Bible, as aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers, and even those presumed to be adversaries. As Craig Van Gelder (1999, 116) assumes, “This is why we are called to live our lives as strangers — not to be strange, but to live as strangers in the world.” He adds, “The word ‘stranger’ really means to live alongside with. The Christian community has been called by God, out of the peoples of the world, to live ‘alongside with’ the peoples of this world” (Van Gelder 1999, 116). Guder (1998, 177) remarks,

> through the practice of Christian hospitality the church participates in God’s peaceable kingdom (realm). Such hospitality indicates the crossing of boundaries (ethnic origin, economic condition, political orientation, gender status, social experience, educational background) by being open to and welcoming of the other. Without such communities of hospitality, the world will have no way of knowing that God’s creation is meant to live in peace.

Guder (1998, 177) cites the contemplative reflection of spiritualist Henri Nouwen, who “succinctly describes the church’s role within our modern (postmodern) context:”

> Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude, and do harm. But still — that is our vocation: to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.

According to Guder (1998, 177), “The stranger represents an unknown and ambiguous figure or foe, resource or thief, giver or taker,” citing Easter’s story of the road to Emmaus, (Lk 24:13-35) in which “despondent travelers” were extended hospitality by a stranger who had joined them, even serving as host in their home. Guder (1998, 177) affirms, “The stranger plays a central role in biblical stories of faith, and for good reason.” He then makes this observation by Parker Palmer, “The religious quest, the spiritual pilgrimage, is always taking us into new lands where we are strange to others and they are strange to us. Faith is a venture into the unknown, into the realms of mystery, away from the safe and comfortable” (Guder 1998, 177-178). Employing traditional Christian concepts and language, Guder (1998, 178) notes, "Christian hospitality that represents the reign of God includes but is not limited to the offer of aid and comfort to the visitor or outsider. The openness and receptivity of hospitality draws attention to otherness in its many expressions . . . Strangers not only challenge and subvert our familiar worlds; they can enhance and even transform our way of life and our most intimate relationships." He adds, "By honoring others precisely in their otherness, we embrace the new, the mysterious, and the unexpected: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (Heb 13:2)" (Guder 1998, 178). Guder (1998, 178) is quick with the reminder that "Jesus came as a stranger ("as one unknown," said Albert Schweitzer in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus)*, as one who had no place to lay his head" (Mt 8:20) during his ministry, as "he crossed conventional boundaries and propelled himself into the lives of strangers." Guder summarizes his thoughts, asserting, "Missional communities of hospitality do not seek the homogenous oneness hoped for by modernity, nor do they celebrate the fragmented diversity of postmodernity. They welcome and nurture the incredible richness and particularity of perspectives, backgrounds, and gifts but always within the embrace of God's reconciling unity" (Guder 1998, 179). He concludes by saying, "Contemporary images of community or hospitality tend to exhibit what Parker Palmer calls an 'ideology of intimacy'" (Guder 1998, 179).

> Modern communities maintain a façade of unity and harmony by eliminating the strange and cultivating the familiar, by suppressing dissimilarity and emphasizing agreement. The traumatic and tragic events of human life are glossed over, ignored, [avoided] or explained away. Those who are strange — other than we are — are either excluded or quickly made like us . . . Missional communities, shaped by faith in Jesus Christ and the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit, present a different image. Rather than seeing themselves as one more civic institution offering religious goods and services to individuals (or to society at large), such communities take the time to create gracious and caring space where they can reach out and invite their fellow human beings into a new relationship with God and with each other (Guder 1998, 179-180).

Branson and Martínez (2011, 239; see Conde-Frazier 2004) invoke the musings of Elizabeth Conde-Frazier who takes a unique approach to hospitable practices, insisting that this ancient biblical and Near Eastern cultural practice must move from "Hospitality to Shalom," what is described as a "concrete process."

> . . . a spirituality for multicultural living. The goal is to start at biblical hospitality and move through encounter, compassion, passion and finally to arrive at biblical shalom. As people who take seriously the implications of biblical hospitality we are called to new levels of commitment to the other, and these steps lead to other commitments and practices. This journey of conversion leads us to a situation in which we begin to approximate God's shalom in our intercultural relations. . . Creating specific opportunities for hospitality in multiple directions creates the opportunity for encounter. In many ways cultural settings, common meals or shared meals in homes will be a great way to start. . . Going from hospitality to shalom requires the personal interaction that can challenge the contradictions of our underlying cultural assumptions about the other. In this process we can learn from our brothers and sisters and grow in relationship to each other (Branson & Martinez 2011, 240).

Conde-Frazier's theory indeed has merit as it calls to memory the importance of dining in the Gospel of Luke, where every meal is saturated with deep meaning. It also echoes research by anthropologist Mary Douglas (1975a; 1999; for a further analysis of "meals" in the Gospels, see Culpepper, forthcoming) thesis in which she deciphers the deep meanings of meals inherent in many cultures.

The challenge for missional churches in creating hospitable environments characterized by "extravagant welcome," expansive inclusiveness, radical hospitality, and open vulnerability, or as Daniel DeForest London (2018) describes hospitality, "prayerful audacity," is found in the way churches seek to include everyone, fulfilling the usually benign invitation that "everyone is welcome." This phrase is sometimes tested when applied to certain individuals and people groups. In claiming to "reach out" to everyone, these declarative slogans are frequently exposed for what they are, nothing more than pablum, pious religious speak. The resulting byproduct of "reaching out" is often an inevitable whirlwind of conflict and crisis, especially when a congregation lacks the necessary intentionality that comes with a clearly established and articulated identity. Van Gelder (1999, 111), "to state it briefly," says, "this identity crisis is that in trying to grapple with our identity, we have tended to reduce the mission of the church to issues. We have become issue oriented." That may very well be true, but until and unless various issues, especially those considered of utmost import, are resolved or at least taken seriously, the local church cannot even begin to think about being relevant, much less fulfilling its self-understood mission. Claiming identity can only be accomplished after carefully crafting and articulating belief, mission, and vision, as well as an *Open and Affirming* or *Welcoming and Affirming* statement, if applicable. Such decisions, leading to clarity of purpose, can only be achieved through an intentional congregational process. Like it or not, issues are at the heart of the postmodern equation, affecting society and churches alike. Van Gelder (1999, 111) names the inherent challenge motivating an issue-driven or issue-oriented ecclesial response. He says,

> On the other side, there are those who focus their attention on such problems as oppression or injustice as the great social issues of our day. Here the church is often narrowly understood in terms of social justice. Whether the issue is homosexuality, the role of women, abortion, assisted suicide, or racial representation, the Christian message becomes reduced to matters of justice and advocacy in relation to a specific cause. In this approach as well, the issues become defined primarily in terms of how the world sees them. The church then seeks to understand its mission as one of trying to address these problems. Here too the world sets the agenda for the church (Van Gelder 1999, 111).

The inherent dynamics in these musings are multifaceted and multilayered, finding their locus in the mainstream of postmodernity. The first response is a christological one, determining the purpose of the Jesus story and the Christ event, the dilemma played out between the eternal questions of individual "salvation" versus immediate corporate or communal concerns. Did

Jesus come to earth to save people from their sins, a very biblical notion, or did Jesus come to show people a better way to live relationally, exhibiting and illustrating social justice as a way of salvation in every context in which we find him in the Gospels?

At the forefront of contemporary concerns related to social issues is "the love that dare not speak its name!" Finding resolution by focusing on the LGBTQQIA+ dilemma or equation, whichever perspective is perceived as most accurate to the local church setting, is essential. It is this defining issue that stretches every metaphor used by a local congregation to describe itself. In many ways, addressing the LGBTQQIA+ question, while making subsequent decisions regarding this issue, represents the far edge, the cutting edge, of congregational consideration and exploration.

2.2.1 Practical Theology and Postmodern Progressivism

Conventional missiology and postmodern progressivism tend toward disparate understandings of the Church's mission in the world. This is one of the key reasons why meaningful dialogue between missiologists and progressives has yet to find a foothold. Despite this disconnect, such conversations are desperately needed across the spectrum of mainstream Christianity. This is particularly true regarding discussions that bring attention to the welcome and inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons into congregational life. Missiologists, both theorists and practitioners, have tended to write to and for traditional Christian audiences and in so doing, have ignored congregations struggling to find biblical foundations and congregational support for accepting and affirming persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. If these scholars were to write with more openness toward persons often shunned by the Church, there would likely be an immediate backlash and a substantial limitation on the marketability of their publications to individuals and congregations. Many conservative clergy and their churches would boycott their compositions, denouncing the content in their writings. While numerous missiologists, quoted extensively in earlier parts of this chapter, generally engage in issues of inclusiveness or hospitality, as well as other topics that would appeal to postmodern progressives, by and large these authors fail to specifically address issues related to and concerns of the LGBTQQIA+ community. To complicate matters further, progressive Christian writers generally fail to engage in evangelistically based missiological discussions of any kind, arguing that ideas like "conversion" and "salvation" are considered archaic and irrelevant and not at all based on the religious proclivities of many postmodern thinkers. A challenge always present in these conversations is that there are churches and denominations that hide behind inclusiveness to mask a lack of broader progressiveness. Welcome and inclusion is but one aspect of progressive Christian theology, only one part of the much larger whole, with adherents deeply concerned about the necessity to embrace, to believe in, traditional doctrinal and creedal affirmations.

One major factor that makes dialogue regarding the place of LGBTQQIA+ persons in congregational life so difficult is that this people group is often understood to be unique among people groups. Indeed, the LGBTQQIA+ community transcends typical cultural, ethnic, and racial boundaries because LGBTQQIA+ individuals identify this way based on gender and/or sexuality. LGBTQQIA+ individuals often have been relegated to the fringes of society by the Church because of a history of sexual taboos. The result has been that this people group has been shunned as sexually and socially deviant by traditional conservative Christianity. Therefore, before a local missional congregation can openly welcome and include LGBTQQIA+ individuals into full fellowship, they often will first complete a process of moving theologically toward a more progressive faith perspective, where the desire to love one another can overcome the need to hold others to our individual or corporate standards.

2.2.2 The Role of Scripture

Another insight from this survey of missiological material, with its goal of creating missional churches as part of the *missio Dei*, is the role of the Bible in missional thought and action. The larger role of scripture is the primary lynchpin in defining this practical, theological approach incorporating biblical hospitality as the core component addressing the heart of the research problem within the broader field of Practical Theology. The primacy of scripture remains at the core of congregational identity and development. In concert with the didactics of teaching and the primacy of preaching within a theological framework, the goal is establishing vibrant and vital, relevant and relational congregations poised for this postmodern age. Guder (2015, 77) frames the conversation by asking, "How can churches disengage themselves from such nebulous things as worldviews, ways of life, moral codes, social values, dreams of happiness and prosperity?" He says,

> There is only one way, and it is neither easy or quick. It is called theology. The church, whose establishment consists in its legitimation and sanctification of the operative values, goals, and moral conventions of its host culture, may disengage itself from that culture symbolically through occasional acts of dissent . . . and resistance. . . But unless such acts of disengagement are accompanied by and grounded in renewed and sustained *thought* concerning our real identity and vocation as Christians, the acts will neither speak for themselves nor become the basis of an ethic compelling enough to inspire the whole people of God . . . But in the absence of a deeper, biblically literate and theologically imaginative analysis, one into which earnest Christians of many different political and cultural backgrounds and persuasions may be initiated, the acts of the radical minorities with the churches only serve to alienate many who, with some sustained attempt at *thinking* the faith, might well become part of the resistance. This will involve earnest Christians of many different political and cultural backgrounds (Guder 2015, 77).

Van Gelder is correct in stating the need for intentional theological thinking within local churches. It seems, however, that the specific goal he has in mind is to lead congregants to side with traditional theological creeds and doctrines that have often regressively affected the Church from its inception, limiting its creativity. The insistence on maintaining outmoded traditions has only exacerbated a rapid decline, making churches even more irrelevant in the minds of many postmodern, progressive theological thinkers. Van Gelder seems concerned about raising certain relevant issues, that some congregational inquiry is a negative. It is his theory that doing so might serve as a subtle or realized threat to Church dogma, challenging traditional doctrines and creedal pronouncements. His recommendations lead with a certain level of paranoia, that a congregation might determine that it best serves its constituency, society, and the world by addressing the social justice issues confronting humanity. This may be their chosen path! It is certainly a progressive, postmodern pathway! Anthony J. Gittins (2008, 9) offers this essential reminder, noting that "theology provides 'outer knowledge' by teaching us about God, but 'inner knowledge' comes through faith and prayer as we form and deepen a true relationship with God. Theology alone cannot make disciples," the key being found in the relationships with God through Christ and with one another. J. E. Lesslie Newbigin (1995, 120) adds, "There can be no 'academic theology,' if that means theology divorced from commitment, faith, and obedience."

One constant, among the many ecclesial paradigms reflected in the postmodern movement is that no matter the perceived identity of a local congregation, the Bible will always be the foundation of its agenda, direction, and goals. Whether a local church congregation self-identifies as traditional, conservative, fundamentalist, progressive, liberal, or by invoking some other label, the biblical narrative will continue to be central. It will always be featured as the most important and essential document continuing to challenge, inform and impact the congregation, no matter the interpretive hermeneutic applied to its content. As Paul Ballard reminds, "The Bible is at the heart of Christian faith and practice. Reading and interpreting the scripture is constitutive of Christian worship and spirituality" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 163).

> As the primary witness to the apostolic faith, the Bible is a formative authority in Christian doctrine and ethics. The Bible, therefore, is central to the theological enterprise, and that in two ways: in the critical study of the Bible itself, and as a theological resource informing Christian understanding. However, despite its importance, the use of scripture as a central concern in practical theology has proven elusive and problematic (Miller-McLemore 2014, 163).

Part of the dilemma or problem is in the mixed messages and metaphors contained within the biblical narrative, all informing and impacting a diversity of theological discovery, insight, and concretization of belief and practice. While "all Christian traditions afford the Bible a baseline of respect, acknowledging a degree of fundamental authority," consistency breaks down along various lines, expressed in various ways, regarded with different weights (Miller-McLemore 2014, 163). Ballard then succinctly adds, "Numerous cross-currents make the use of scripture in practical theology far from straight sailing" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 163). Each tradition conveys its own unique interpretive hermeneutical approach based on core ecclesial values. The Orthodox traditions (Eastern Catholicism) emphasize the way the biblical narrative is woven into "the theological and liturgical life of the church, while the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) relies on the "magisterium" and the teaching authority (Tradition) of the Church. Protestantism, on the other hand, employs a completely different approach, invoking its slogan of *sola scriptura*, a mantra indicating the primacy of the Bible standing at times even over and against the Church. Such emphases are further diversified through various denominations and sects, each one touting its own theological slant. These views span the gamut from strict fundamentalism (literalistic) to universalist liberalism (metaphorical mythology or mythological metaphor). The former employs a rigidly inflexible hermeneutic, while the latter allows for a hermeneutic encouraging open inquiry and the consideration of myriad contemporary viewpoints, all of which reflect a wide array of cultural trends in society, interpreted through an ever-expanding and broadening spectrum (Miller-McLemore 2014, 163). Blackwell observes that only recently have traditional systematic approaches to biblical study given way to "the question of the use of the Bible in practical theology, the hope being that a whole new arena is being opened, "stimulating creative dialogue" between biblical theologians and practitioners (Miller-McLemore 2014, 163).

Ballard suggests, ". . . it is necessary to have sufficient acquaintance with biblical scholarship to be able to use the scriptures with integrity. One needs to grasp the critical issues, the approaches to interpretation, and what to do with the 'nasty texts' that seem to undermine the gospel" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 168). Some would say these "nasty texts" help illumine the gospel by creating constructively substantive dialogue. Ballard asserts that as the Bible becomes a "familiar part of the round of prayer, reflection, and guidance that shapes the life of faith," the "practical theologian" in her or his capacity as a leader and member of the community of faith, enabling everyone to develop their spiritual life (Miller-McLemore 2014, 168). The inherent assumption regarding the role or place of the Bible in Ballard's argument is that "one must accept the Bible as scripture," or that the Bible is the "Word of God," presuppositions that not every individual will accept at face value (Miller-McLemore 2014, 168). Ballard cites Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who explains Paul Ricoeur's reference to "readiness to take the Bible seriously as scripture — as authoritative revelation" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 168). Brueggemann explains that "after one has abandoned a first simplistic *naïveté* and after one has seriously engaged in criticism and pushed it as far as it can go . . . (This approach) recognizes that in the midst of such rationality there is nonetheless 'surplus' that cannot be vetoed by critical thought but that continues to be generative when the text is heard in a kind of truthful innocence" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 168-169). Brueggemann makes this proposal, ". . . In Scripture study, reading and hearing we are *re-describing the world*, that is, constructing it alternately" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 169). Ballard points out that the Scripture Project at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, made up of biblical scholars, systematic theologians, and pastors from the United States and the United Kingdom, all reading the Bible together, proposed a similar model, the challenge having been described by Ellen Davis and Richard Hays.

> In the course of the consultation, the conviction grew among us that reading Scripture is an *art* — a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination, in contrast to the enlightenment's ideal of detached objectivity. In our practices of reading the Bible, we are (or should be) something like artists. This conviction carries two corollaries, the bad news and the good . . . The bad news is that, like every other true art form, reading Scripture is a difficult thing to do well . . . there lies the good news as well. Like every other form of art, reading Scripture has the potential for creating something beautiful . . . Our readings will produce such beauty precisely to the extent that they respond faithfully to the antecedent imaginative power of God, to which the Bible bears witness (Miller-McLemore 2014, 169).

Sadly many, if not most, Christians do not read the Bible in this creative, imaginative, and playful way. Rather, they take the biblical narrative as the strict and stern "Word of God," the plumb line that serves as a manual for passing judgment on contemporary concerns, reduced to nothing more than a book of answers. Ballard summarizes, "Theological reflection as a deliberate process, therefore, aims to enable us to discern the wisdom of God in the scripture for faithful living in the present" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 169). As for the role biblical narrative plays or should play in the realm of Practical Theology, Ballard affirms, "The Bible is not only a resource in and for practical theology. Practical theology itself is a resource for understanding the Bible. Practical theology has a responsibility to theological inquiry and particularly to biblical studies, delving deeply into how the Bible is received and regarded in the church and the world. This is first an empirical, and then an evaluative, task. . ." (Miller-McLemore 2014, 170). Perhaps Practical Theology can serve as a bridge between academia and faith communities, promoting dialogue and mutual discovery (Miller-McLemore 2014, 170). Finally, Ballard acknowledges, "More important, the use of scripture is an area that has not received sufficient attention in practical theology. It is imperative, therefore, that greater attention be paid to how the Bible should function and how it acts as scripture. The Bible is too important to be left to biblical scholars and the systematic theologians" (Miller-McLemore 2014, 171). A central theme of this research is the attempt to model the way biblical narrative can inform and impact practical theological exercises. At its essence, the Bible serves as a curriculum in and of itself and as such, should be incorporated into the nexus of Practical Theology.

As noted earlier, Hays reminds those who engage the biblical narrative that this process best takes place within the parameters of the faith and the Church. While scholarship is essential and important to new discoveries, outside of practical application all that work really is in vain. It is at the point of practicum that biblical and theological exegesis and Practical Theology and Missiology intersect informing and impacting one another. Hays (2007, 11-15) offers twelve identifying marks defining this praxis as he makes his argument:

(1) Theological exegesis is *a practice of and for the church.*

(2) Theological exegesis is *self-involving disclosure.*

(3) At the same time, *historical study is internal to the practice of theological exegesis.*

(4) Theological exegesis attends to *the literary wholeness of the individual scriptural witness.*

(5) My fifth point is the dialectical converse of the previous one: theological exegesis can never be content only to describe the theological perspectives of the individual biblical authors; instead, it always presses forward to *the synthetic question of canonical coherence.*

(6) Theological exegesis does not focus chiefly on the hypothetical history behind the biblical texts, nor does it attend primarily to the meaning of texts as self-contained works of literature; rather, it focuses on these *texts as testimony.*

(7) *The language of theological exegesis is intratextual in character*, (interpretations remaining "close to the primary language of the witnesses rather than moving away from the particularity of the biblical testimony to a language of second-order abstraction that seeks to 'translate' the biblical imagery into some other conceptual register."

(8) Theological exegesis, insofar as it stays close to the language and conceptions of the NT witnesses, will find itself drawn into the Bible's complex web of *intertextuality.* The NT insistently cites and alludes to the OT, argues for a narrative continuity between the story of Israel and the story of Jesus, and interprets this continuity through discerning *typological* correspondences between the two.

(9) Theological exegesis thereby is committed to the discovery and exposition of *multiple senses* in biblical texts. Old Testament texts, when read in conjunction with the story of Jesus, take on new and unexpected resonances as they prefigure events far beyond the historical horizon of their authors and original readers.

(10) Learning to read the texts with eyes of faith is a skill for which we are trained by *the Christian tradition* . . . Consequently, *theological exegesis will find hermeneutical aid, not hindrance, in the church's doctrinal traditions.*

(11) Theological exegesis, however, goes beyond repeating traditional interpretations; rather, instructed by the example of traditional readings, theological interpreters will produce *fresh readings*, new performances of Scripture's sense that encounter the texts anew with eyes of faith and see the ways that the Holy Spirit continues to speak to the churches through the same ancient texts that the tradition has handed on to us.

(12) Finally, when we speak of theological exegesis, particularly when we acknowledge the Spirit's role, we must remember that we are always speaking not chiefly of our own clever readings and constructions of the text but, rather,

> of the way that God, working through the text, is reshaping us . . . This means that theological exegesis must always be done from a posture of prayer and humility before the word. . .

Basically, the Bible begins as narrative history, salvation history, the salvation story recorded as literature, poetry and prose describing the events and experiences of the Israelites in their evolution as a nation and a people. The story then dramatically shifts themes, first with the Jesus story in the Gospels and then with the advent of the early Church as described in the book of Acts and outlined in greater detail in the Epistles.

Hunsberger and Van Gelder describe the postmodern approach to biblical exegesis as being "postcritical, which conveniently matches all the other "post" adjectives commensurate with postmodernity (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996, 41). They talk about the need for a *missional* hermeneutic, implying that this demands a workable biblical hermeneutic. Their assumption about these hermeneutics must be grounded in the Christian scriptures. They point out that "the early Christian movement that canonized the New Testament" was a "movement with a specifically *missionary* character" (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996, 232-233). At the hub of the convergence of biblical, ecclesial, and missional paradigms lies the idea that the hermeneutic at the core of any textual exegesis "is not merely pretheological, laying out the ground rules for reading Scripture before theological reflection begins. Rather, a biblical hermeneutic that is honest and self-critical must necessarily be *theological* in character" (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996, 231-232). Of course, there invariably comes a moment in any biblical dialogue or debate in which a choice will be made regarding how to interpret any part of the biblical narrative. It is a given that most biblical texts are open to varying viewpoints. Hunsberger and Van Gelder (1996, 230) acknowledge, "For some, diversity in biblical interpretation is merely the sign of an unfinished task. If we can't agree on what the

Bible is saying to our world, we need to keep talking and reading with greater effort and intensity until we do agree." Both scholars would admit that this goal is a futile, pointless exercise, nothing more than naïve and wishful thinking. They add,

> Yet such an approach has often led to one of two unfortunate results. Either Christians have become totally absorbed in endless (and often unproductive) attempts to reconcile their differences (e.g., as has happened in certain sectors of the ecumenical movement), or they have continually separated themselves from other Christians who are deemed heretical or lapsed (e.g., as in North American Protestantism). These twin failures of North American Christianity betray a common inability to deal constructively with diversity in interpretation. Of course diversity in interpretation can be a sign of error, but might there not also be in some cases a plurality of right interpretations? Might it not be possible to speak the truth of Scripture in love, while recognizing that others may do so with different accents, perspectives and concerns? . . . But the problem of diversity in interpretation is not the only challenge we face . . . at a deeper level, the challenge of postmodernism is brought on by our increasing loss of a universal frame of reference (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996, 231).

Sadly, there are a variety of issues that, despite the best efforts and intentions of modern/postmodern biblical scholarship, will not be resolved by any careful reading and exegesis of the biblical narrative. Issues such as universalism, abortion, women's ordination, the embrace of members of the LGBTQQIA+ community into fullness of congregational life of churches, will continue to have hard boundaries, drawing firmly entrenched lines and creating adversarial situations. George R. Hunsberger and Van Gelder (1996, 229), like even the most hopeful of missiologists, accept this challenging reality.

> . . . The postmodern world is a world in which pluralism constantly threatens to devolve into factionalism, in which anomie becomes a perpetual existential reality, and in which the resolution of disputes becomes increasingly problematic, frequently disintegrating into a clutching after power and its dark counterpart, the proliferation of violence.

Also, at the core of such theological intractability is the concern that political correctness might erode cornerstones of the faith. Hunsberger and Van Gelder (1996, 229) are correct when they suggest there is a battle for supremacy in the realms of identity, lifestyle, and politics. They acknowledge that the "dialectic between our common humanity and our cultural particularity — a dialectic that lies at the heart of a missional hermeneutic — is itself grounded in the narratives of Scripture." These missiologists stress the need to affirm the "reality and inevitability of plurality in interpretation," declaring,

> Because every reading of the Bible is shaped by the individuality and the historical and cultural particularity of the interpreter, there will always be multiple interpretations of the Bible. Therefore our model suggests that plurality of interpretation in not necessarily a sign of interpretive failure but often of interpretive effectiveness, reflecting a distinctive convergence of the text with the particular context of the reader (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996, 229).

Hunsberger and Van Gelder (1996, 233) then add,

> At the same time, a missional hermeneutic must be committed to dialogue with other readers of the biblical text. Every time we read a commentary or hear someone else talk about a passage, we discover new perspectives that we had not seen before. Dialogue in interpretation often results in the correction of idiosyncratic or distorted readings of Scripture within any given context. Therefore there is also a sense in which plurality in interpretation is not always a sign of interpretive effectiveness, but sometimes a result of defective or inadequate readings, which may be corrected with other interpreters.

One inherent problem must be acknowledged from the outset: these kinds of discussions are unlikely to take place. Even assuming that productive dialogue and consensus is a remote possibility, while lamenting the reality that they often are not, these adversaries are not likely to come together in the first place. And if they do, the results of these kinds of dialogues typically digress into debates that offer no resolution or solution. Rarely if ever does a fruitful outcome become even the remotest possibility. Nevertheless, Hunsberger and Van Gelder (1996, 233-234) continue to be hopeful, if not optimistic,

> How can plurality in interpretation be at one point a sign of interpretive success and at another point a sign of deficiency? The answer lies in the multifaceted nature of interpretation itself. Every interpretive reading is an attempt to project

> a symbolic world in which the world of the text and the world of the reader are brought together in such a way that each mutually informs the other. Where there is a diversity of readers, there will always be a plurality of interpretations; each reader brings his or her own distinctive "world" into a conversation with the text. But these worlds, in which text and context are brought together are not totally dissimilar. Every interpretation must do justice to the same text. . . must connect, in some way, with our basic humanity. To be meaningful, every interpretation must address in some way the common "stuff" of all our lives. . . Diversity in interpretation is healthy when it emerges from our human diversity; it is deficient when it distorts our common text or fails to connect with our common humanity. . . The meaning of our common humanity and its relationship to our individual and cultural particularity is . . . discovered in the process of dialogic interpretation with others. . . This dialectic between our common humanity and our cultural particularity — a dialectic that lies at the heart of a missional hermeneutic — is itself grounded in the narratives of Scripture. . .

Hunsberger and Van Gelder make salient points with these theories, but practical application creates this standoff. Nevertheless, they are certainly to be commended for their efforts in naming this herculean problem.

2.2.3 The Challenges of Contemporary Culture

Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile (2018, 1) observe that "the first decades of the twenty-first century are experiencing a period of profound change in the cultural landscape of the United States, and . . . a profound change and challenge to the church as well." They add,

> The cultural environment of the United States has . . . regularly created opportunities for new forms of Christian witness and organizational expressions of the church to emerge. But what appears to be new . . . is the extent to which the underlying assumptions, and basic organizational framework, that gave birth to . . . the American church now appear to be unraveling (Van Gelder and Zscheile 2018, 1).

If Van Gelder and Zscheile are correct, then it might also be argued that trends taking place across the centuries are only now reaching their peak. Only now can students of ecclesiology recognize and experience such developments in tangible ways. Some would argue that this is a result of the guidance of the Spirit revealing an unfolding revelation. From a critical perspective, however, analysis of current realities may encourage others to understand the Church as having caught up with societal outliers, or those outliers having caught up with the Church. The contemporary Church is at a crossroads formed by an ancient faith encountering a postmodern, secular world, with the relevance of today's Church constantly being called into question.

The Christian scriptures indicate that, from the Church's beginning, there was no homogeneous praxis. There is not now, nor has there ever been, a single New Testament church model. The New Testament reflects "a situation where the mobile ministry of apostles, prophets, and evangelists was beginning to give way to the settled ministry of bishops (elders) and deacons" (Van Gelder and Zscheile 2018, 1). Even so, David J. Bosch (2011, 190, 206) argues there was, in fact, a "coherent paradigm," noting that despite the many and important differences among theologians such as Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, . . . Athanasius, and the three Cappadocians, all shared a similar view of God, humanity, and the world. Practical theologian Mark Lau Branson has written extensively on the impact of context and culture within local missional churches and has explored the ways these dynamics inform and influence local faith communities. Branson (2004, 4-5) states that "North American churches can often tell founding stories that specify ethnicity, immigration/migration patterns, and the social and economic variables of a place." In his work, Branson, along with Juan F. Martínez, is intrigued by the ways that Practical Theology can help to interpret the intercultural lives of churches. While he does not specifically address the LGBTQQIA+ community, his five-step discernment process for local church engagement and interaction with various people groups can certainly be applied to the specific welcome and inclusion of the LGBTQQIA+ community.

> 1. The church describes its current circumstances concerning ethnic homogeneity or heterogeneity and their relationships and practices among themselves, in their neighborhood and regarding their larger context.
>
> 2. They analyze their environment, including demographics, history, worldviews, cultural resources like the arts and the sociopolitical forces that shaped them and their context.
>
> 3. Then as they study the text of Scripture, church history, and their theological traditions and beliefs (concerning the incarnation, the Trinity, the gospel, God's love for the world and the meaning of being a church), they lay these narratives and beliefs alongside their current praxis and analysis. This allows a rethinking of practices as questions are raised, traditions are reconsidered and biblical voices are heard.
>
> 4. They tell their personal ethnic autobiographies, the ethnic and cultural story of their congregation, and stories of boundary crossing and of being engaged by persons who are different. The insights of the previous steps often create more clarity concerning these narratives.
>
> 5. The church prayerfully enters into discernment, asking God, "What are you doing?" and "What do you want?" They shape a new praxis through imagination, planning, experiments, evaluations, and commitment (Branson and Martinez 2011, 48-49).

Branson and Martínez (2011, 49) note, "this illustration indicates the kind of curriculum and other resources a church needs in order to engage the complexities of intercultural life." They add, "And our missional formation draws on the strengths and weaknesses of how our cultural narratives have shaped the ways we interact with strangers or seek peace and justice" (Branson and Martinez (2011, 64). A focus on ethnicity, as directly tied to context and culture, can lead to discussions about diversity and in more open and affirming language. Branson and Martínez (2011, 87) describe ethnicity as "a social construct," usually referring "to a cultural group with common links such as biology, heritage, language, religion, and geography or migration patterns." They rely heavily on the insights of Michael Emerson, who describes the challenge of creating multicultural, multiracial congregations. Speaking specifically about the obstacles confronting blacks and whites who might choose to integrate congregationally into what Emerson calls Mixed American Culture congregations, this author names the conundrum.

> People of . . . indigenous U.S. cultures believe they have . . . an equal right to practice their culture (I would say especially in worship practices); have little interest in giving it up; . . . and have centuries of racial wounds. Conversely, those in immigrant cultures typically come to the United States expecting to adapt to an American culture (Branson and Martinez 2011, 86-87).

This analysis helps to explain why more churches in the United States are not interracial, thus offering the painful reminder of Martin Luther King, Jr., who once opined that 11:00 on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week (Haselden 1964).

Branson and Martínez continually remind their readers of the need to "draw on personal and group narratives, intellectual and cultural resources, biblical and theological texts, and perspectives on communication and leadership," to promote unity in diversity, in the hope that churches will "pursue cultural boundary crossing with neighbors and intercultural life within their congregations" (Branson & Martinez 2011, 89). In addition, they "believe that . . . we can shape intercultural community in churches not by ignoring particulars, but . . . by creating new stories of mutual accountability and shared missional life" (Branson & Martinez 2011, 89, 91). They believe,

> . . . that the matrix of frameworks we provide can increase the capacities of a church to cross boundaries and to become more inclusive . . . We prefer the term *intercultural* as a way to emphasize a continual, dynamic relatedness of diverse peoples. We want to pursue an agenda that acknowledges the ever-changing nature of our churches, relationships and contexts . . . Many of the particularities of each ethnic culture are preserved, sometimes altered, as a new culture takes shape in the congregation and new polycentric identities develop (Branson and Martinez 2011, 93).

Branson and Martínez (2011, 101) assert that when a church is considering becoming cross-cultural, "either in its internal life or in its missional life, members become increasingly aware of tensions and anxieties, but the issues often remain vague and unspoken." This lack of clarity can be more pronounced in churches considering the inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons, the conversation can lead to loud and explicit concerns born out of fear and supported by a narrow biblical hermeneutic. Regarding inclusivity, "when we gather together in a congregation or connect and work with our neighbors, we always bring our diverse worldviews" which, unfortunately, can lead to articulated biases, prejudices, and stereotypes (Branson & Martinez 2011, 112). Establishing ground rules for communication is a critical aspect of the process. "By helping churches understand the different ways we communicate, leaders can make it more likely that effective communication will occur across cultural and linguistic boundaries," understanding that "language is much more than a (mechanistic) tool that humans utilize for communication, but is also "a complex system that weaves perceptions, meanings and imaginations into a 'system of representation,' a means of sorting out reality at the boundary between objects (out there) and concepts (constructs of our minds). (Branson & Martinez 2011, 115; see Stewart & Bennett 1991). Branson and Martínez not only emphasize the importance of role perceptions in forming opinions that challenge diversity, but also describe a "lifeworld which is primarily preconscious . . . the entire worldview of a group of persons, including their culture and language" (Branson and Martinez 2011, 190). Finally, the role the Bible plays in these cross-cultural conversations is brought into focus.

> An important task in the process of multicultural church ministry is to read and study the Bible, taking into account both the biblical social context and our own context today. The hermeneutical task applies both to the Bible and to the community reading and interpreting it. . . Because we often read the Bible as an ahistorical document, we ignore the historical and social location of the actors or the writers and miss much of the message . . . But in Bible studies in intercultural contexts, we need to make sure that minority voices are given a space. It is not that their interpretation will be the most accurate but that the community of believers needs all the voices of the church if it is to effectively

> hear the Word . . . for today (Branson & Martinez 2011, 238-39; see Nieman & Rogers 2001).

2.2.4 The Postmodern Problem

In numerous mainline denominational settings inclusiveness, progressivism, and postmodernism are inextricably linked in ecclesial conversations. Churches that are hospitably welcoming and inclusive of persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation are most often progressive in theology and embrace postmodern culture as beneficial. Newbigin's exploration of the dynamics of context and culture, as well as their impact on missional practice, provides a window into a further analysis regarding the issues he raises, and leads to a discussion about postmodernity and progressivism. It is here where the intersection with the research problem gains and builds its momentum. Hospitality, specifically as it pertains to the welcome and inclusion of persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation, is inextricably connected with postmodern, progressive concerns. According to sociological and religious experts and commentators, the contemporary Church has entered an unknown phase, the uncharted territory described as post-denominational, post-Christian, and postmodern. This phenomenon is generally characterized by blanket relativism and a distrust of tradition. Guder (2015, 78) cites the "Re-Forming Ministry" project, that while specifically addressing the decline in the Presbyterian Church, USA, can easily be applied to every mainline denomination. The participants in the "project" astutely and unequivocally declared,

> Mainline Protestantism is no longer the religious expression of American society, the culture's *de facto* established church. The social and religious climate has altered dramatically, pushing denominations such as the PCUSA out of the center of American Christianity, and pushing Christianity itself to the margins of a culture that is increasingly secular, pluralistic, and indifferent to the institutional church (Guder 2015, 78).

In this lamentable diatribe, the adjective “postmodern” was strangely absent. Postmodern Christians, though honoring traditional viewpoints and positions generally do not embrace them as normative guides for theological thought. They are often negatively critical of the fundamentals, the cornerstones of Constantinian Christendom that shaped Western culture for more than two thousand years, which they personally experienced as confining and restrictive. Of those who have grown beyond those fundamentals, many never return, or even look back on the Church’s decaying roots. The cry of the masses in the United States today is that they are spiritual rather than religious, despite spirituality being “ambiguous and confusing for many people” (Gittins 2008, 35). Postmodernists acknowledge that the world has changed a great deal due to the technological revolution that has created a truly global village. A case in point is the terrifyingly rapid spread of the COVID-19, Novel Coronavirus pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China in December 2019, spread quickly, and became a worldwide plague in late January 2020.

Van Gelder (1999, 41) opines, “The word *postmodern* is gaining increasing public usage and a substantial literature is now available to describe this new condition. However, as recently as the late 1980s, this concept was still limited primarily to the domain of philosophers and social theorists.” He then adds, “While it has a more popularized usage, little progress has been made in clearing up the ambiguities associated with it” (Van Gelder 1999, 41). These supposed ambiguities “appear to be inherent in the cultural conditions that are increasingly being described as the ‘postmodern condition’” (Van Gelder 1999, 41). Norman K. Denzin (1991, vii) provides a definition for postmodern that fails to mention the intellectual capacity now demanded by twenty-first century, intellectually curious, critically thinking individuals.

> Postmodernism is defined by the following terms: a nostalgia, conservative longing for the past, coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between past

> and present; and intense preoccupation with the real and its representations; a pornography of the visual; the commodification of sexuality and desire; a consumer culture which objectifies a set of masculine cultural ideals; intense emotional experiences shaped by anxiety, alienation, (resentment), and a detachment from others.

Denzin's definition suggests certain tenets that he posits as commensurate with postmodernity but is presented from a negative, perhaps narrow, perspective, revealing a bias that could be based on a counterintuitive or oppositional perspective**.** People identified with postmodernity are people who demand honesty and integrity in any dialogue, expecting nothing less than transparency and tend to be more concerned with their hypothetical, ethereal or transcendent questions rather than with pat or ready-made answers, especially simplistic responses that fail to satisfy their curiosity. If this were the only definition of postmodern, it would be understandable why many traditionalists would be disturbed by the prospects of such a narcissistically focused agenda. Many would argue that postmoderns have no desire to visit the past but are myopically focused on the present as it unfolds into the future. Van Gelder (1999, 41), commenting on this one-sided definition, notes, "While by no means exhaustive of the themes found in the current discussion of the postmodern, this definition indicates something of the diversity of its character." Others would beg to differ, arguing that this definition does the exact opposite, merely serving to satisfy the condemnation of the postmodern context and culture and those who choose to embrace it. Van Gelder is correct, however, when he asserts that "the postmodern condition is identified with a relativity that comes from seeing something from multiple perspectives. This perspectival and relative character of viewing is illustrated in our ability to judge the 'truth of the matter. . .'" (Van Gelder 1999, 41). He succinctly adds, "The postmodern condition is identified with what is known as the social construct of reality" achieved by looking at a given subject from a variety of angles (Van Gelder 1999, 41). Using the image of viewing and critiquing a movie, Van Gelder astutely points out that perception is often determined by perspective, and based on whether that specific person represents the audience or the director. The same principles apply to critiquing any assumed reality.

For the purposes of this study, any relevant critical examination would apply to the Bible, theology, and the Church and the role of each one as a component interpreting contemporary society. Thus, "the critical issue to address is the relationship between the narratives of our context and the uniqueness of the biblical narrative," an engagement that seamlessly leads to a larger conversation about the nature and content of a *postmodern church* (Hunsberger & Van Gelder eds. 1996, 241). This dialogue is essential if the Church is to find common ground and relevant footing for engaging spiritual seekers who might give the local church one final chance to speak a new language that connects with the new societal paradigms now being expressed as commonly accepted vernacular. Van Gelder indicates that for many in leadership positions, this might not be easy, for this kind of conversation demands a certain level of comfort with risk-taking and vulnerability, along with self-assuredness and the confidence required for engaging in intellectual theological discussions. Such discourse calls for developing a fluidity of language that creates safe and secure spaces for an open and honest exchange of ideas, some of which might be regarded as shocking or heretical. Van Gelder, however, opts to stay in a traditional lane, advocating that "the church in our postmodern context must move in directions fundamentally different from the new and the next," these "beginning points" being "basically wrong because they have disconnected the church from the traditions" (Hunsberger & Van Gelder eds. 1996, 256). Van Gelder's analysis fails to acknowledge that many postmoderns care nothing about the traditions or the Tradition of the

Church, i.e., traditional Church teaching, these terms inherently associated with the creedal formulas and doctrinal statements initially made as papal pronouncements within Roman Catholicism. By and large, postmodern thinkers tend to see traditional Church teaching as irrelevant and outdated, desiring that their voices be heard and that their concerns be regarded and respected, while their positions are taken seriously. The questions posed by postmoderns must drive these conversations, rather than the narrowing focus emphasized, or demanded by anxious, fearful, and paranoid church leaders, especially fomented by insecure and insular clergy. The fear of those in presumed authority, revealed in intractable approaches and attempts to "double down" on firmly held viewpoints, is the catalyst that often creates and galvanizes an unyielding wedge of separation. Inflexible intractability only serves to widen the gap while stifling opportunities for creative dialogue as the fear and anxiety of these gatekeepers is fully displayed, their motives exposed. This level of discomfort exposes a constant, underlying threat, that a challenging subject or an uncomfortable conversation or debate might get out of hand.

Acknowledging these risks, Van Gelder is probably correct in his reminder that the Church must become relational in its corporate setting. As he says, the lesson needing to be learned is "that the church in postmodernity must seek to demonstrate a distinctive communal form of life in our culture" honoring the context while transcending it at the same time (Hunsberger & Van Gelder eds. 1996, 259). Guder (1998, 175-176) summarizes, "The optimistic expectation in North America that modernity's [postmodernity's] individual freedom, reason, democratic rule, market capitalism, and advanced technology would conquer all human ills has been replaced with increasing delusion, anxiety, and cynicism."

> The headlines of our daily newspapers report increasing crime, violence, and hatred as groups seek to separate and distinguish themselves from those who

> appear to be a threat. (For example, the rise of the white nationalist movement and other fringe, sectarian groups). As illustrated by the current debates about affirmative action and immigration, more and more individuals and groups see themselves competing for personal safety, financial security, and general well-being in an age of scarcity. The tribalization of postmodernity that celebrates difference will only increase the division and distance between various groups as they discover their identity by distinguishing themselves from others (Guder 1998, 176).

In summary, the overriding fear of both practical theologians and missiologists who are attempting the impossible task of maintaining and managing the paradoxes and similarities inherent within these two polarities, is that, in the meantime, the Church is going to sink into the mire of a relativistic malaise, falling victim to the warning expressed by the anonymous writer of II Timothy, "For the time is coming when the people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers (teachings) to suit their own likings, and will turn away from the truth and wander into myths. . ." (NRSV 4:3-4). In the estimation of many, this prophecy has already become fully realized, and there is no way to turn back the clock and go back in time. The irony of employing the term "myth" as it is used in II Timothy is that it has become popular, sacrosanct in the postmodern progressive vernacular, conveying a positive image. In postmodernism, myth is not something true or untrue, but a window or doorway into deeper dialogue and revelation about the essence of truth.

2.2.5 Conclusion

While this research advocates for the unqualified hospitable welcome and inclusion of the LGBTQQIA+ community into local missional churches, in no way does this study suggest that a church cannot or will not be missional if it does not embrace this level of invitation. There are certainly churches with missional characteristics and qualities that, based on their biblical interpretation and understanding, cannot extend the degree of hospitable welcome and inclusion recommended in this thesis. With honesty and integrity these congregations are holding fast to their convictions and are thriving in their own local context. It might be said in terms of relevance, that being relevant as a local missional congregation is in the eye of the beholder, a matter of local ecclesial perspective. If meaningful and productive dialogue is to take place among individuals and congregations that have a difference of opinion on this subject, respect must be the order of the day, allowing for open lines of communication that foster better ecumenical relations.

If the Church is to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century, Christians must continue to open themselves to the myriad ways in which scholars, as well as those in church pews, can successfully encounter the depth and breadth of scripture through a holistic reading of biblical texts. The current progressive postmodern Christian movement is the Church's best hope for becoming a vibrant and vital, relational and relevant voice in contemporary culture. The future of the missional Church and of missional local churches depends on the willingness to explore the cutting edges of biblical theology and social reform. If local missional churches are to inform and impact Christianity these congregations must continue to reform themselves, continually seeking self-definition as they name a clear identity and fulfill their unique purpose. Then and only then will they carry out the ministry and mission that they believe themselves called to be and to do.

CHAPTER THREE

MISUSING THE BIBLE IN THE LGBTQQIA+ CONVERSATION: SOME QUESTIONABLE TEXTS

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Erhard S. Gerstenberger's comments are especially appropriate regarding texts frequently assumed to be strictly prohibitive of nonheterosexual activity. In his introduction to the book of Leviticus, Gerstenberger specifically discusses what are perceived to be clear prohibitions against homosexuality in the Holiness Code. This commentator begins his analysis by noting the importance of context in interpreting and understanding any part of the Bible. Though dated, his point remains relevant.

> If before reading a text a person does not first clearly determine just what sort of text it is, misunderstanding is unavoidable. A text is able to communicate only those particular signals and information that are commensurate with its essential character, its origin, use, and intentions. We deal every day with a wide variety of texts: telephone books, novels, business letters, newspaper reports, advertisements, owner's instructions, traffic signs, cooking recipes. From experience we know how to classify each individual type of text within our daily realities, how to decipher these texts, and we know what they have to say to us. Woe to the person who takes as a joke the warning label "poison" on a bottle, or who reads an invoice as a love letter (Gerstenberger 1996, 1).

While historical-critical methodology is important in exegetical study, this chapter also employs a canonical approach to texts, with emphasis on the way texts are used in congregational settings. There are typically six to eleven texts within the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures cited to prohibit and condemn nonheterosexual behavior. Frequently referred to as "clobber texts" or "texts of terror" these perceived prohibitions include Genesis 9:20-27 and 19; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Judges 19; Romans 1:21; 26, 27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:10; 2 Peter 2:6; and Jude 1:7 (see Spong 2005; Trible 1984, 2022; Levine

2022). For the purposes of this study, Judges 19, the story of the Levite and the concubine at Gibeah, has been added to this group of texts because of its similarity with Genesis 19, the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative.

3.1 THE PRESUMABLY PROHIBITIVE TEXTS

Although some of these presumably prohibitive texts fail to reference non-heterosexual behavior, their content is often cited to "prove" that nonheterosexuality is forbidden in all instances. Some of these texts that are sometimes referred to as "clobber texts" or "texts of terror" are more significant than others and will be addressed accordingly. There is a clear line of demarcation between biblical conservatives and biblical progressives in what constitutes appropriate interpretation of these prohibitive texts. Each periscope must be interpreted and understood contextually and undergirded by a consistent hermeneutic. As with many biblical prescriptions, these texts are often taken out of context, used as proof texts to support a certain position.

Many scientific discoveries have been made in the centuries since these biblical stories were written, each one enlightening researchers about anthropology, biology, and sexuality (see Bagley & Trembley 1998; Bailey 2016; Bieber 1965; Billy et al. 1993; Binson et al. 1995; Branch 2016; Chandra et al., 2011; Cook 2021; Diamond 1993; Fay et al. 1989; Gagnon & Simon 1973; Gates 2011; Gebhard 1972; Gebhard & Johnson 1979; Gonsiorek et al. 1995; Hamer 1994; Harry 1990; Herbenick et al. 2010; Hewitt 1998; Hunt 1974; James & Yarhouse 2000; Janus & Janus 1993; Kinsey et al. 1948; Kinsey et al. 1953; Laumann et al. 1994; LeVay 2011; McWhirter et al. 1990; Mosher et al. 2005; NSSHB findings; Patterson & D'Augelli; Pietropinto & Simenauer 1977; Rogers & Turner 1991; Rosario 1994; Sell et al. 1995; Smith 1991; Taylor 1993). After years of dispute, the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 removed homosexuality from its official list of mental diseases. The decision caused quite a stir and was met with controversy and opposition. Science understands sexuality is a baseline biological reality among both lower and higher animal species, and that of course, includes human beings. It is generally thought today that sexuality is an inherent orientation and, by and large, not conditioned by environment or other external factors. As with every theory, there are always exceptions and case specific instances in these specific texts that must be noted. This chapter will now continue by examining the biblical texts typically understood as prohibitive, exploring their contextual background and cultural milieu determining their formation.

3.1.1 The Sin of Ham: Seeing His Naked Father (Genesis 9:20-27)

The Yahwist (Speiser 1963, 61; Von Rad 1972, 135) story of Ham and Noah is simple and straightforward, with Ham, the eponymic ancestor of Canaan, discovering that his father Noah, following too much strong drink, was naked and lying uncovered in his tent while he slept. After Ham sees his father in this vulnerably compromised position, Ham approaches his brothers Shem and Japheth to relate what he had just seen. The brothers, who were obviously disturbed at this situation, back their way into Noah's tent and cover him with a garment, making sure not to lay eyes on his nakedness. The writer indicates there is great shame in this test, observing that "when Noah awoke from his wine" he "knew what his youngest son had done to him," during his sleep. Referencing the sin of seeing someone's nakedness, some commentators suggest that perhaps Noah's unnamed wife may also have been naked and in a compromised position (Davies 1969, 158). As seen in Genesis 19 and Judges 19, (ידץ), to "know," a euphemism for sex, is also found in Genesis 9, implying that Ham raped his defenseless father. There is debate as to whether Ham violated Noah by seeing him naked and thus exposed or whether Ham violated his father through a sexual indiscretion (Speiser 1963, 61). O'Connor (2018, 154) explains,

> Canaan is the eponymous forefather of the native peoples (Gen 10:6, 15-16), Ham's son cursed by Noah (9:25) . . . Canaan is also an ancient name for the land of Palestine/Israel. Although in other biblical texts, the Canaanites are enemies of the Israelites, Gen 9 insists they are connected by blood, offspring of Noah, yet set against each other by primal missteps among the ancestors . . . In some texts, Canaanite becomes an ideologically loaded term, a metaphor for the native peoples against whom Israel often identifies itself. Israel finds Canaanite religion to be despicable and Deuteronomy calls for its eradication (Deut 20:16-18). Yet some biblical historians and archaeologists argue that the Israelites were Canaanites who became worshippers of YHWH, and that the hostility between the two cultures was the result of later competition for land. At the least, the relationships between the two were complicated and fraught with tensions over land and worship.

There is no indication that drunkenness was a contributing factor to the egregious violation in the story (Von Rad 1972, 136; O'Connor 2018, 154; Brueggemann 1982, 89). Whatever took place, "our exposition cannot fail to note that the disorders between father and son are given sexual expression . . . However, the text should not be pushed excessively in that direction (Brueggemann 1982, 91). Many commentators seem to err on the side of caution regarding this indiscretion, naming nakedness (Lev 18:7) as the issue but leaving room for a more serious violation (Fretheim 1994, 402). It is fair to say that the text implies something further. Noah placed a curse on Ham's son Canaan because of his father's indiscretion, a touchstone allowing for unmitigated prejudice to be leveled against the Canaanites. The content of this curse subjugated Ham's descendants as second-class citizens, a narrative that would eventually become a "proof text" condemning people of color and advocating for their indenture. "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers . . . Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave" (Gen 9:25-27). Robert Alter (2004, 53) points out that the phrase "enlarge Japheth" involves a pun in Hebrew (yaft leyafet)! Von Rad (1972, 137) says this pun is most accurately translated as "God give Japheth ample room," proof of God's grace toward him and Israel's expansion. Alter (2004, 53) notes that the pun is a play on the root . . . which may mean "enlargement," an indication of God's blessing to Japheth as "the progenitor . . . of worldly prosperity and widespread dominion. . ."

Aside from the horrific acceptance of bias toward the Canaanite people and an eventual racism projected onto people of color, the narrative has also been used as a rebuke of nonheterosexual behavior. The text does not clearly name Ham's actions, though it is safe to assume that there was much more to this story, events hidden between the lines of the text. This textual omission has led to the conclusion that Ham performed an untoward act on his father who was completely unaware of what was transpiring. This theory, born from the fact that to uncover someone's private parts implied a euphemism for having sex with them, in this case the textual insinuation amounting to an act of gross incestuous immorality. In this regard, the text reminds the reader of the end of the Sodom and Gomorrah story, wherein Lot's daughters have incestuous sex with their father to procreate and preserve the family lineage. Alter (2004, 52-53) describes the interaction between Ham and Noah.

> . . . Ham, the perpetrator of the act of violation, is mysteriously displaced in the curse by his son Canaan, and thus the whole story is made to justify the—merely hoped-for—subject status of the Canaanites in relation to the descendants of Shem, the Israelites . . . No one has ever figured out exactly what it is that Ham does to Noah. Some, as early as the classical Midrash, have glimpsed here a Zeus-Chronos story in which the son castrates the father or, alternately, penetrates him sexually. The latter possibility is reinforced by the fact that "to see the nakedness of" frequently means "to copulate with," and it is noteworthy that the Hebrews associated the Canaanites with lasciviousness (see, for example, the rape of Dinah, Genesis 34). Lot's daughters, of course, take advantage of his drunkenness to have sex with him. But it is entirely possible that the mere seeing of a father's nakedness was thought of as a terrible taboo, so that Ham's failure to avert his eyes would itself have earned him the curse.

Once again, assuming that rape by unwanted sexual advances and intercourse was indeed the act perpetrated on Noah by his son Ham, it must be acknowledged that sexual assault and incest have nothing to do with adult, consensual sexual activity. To misuse this text as a weapon condemning nonheterosexual behavior, as with any part of the biblical narrative, is inappropriate. Unfortunately, as is shown in the analysis of these presumably prohibitive texts, these narratives are frequently cited to make blanket condemnations about the mysteries of human sexuality.

3.1.2 Sodom, Gomorrah, and the Sin of Inhospitality: A Pivotal Example (Genesis 19)

One of the most misinterpreted stories in all the Bible is the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, the content of this text specifically addressing hospitable versus inhospitable practice. The story describing these reportedly wicked enclaves is often benignly or blatantly misrepresented as the quintessential text condemning nonheterosexual behavior (see Levine 2022). The issue in this Yahwist (Speiser 1963, 137-138; Von Rad 1972, 216-217) text centers around the attempt by the men of Sodom to sexually abuse, to rape, Lot's guests, an act of conquest and humiliation of the one who had "invaded" their territory. This story serves as a pivotal example of the need for serious exegetical inquiry in any thorough examination of a biblical text, with the goal of discovering a new or alternative hermeneutic. It is from the misinterpretation swirling around this narrative that the terms "sodomy" and "Sodomite" were born, derogatory terms used to condemn LGBTQQIA+ persons. The traditional interpretation has been that nonheterosexuality was the sin that brought about the demise of the two cities, when in fact it was the sin of "inhospitality" that was the egregious violation at the heart of this text, portrayed in the horrific reception given to Lot's guests by the men of this enclave (Fretheim 1994, 473-474, 477; Wenham 1994, 55). This common understanding is based on a combination of the deplorable actions of the male citizenry of Sodom egregiously perpetrated on Lot's, and thus the town's, unexpected guests as well as a prevailing uncritical approach to the study of this specific biblical text. The men of Sodom sought to "know" the two angels or visitors who had come to their town, the pair first having been introduced in the preceding text in their impromptu encounter with Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre. To "know" (ידע) in Hebrew carried multiple meanings, sometimes, such as in this instance, used as a double entendre at the least, indicating either an interrogation to secure information when greeting an individual, or a metaphor indicating the committing of a sex act with or upon an individual (See Wenham 1994, 55; Preuss 1986, 448-481; Clines 2009, 146-147). Scott Morchhauser (2003, 471) points out that to "know" has meanings, "ranging from simple 'comprehension' to the 'gaining of experience', with its employment as a euphemism for 'intimate physical relations' often cited in this connection" (see Gen 4:1, 4:17, 4:25, 38:26; Judg 19:25; 1 Sam 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4 for examples of intimacy). The assumption in the text, then and now, was that these men sought to harm their guests by raping them, making them take on the role of a woman in a sex act, the ultimate humiliation, the worst offense one man could inflict upon another. It is plausible, however, that the entire situation devolved because of a huge misunderstanding of motive, with tensions high and jumping to conclusions real possibilities. It is the confusing interplay between this sometimes-literal, sometimes-symbolic, language that muddles the story. Commenting on these myriad definitions, Morschauser (2003, 472) observes,

> ידע also has a judicial implication to it. It is typical of treaty/covenantal terminology in the Near East, referring to 'formal acknowledgment/recognition' of an individual's identity or status. Within this semantic sphere is the forensic usage of the word to denote the process of 'legal discovery, or inquiry', where ידע has the meaning 'to investigate (a person's state or actions)' (so as to make a decision). This understanding fits quite well into our present discussion.

> 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them', is not a cry that the parties be turned over for 'rape'—homosexual or otherwise. The implication is that the men be produced for *interrogation*: to discover (legally), and to ascertain their true identity—whether they are friends or foes, whether they truly deserve hospitality, or are to face hostility.

Despite Morschauser's argument the text reveals that the intent of the men of the town was clearly to rape Lot's guests, to show physical dominance over them. While this is a textual argument that can be made based on the multiple interpretations of the Hebrew to "know," the setting and content of the plotline in the story offers clear indication that rape was the intention of the men who gathered outside Lot's home. Why else would Lot have offered his virgin daughters to protect his coveted guests? Whatever the intention of the men of the town, Lot refused to acquiesce to what he perceived as a very real threat to his guests, not willing to risk violating the laws of hospitality. Perhaps an indication of motive can be found in that Lot obviously perceived hostility of spirit within what apparently was a mob scene. The text reveals that the men became increasingly hostile, enraged that their demands were being rebuffed. In Lot's mind there was no viable option in either scenario. The potential violation of hospitality outweighed any perceived violation on the part of these hostile men. Suddenly, because of the guests, the host Lot, who is technically a guest in this foreign enclave, and his family, are now at risk, vulnerably compromised as outsiders, alien residents in their host city.

> Lot and the Sodomites are not equals: Lot is a migrant and therefore a "guest". Rosello's (2001) is relevant here; the concept of hospitality, when applied to migration, blurs distinctions between rights and generosity, so it prevents migrants from fully feeling at home in the host society. As such, he is an outsider who is under a debt of hospitality; he does not have an equal footing with the Sodomites and his is never going to be truly at home in Sodom despite residing there, owing to his status as a recent migrant and therefore an "Other" (Southwood 2018, 478).

Lot's "efforts at integration and hospitality are undercut by his position as a recent migrant and, therefore, a 'guest' of the population" (Southwood 2018, 480). This status that renders him without a measure of status means that "he is a cheap target and when abuse comes knocking at his door – a door which he as host polices until his status as a migrant and guest takes this power away from him" (Southwood 2018, 480). Lot and his family are thus "forced to migrate and begin again somewhere else. His wife does not make the journey" (Southwood 2018, 480).

The text also provides a sad reminder about the state of women in ancient Near Eastern culture, showing a total disregard and lack of respect for them. Lot offers his two virgin daughters to appease the angry men to assure the protection of his houseguests. The willingness of Lot to sacrifice his daughters speaks to the primacy of hospitality within this ancient culture, a custom not to be violated at any cost. John Goldingay (2020, 304) offers this perspective,

> Lot thinks he might be able to protect the envoys by offering the Sodomites his daughters (v. 8). But what is the point of the offer? Though it has been suggested that Lot is fulfilling the expectations of Israelite hospitality by offering them for sex, commentators do not provide evidence for this interpretation beyond a reference to Judg. 19, which is hardly narrated as a positive expression of Israelite values. Admittedly, an offer of sex with his virgin daughters might interest the men in the crowd. But is Lot then serious, or is he trying to jolt the community to its senses? Can the Sodomites tell the difference between what is bad and what is good in their own eyes? The word for "sleeping with" again more literally means "knowing. . ."

Goldingay (2020, 305) notes that part of the disrespect shown to Lot may have to do with the fact that he is a foreigner living in Sodom, and not a "brother" as he respectfully calls them in his attempt to assuage the volatile situation, a reminder "of his actual status as a resident alien whose green card can be withdrawn at any moment." The men of the town refuse to offer either Lot or his guests the same hospitable courtesy Lot has extended to his visitors. Various commentators debate the role hospitality plays in this text, but many agree that inhospitality was the major violation in the story. A breach of hospitality laws would have brought shame upon Lot's entire household. Lot offered his own progeny, his own flesh and blood, rather than the strangers who were desired by the assembly outside his door. Clearly, Lot's daughters, reflecting the value of women, were not entitled to the same measure of hospitality as the guests. One only need read the story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19 to see the terrible outcome that befell the Levite's woman in a similar situation.

This text explains and justifies the shameful treatment by Lot of his daughters, thus offering insight into the larger issue of the way women were treated in the ancient world. By and large women were regarded as property and thus were treated accordingly (see Gen 29:24, 29; 31:15; Ex 20:17; 21:7-11; Deut 5:21; 21:10-17) [Bird 1997, 55; Breyfogle 1910, 106-107, 112; Countryman 2007, 144; Early, Jr. 2022; Fiorenza 1983; Rollston 2012; Ruether 1998; Ruether 2000; Trible 1978; Sauder 2011, 1-2, 5-6; 13]. As Carol Meyers (2013, 180) declares, "negative stereotypes and judgements about the relationships between women and men in ancient Israel abound in biblical scholarship. Israelite women are thought to be inferior to men, the chattel of men, even enslaved by men." This predominance of gender inequity is specifically revealed in the Hebrew Bible, interrelated as they are, in ". . . male property ownership, and male control of female sexuality. . ." (Meyers, 2013, 200). Meyers (2013, 180) cites feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether "who chastises the biblical prophets for not objecting to the 'enslavement of persons within the Hebrew family itself: namely, women and children," fueling Israel's "'rigidly patriarchal'" system and the perception "that women were 'subordinated to men,'" leading to an assumed "male dominance." Laura Sauder (2011, 1) relates, "As Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued with the publication of *The Woman's Bible* in 1895, 'the biblical text is androcentric and . . . men have put their stamp on biblical revelation.

The Bible is not just interpreted from a male perspective . . . [r]ather, it is manmade because it is written by men and is the expression of a patriarchal culture" (Fiorenza 1983, 13). As Caroline M. Breyfogle (1910, 106), notes, "in early society, woman was always in a state of dependence." Citing Edward Westermarck (1906, 647), she adds, "woman in the Old Testament is subject to the 'Chinese rule of the three obediences. When young she must obey her father; when married, she must obey her husband; and when her husband is dead, she must obey her son.'" Genesis 19 and other texts like it explicitly show the reasons explaining why the standard measure of hospitable expectation afforded to male sojourners would not have been offered to women. The good news is that "woman has come out of a status where she was the property of man, rated with his ox and his ass," her standing forever changed "from that of an unfree subject to that of membership in the community with rights and duties all her own" (Breyfogle 1910, 107, 106). Using the creation story from Genesis 1, Kevin Giles (2014, 3) asserts, "thus what we have in this primary and definitive scriptural comment on the sexes is the strongest imaginable affirmation of the equal status of man and woman ("in the image of God he created them"), of male-female differentiation ("male and female he created them") and of their conjoint authority over creation ("let them have dominion")."

The Hebrew Bible reveals its incongruencies and inconsistencies, "recognizing that there are many different strands of composition within the biblical texts. . ." (Sauder 2011, 1). While there are numerous hospitable texts that demand care for the widows and orphans (Ex 22:22-24; Isa 1:17; 1 Kings 17:7-24; Jas 1:27; 1 Tim 5:16; Acts 6:1-7) as a sign of God's compassion toward the less fortunate, calling for them to be given the same expectation of hospitality afforded foreigners, strangers, and/or aliens (Lev 19:34; Ex 12:49; Num 9:14, 15:14; Deut 24:14), there are also myriad *herem* texts that are by virtue of their content are inhospitable (see Duet 20:17; Josh 6:15-21; Judg 19-21; I Sam 15; Mal 4:6). Regarding the presumably prohibitive texts in terms of affording commentary on nonheterosexual behavior, a great diversity of opinion will continue to dominate biblical, ecclesiological, and theological dialogue and debate, with little resolution in the process. That being acknowledged, an honest inquiry based on the best biblical scholarship about these controversial texts strongly indicates that creating a sexual ethic from within them is a nonstarter. Under no circumstances would the attempt by the townsfolk to disgrace and humiliate Lot's guests ever have been acceptable, no matter their true motive. It would, however, have been even more egregious if their desire to "know" these guests was an attempt to violate them sexually. Either intent driving their actions would have constituted not only a blatant disregard, but an absolute violation of the laws governing hospitality. And yes, many of those rudiments were unspoken, practices simply understood as part of the landscape, the cultural milieu of the day. Insiders would have known these rubrics, and of course, there were no outsiders. In the case of rape, there was nothing homosexual, much less sexual, about it. Whatever this text is, it is not a text about nonheterosexuality or nonheterosexual relationships. Rape is never a sexually motivated act but is always perpetrated to exhibit control and assert power, to debilitate, immobilize, and frighten, to terrorize and traumatize the unwilling victim through force and intimidation. Rape is never acceptable, always a criminal act (Katz & Mazur 1979; Growth & Birnbaum 1979; Lauer 2004; see American Psychological Association website for numerous articles). The consensus among some scholars is that the purpose of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative is to address the consequences of failing to practice hospitality, (Fretheim 1994, 473-474, 477; Wenham 1994, 55) including the ramifications of inhospitality. Following the storyline from Genesis 18 to 19, Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre to his nephew Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Fretheim (1994, 473) observes that "both chapters share the basic thematic link of *hospitality*, which should not be narrowly conceived, as if it were a matter of putting out a welcome mat." Fretheim (1994, 473-474) observes,

> Hospitality involves a wide-ranging image, revealing fundamental relationships of well-being for individuals and society. Abraham shows hospitality in exemplary fashion. Lot follows suit to some extent, but he fails at a key juncture. The people of Sodom show no sign of what hospitality entails at all. It seems wise not to overdraw the differences between Abraham's hospitality in 18:1-8 and Lot's in 19:1-3. Initially, Lot's hospitality parallels Abraham's; thus, when the differences appear, they have a greater shock value. Lot does engage the crowd on behalf of his guests, and he names directly the sin of the Sodomites (v. 7; רצ *ra'*). At the same time, his language to them as "brothers" raises problems, and his treatment of his daughters reveals deep levels of inhospitality.

Davies notes that "Lot is no less a host than his uncle." Von Rad (1972, 218), opining about Lot offering his virgin daughters to the mob, states that "Lot did attempt to preserve the sacredness of hospitality by means of an extreme measure, but was it not a compromise?" Either way, "Lot's response as host is to protect the strangers" (O'Connor 2018, 276) offering his daughters in their place as an ultimate example of hospitality to the guests despite how that act is perceived today. "When Lot offers his daughters to the men of Sodom, he places hospitality over his duty to protect his female offspring" (O'Connor 2018, 278). Despite his questionable character, it is the men of Sodom who "are guilty in their treatment of strangers" (O'Connor 2018, 278). O'Connor (2018, 274) includes a comment by Brennan Breed, "Part of what makes the Bible so bizarre in its ancient context is its repeated insistence on hospitality for the foreigner." He goes on to say,

> There are lots of ancient law codes from the ancient Near East (Hammurabi's famous code is merely one of them), and none of them have laws that protect foreigners. This is because foreigners had absolutely no rights in anybody else's land: they posed a threat to everyone else's scarce resources, and they could always be a scouting party for a foreign enemy. So, it is best to shut them out unless they are beneficial to your people in some way. Foreign dignitaries and rich merchants were always welcome; people fleeing oppression never were

> . . . Ancient Israel, though, is an odd duck because their law codes say over and over again that you *have* to welcome the wandering foreigner and you *have* to help them, you *cannot* oppress them: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod 22:21).

Davies (1969, 188) notes that Lot's actions were driven "by reasons of hospitality rather than morality" in the offering of his "unbetrothed" daughters. Von Rad (1972, 218, 217) observes that "perhaps an ancient narrative, well known in Israel, about a frightful violation of the law of hospitality was connected only secondarily with Sodom as the seat of all sin," noting that "in Canaan, where civilization at that time was already old, sexual aberrations were quite in vogue . . . this was especially true of the Canaanite cult of the fertility gods Baal and Astarte, which was erotic and orgasmic at times." It can be argued that hospitality was the issue and rape was the occasion, or vice versa.

Even so, the terms "sodomy" and "sodomite" came to be synonymous with nonheterosexuality. "Sodomy" should mean inhospitality! Originally, a "sodomite" was a citizen of the city of Sodom! Ironically, the only sexual intercourse in the narrative takes place at the end of the story, a text that is usually ignored by those seeking to prove a prejudiced point. After their narrow escape from Sodom, Lot's daughters, distraught over the death of their mother who died while fleeing the scene, and consumed with the fear that they now have no opportunity to marry and procreate, ply their father with wine, getting him drunk and seducing him into having a three-way. Over the course of two nights, the two sisters take turns having sex with their father in an incestuous tryst in the hopes of securing heirs and preserving the family lineage (see Akerley 1998, 7-8). Their *ménage trois* was successful, however, with both daughters conceiving and giving birth to sons, ensuring legacy and lineage, procreation being a high priority in the ancient world. It is interesting how this conclusion to the longer narrative is frequently avoided, ignored, or strangely justified by many who preach and teach it, further fueling a predetermined agenda (see Akerley 1998, 8-9). Unfortunately, selectively picking and choosing certain texts while disregarding others remains for many the standard way of reading and interpreting them. Many religious leaders employ this inconsistent hermeneutical approach in defending a position. Rather than protecting those who come under their influence, they continue to perpetuate stereotypes about what the Bible does and does not say. The consequences are catastrophic, with many honest, sincere, and willing students of the Bible remaining biblically illiterate, and, intentionally or not, continuing to foster a tradition of abuse against certain individuals, mainly persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. It is this same hermeneutical approach to the biblical narrative that once justified the position that women are inferior to men, thus prohibiting them from ordination because they were first in the Edenic Fall. The same rationale has also been employed to justify slavery and the idea that persons of African descent were an inferior race of people.

It is important to note, however, some specific texts from the Bible contradicting the accustomed perspective and role of women, noteworthy examples found in the genealogy early in the Gospel of Matthew. In this genealogy there is an "unusual feature," as Jane Schaberg calls it, and that is the inclusion of four women in a lineage that was otherwise all male, and each one of them ironically having a scandalous reputation (Schaberg 1987, 20). The conspicuous mention of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba all have an interesting commonality. Each one of them is of foreign descent—Tamar and Rahab presumably of Canaanite origin; Ruth a Moabitess; and Bathsheba a Hittite; the Gospel writer emphasizing that Jesus comes from a mixed-race line with illegitimate origins (Schaberg 1987, 20-21). It is also important to note that these four individuals were all in some way labeled as women of ill repute. Tamar disguised herself as a harlot and fulfilled that role. Rahab was a practicing prostitute. Ruth could be accused of being a fornicator and certainly was a seductress. Bathsheba, though following orders, was technically guilty of adultery. In other words, each one of them have in common a questionable background, actions regarded as sinful, and all these presumed indiscretions of a sexual nature, "each involved in extraordinary or irregular sexual unions, which were scandalous to outsiders" (Schaberg 1987, 21). Despite this, they are prominently mentioned in Matthew's lineage. The attributes assigned to these women provide their own commentary about the nature of hospitality, God including and using foreigners and suspect personalities to achieve divine will. Schaberg assumes there is a subtle message in Matthew's genealogy, that this lineage prepares "for the account of the irregular union that produced Jesus," even as they portray the role of divine intervention in his suspicious birth (Schaberg 1987, 21).

The biblical story describing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the most misunderstood texts in all the biblical narrative, revealing the judgment and wrath of an angry deity intent on the annihilation of every individual inhabiting that purportedly wicked enclave. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, a key figure in the Church of England's engagement of secularization specifically regarding the struggle with homosexual law reform described in the Wolfenden Report, 1954-1967, wrote in 1954, "Consideration of the Christian attitude to homosexual practices inevitably begins with the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a catastrophe of which Dr George Adam Smith said that its glare burns still, though the ruins it left have entirely disappeared" (Bailey 1955, 1). Bailey is one of the early exegetes to raise the pivotal question challenging the traditional notion that the Sodom and Gomorrah text was exclusively about homosexual or nonheterosexual behavior. He asks, "What is the meaning of the incident recorded in Gen. xix. 4-11? Did that incident simply constitute one proof among many of the wickedness of Sodom—was it the cause, or only the occasion, of God's judgment? What ground is there for the persistent belief that the inhabitants of the city were addicted to male homosexual practices, and were punished accordingly?" (Bailey 1955, 1). Bailey's exegesis has become the generally accepted argument about this text. A significant contribution regarding the Sodom and Gomorrah story is Bailey's careful description of the way that the content of the narrative as it pertained to the sin in question, evolved in the Christian scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers, moving from inhospitality to homosexuality, becoming codified as normative by a vast majority for centuries (Bailey 1955, 1-28). It is not coincidental that the introduction of hospitality as a specific event in the biblical narrative in the story of Abraham and Sarah and their three visitors by the oaks of Mamre, is directly followed by the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative. The same divine beings, still disguised as men, leave Abraham's company and the hospitality afforded them at his encampment and set out for Sodom. Upon their arrival in the city, however, suddenly the text reveals that there are strangely now just two of the three. The disappearance of one of them further supports the assumption that at least one of the beings was indeed "the Lord," clarifying for the reader the reason this deity must now disappear for at least a short while, mysteriously reappearing at a pivotal moment later in the drama. This appears to be a literary device used by the writer to expedite the task of gathering information about Sodom from a safe distance, an important feature guaranteeing the safety, and perhaps the anonymity, of this mysterious figure posing as a person. Moving forward, the unnamed deity would rely on the discovery by these two men as they enter Sodom to fully investigate and assess the situation. Janzen asserts, "It is clear from a comparison of 19:1-3 with 18:1-8 that the test of Sodom turns on the question of hospitality. The way Sodom fails the test becomes clear through a study of the similarity and difference between the two episodes" (Janzen 1993, 61). As is shown, many biblical interpreters today **a**gree that overwhelming evidence supports the theory that inhospitality was the pivotal sin of Sodom that inevitably brought about the destruction of that ancient city.

Traditional interpretations of this narrative continue to dominate in many circles, but there is growing consensus among scholars and other contemporary writers that the sin of Sodom was inhospitality rather than nonheterosexuality (Spong 1988, 136-143; Spong 1992, 7-9; Spong 2005, 127-133; O'Connor 2018, 277; von Rad 1972, 219; Westermann 1985, 294-315; Wenham 1994, 53-65). Many of these writers agree that while homosexual rape was the occasion for the story, it was not the primary issue driving the context of the narrative. Some commentators choose to not go so far as to name this sin as the prevailing issue that brought about Sodom's demise. At the minimum, these two sins are both mentioned as egregious, leading to horrific consequences. The absence of hospitality alone was a damnable offense. Combined with an attempt to abuse Lot's houseguests, this crisis presented an untenable scenario.

Errors in interpreting the Sodom and Gomorrah text tend to occur when referencing other assumed prohibitive texts, taken out of context, to support a traditional negative view of nonheterosexual behavior (Carla Freedman, personal communication, 13 April 2019). The prescriptions and prohibitions in the Holiness Code were specifically developed to provide clear guidelines, established as parameters for priestly and communal function. Gordon Wenham (1994, 44) declares, "The parallels are clearest in the two hospitality scenes (18:1-8; 19:1-3) and in the pleas for the two cities (18:23-32; 19:18-22). But even within these two parallel texts are some interesting similarities. In other words, Gen 18 and 19:1-22 are told in two parallel panels. . ." Whereas the reader has been given a clear model of how the ancient custom and practice of Near Eastern hospitality should be conducted between host and guest, inhabitant and alien, foreigner, or stranger, the reader is now provided with an antithetical example revealing the unfortunate consequences of failing to be hospitable in each unique situation. The reader is exposed to a horrific encounter, a repulsive display of men exhibiting the worst of inhospitable behavior, characterized by the attempt to act on debased carnal desires. They would pay dearly for their actions, the whole arsenal of judgment and punishment leveled against them. To expedite the transition from Mamre to Sodom a dialogue takes place between Abraham and the Lord that reveals the degree of God's anger toward the citizens of the city. The two figures, in what many scholars describe as traditional or typical Near Eastern bargaining, bartering, or haggling, discuss the number of righteous persons living inside Sodom's city limits to save this people from what certainly seems a preordained fate (MacDonald 2004, 30). Walter Brueggemann (1982, 172) describes the conversation in this manner, "The process, like barter in a Near Eastern bazaar, moves from fifty to ten." In this lively, perhaps heated, conversation between Abraham and the Lord, the very nature of God hangs in the balance. God is ready to smite every citizen of the city, save for Lot and his family, and Abraham is the voice of reason seeking to strike a moderate solution, what might ironically be termed as a divine level of peace and mercy. Theological themes are emerging and evolving about God's justice and judgment, grace, and wrath. Of course, at stake for Abraham is the fact that his nephew Lot and his family reside in Sodom and Abraham fears for their safety, not knowing their fate if God chooses to act as presumed. At the end of their debate, Abraham loses the argument and Sodom's fate is sealed. Lot and his family, however, will be given the opportunity to flee the wrath to come, allowed safe passage out of the agony of burning sulfur and flesh. According to the narrative Lot's wife became the only casualty, disobeying the divine command to not look back at the conflagration. She was unmercifully struck on the spot and turned into a pillar of salt, a reminder that this city was located near the Dead Sea. Every other family member was spared the inevitable horrors of doom and destruction, a death sentence inflicted on every remaining citizen.

Valerie Miles-Tribble takes exception to this patriarchal interpretation of the story in her article "Mrs. Lot: Vilified or Victim? Sinner or Salt?" In this article Miles-Tribble gives Lot's wife a name, challenging the traditional moniker imposed upon her by the biblical writer. By calling her "Mrs. Lot," the author affords her the only name available or imagined and can thus remove the inherent possessive inference and image suggested by merely referring to her as "Lot's wife." Rather than perpetuate the stereotypes about "Mrs. Lot" either being a disobedient and unfaithful victim of circumstances or a perpetrator, Miles-Tribble rehabilitates Mrs. Lot's image by giving her the respect that Miles-Tribble believes this unlikely and unwitting heroine is due. In her groundbreaking research as a feminist theologian, Miles-Tribble (2018, 167-168) seeks to provide a broader interpretation that removes the permanent stain on "Mrs. Lot's" life as a defiant or insubordinate villain. Miles-Tribble (2018, 167-168) begins her defense by noting,

> Patriarchal and punitive characterization often casts the silenced Mrs. Lot as a disobedient and unfaithful sinner who ignored God's command not to look back. Because she did, a common conclusion is that she ostensibly lusted after the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah as the towns were cataclysmically destroyed by God's judgment with rains of fire. Often Mrs. Lot's entire life is rendered to a singular criminal epitaph: But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26, NRSV).

Miles-Tribble reminds her reader of the dangers inherent in perpetuating the patriarchal, possessive prevailing attitudes that dominated this ancient culture and thus pervaded these sacred stories. Ironically, Mrs. Lot has been stereotyped in perpetuity as a personification of the very evil and wickedness she was presumably seeking to escape. Another irony about this narrative is that the "pillar" and "salt" carry with them positive connotations in various places within the biblical narrative.

Conventional biblical wisdom assumes that nonheterosexual acts were at the root of Sodom's wickedness, brought to light when the men of the city demand to "know" Lot's guests, indicating either interrogation or rape though the reader is clearly made aware of the only acceptable interpretation (Matthews 1992, 3-11; Morschauser 2003, 461-485; Yamanda 2008, 72-85). The nature of the city's wickedness, however, is never revealed.

> It is possible that the offense of Sodom is understood with specific references to sexuality. But if such a reading is accepted, the turbulent mood of the narrative suggests gang-rape rather than a private act of either "sodomy" or any specific homosexual act . . . the Bible gives considerable evidence that the sin of Sodom was not specifically sexual, but a general disorder of a society organized against God. Thus in Isa. 1:10; 3:9, the reference is to injustice; in Jer. 23:14, to a variety of irresponsible acts which are named; and in Ezek. 16:49 the sin is pride, excessive food, and indifference to the needy (Brueggemann 1982, 164).

The first Isaiah passage to which Brueggemann refers connects Isaiah's audience with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and indicts the Israelites for their flawed worship practices, condemning outright their offerings and sacrifices. God declares through the prophet, "I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them" (Isa 1:13b-14). The book of Ezekiel also blames the destruction of Sodom on inhospitable practices. The prophet declares, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezek 16:49). In the Christian scriptures, in the Gospels of Matthew (10:15) and Luke (10:12), Jesus refers to the punishment of Sodom when speaking of those who would not welcome the seventy whom he appointed as missionaries. He declares that the citizens of the city of Sodom fared better than those who turned away God's messenger, refusing the expected level of required hospitality when his emissaries came calling. Each of these Gospel texts provides clear commentary on the context and content naming the sin of Sodom. The Bible frequently provides its own commentary. In many cases in the biblical narrative, certain texts provide interpretation of other texts contained therein. Jesus certainly assumes that inhospitality was the issue at the center of what would eventually become a divisive debate about the meaning behind the sin at the center of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative (see Mt 10:15; Lk 10:12). Ezekiel 16:49-50 declares, "Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore, I removed them, when I saw it." It is obvious even within the biblical narrative, that there is disagreement regarding the sin of Sodom, but a strong case can be made that the issue had nothing to do with nonheterosexual acts. The connection to homosexuality, at least as a biological orientation, simply is not there, a stretch when all accounts are taken into consideration. Fretheim (1994, 473, 476) states,

> This text (assigned to J) is the most frequently cited Genesis passage in the rest of the Bible. Sodom and Gomorrah become a conventional image for heinous sins and severe disaster. Apparently these cities symbolize the worst that can be imagined. The nature of Sodom's sins may vary, but the mistreatment of other human beings tops the list; inhospitality lends itself to diverse development (Jer 23:14). Later texts recall Sodom's judgment, even its specific form (see Ps 11:6; Ezek 38:22; Rev 21:8) . . . Sodom is condemned, not because they have no faith in God, but because of the way in which they treat their brothers and sisters. God holds the nonchosen accountable for such behaviors. This assumes an understanding of natural law, wherein God's intentions for all people are clear in the creational order (cf. the oracles of the prophets against the nations, e.g., Amos 1-2).

Fretheim's observations certainly raise a question regarding the accountability of the chosen as an example of hospitable behavior. Once more, the specific sin of Sodom that garnered the

Lord's attention and wrathful response, leading to the demise of the city, is never mentioned, leaving the reader to assume the egregious character that created this mass destruction. As one writer opines, "The first intimation of the moral standing of the inhabitants of Sodom is rather vague, being confined to the simple observation that they 'were very wicked sinners against the Lord'" (Sarna 1966, 144). Even so, this writer quickly jumps to the conclusion that the transgression of the townsmen, i.e., their desire to "know", refers to an attempt to rape the visitors. This egregious violation would be the ultimate act of male-on-male dominance, inflicting the highest level of personal humiliation that could be perpetrated on another man in this patriarchal culture. These horrendous acts constitute the essence of the sinfulness associated with Sodom. Certainly, this episode that reportedly transpired at Lot's front door was dominated by an egregious act, but it was a random, infrequent, though not isolated, event in which sexuality seems less like the issue and more like the occasion for the plotline, the story providing a context within the narrative rather than the overarching issue dominating the unfolding drama. "What it means, in the biblical concept, to 'sin against the Lord' is soon vividly illustrated by the conduct of the Sodomites upon the arrival of the two messengers at Lot's home. Here we find them violently demonstrating their hostility to these strangers and lusting to indulge in unnatural vice" (Sarna 1966, 144). The unnamed sinfulness of the city was established earlier in the narrative, prior to the events that took place at Lot's house that evening. The basic argument about the sin of Sodom is that it consisted of inhospitality, an egregious violation which seems plausible, or was about nonheterosexuality, which seems doubtful. To make the leap that the desire to mistreat Lot's guests by this frenzied mob, to abuse and rape these visitors to Sodom, that this lewd act constituted the overall evil of the citizenry at large, is a reach, an overstatement that the text in and of itself, not to mention other textual references, simply will not support. The events at Lot's home serve to sustain the argument that indeed the city of Sodom was a vile and wicked place, full of human ills and evil, and that, in the mind of the writer, God's vengeance and wrath was justified.

It is clear, however, that the egregious sin spawning the actions committed by the men of Sodom was their total disdain and disregard for their guests. "Lot had offered the men a roof and so protection. The 'shadow of his roof' became thereby the place of security for the guests, the violation of which was a fearful crime with incalculable consequences . . . Lot goes to the extreme in both action (v. 6) and word (v. 7-8) in his intervention on behalf of his guests" (Westermann 1985, 301). Inflicting pain and suffering to this degree clearly reveals the inhospitality that was directed toward Lot's visitors. The hostile act of homosexual rape may allow for the textual conversation, but inhospitality is the concern at stake in this encounter between the town's men and these two men who should have been treated as their guests. Fretheim (1994, 477) puts it thusly,

> This text *illustrates* the situation in Sodom as homosexual activity (condemned for males in Israel [Lev 18:22; 2013]), but refers specifically to the abusive violence and savage inhospitality. The text does not talk about homosexual or orientation generally, or nonviolent sexual behavior. Other biblical references to Sodom lift up a wide range of behavior, from neglect of the poor and needy to lies, greed, luxury, heterosexual abuse, and inhospitality to strangers (Isa 1:9-10; Jer 23:14; Lam 4:6; Ezek 16:48-55; Zeph 2:9). Jesus remains true to the text in condemning a town to a fate like Sodom's because of its refusal to receive strangers who bear the word of God (Matt 10:14-15; 11:23-24; Luke 10:12; 17:29; 2 Pet 2:8; only in Jude 1:7 does the reference to homosexual behavior possibly become explicit).

The book of Jude is a rather obscure narrative in the Christian scriptures, certainly not carrying the argumentative weight of other more pronounced texts. It is safe to assume that Judaism in its ancient forms would have regarded homosexual practices as taboo, perhaps even as sinful, but not for the traditionally held reasons claimed by many religious persons today. Any sexual act that was not procreative in nature would have been considered abhorrent, as the need to produce progeny, to "be fruitful and multiply" was paramount in the ancient world (see Clines 1997). Building on this theme and defending this position, Dennis T. Olson (1998, 876) declares,

> Extending hospitality to strangers was an important and deeply held custom in the ancient Near East, and especially so in Israel. The covenant code in Exodus (Exod 22:21; 23:9) the priestly law of Leviticus (Lev 19:33-34) and the deuteronomic law code (Deut 16:14; 26:12) all command Israel to extend generous hospitality to the stranger or sojourner. God "loves the stranger," and God instructs Israel, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:18-19).

"The behavior of the men of Sodom and Gibeah [see next section for analysis of this companion text] was the very antithesis of these commandments. Not only did they not offer basic hospitality, they wanted to perform acts that were diametrically opposed to it" (deClaissé-Walford 2001, 6). Whether the men's desire to "know" the visitors in a sexual manner or simply to "know" them in terms of interrogating them to gain knowledge about these foreigners, Lot found their demands inappropriate and unacceptable in any capacity and thus stood his ground, refusing their threatening advances, protecting at all costs his sacred obligations and his guests. As Wenham (1994, 16-50, 55) notes,

> So far Lot has been portrayed as most hospitable and very solicitous of his visitors' welfare. He is now shown to be a man of no mean courage. True to the cardinal principle of oriental hospitality that protecting your guests is a sacred duty, he bravely goes out to face the mob alone. The last clause, "he shut the door behind him," gives a clue to his thinking. By shutting the door, he cut off his own escape and hoped to protect those inside.

Lot goes to great lengths, eventually even risking the loss of his daughters, offering them in desperation as a bartering chip. In so doing, Lot risked the potential detriment of his virgin daughters, devaluing them and destroying their potential as desirable marriage material to bring a decent dowry. Out of options, Lot dutifully risks the sacrifice of his daughters in place of the guests he has committed to protect. While showing the minimal value of women in this patriarchal society, this act would have been understood as a noble gesture, a necessary evil carried out to preserve the sacred laws governing hospitality. Wenham (1994, 16-50, 55; see O'Connor 2018, 275-276) declares,

> The mob shouts out that Lot's visitors be brought out, "so that we may know them." It is because of this remark and Lot's subsequent comments that homosexuality has been identified as *the* sin of Sodom. But this has been contested. Certainly their wording is not quite so explicit: "that we may know them." Their words stand in ironic contrast to the Lord's expressed intention to know about them (18:21). The mob could mean simply that they want to know who these visitors are, but since the visitors came through the public gateway and were publicly greeted by Lot, this cannot be all they mean. And since ידע "to know" is frequently used in Genesis of sexual intercourse, this seems the likeliest meaning here (cf. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16). Indeed, it is made inescapable by Lot's reply, in which he describes his daughters as "virgins," lit. "who have not known a man." ידע here be intended to mean sexual intimacy, and this is recognized by all the major commentators. All homosexual practice is regarded by the OT law as a capital offense (Lev 18:22; 20:13; cf. Rom 1:26-27), but the attitude of Israel's neighbors is less clear, for it is not often discussed in their legal collections. It seems likely that they allowed homosexual acts between consenting adults, but here homosexual gang rape is being proposed, something completely at odds with the norms of all oriental hospitality. (See further G. J. Wenham, *ExpTim* 102 [1991] 359-63.)

There is some debate about the argument that homosexuality was condemned without exception or was case or situation specific. Wenham makes the further point that once Lot offers his virgin daughters instead of his male guests, all parties were then clear as to the content of the conversation (Wenham 1994, 16-50, 55). Any confusion about the motive to "know" was quickly resolved. Janzen (1993, 61-62) certainly assumes the worst.

> The contrasts between the two episodes (at Mamre and at Sodom) continue to mount . . . When Yahweh "goes down" to "know" (18:21) the city's moral condition as reflected in how it receives the two visitors, the city responds by pursuing a different sort of knowing (19:5). Whereas Yahweh's knowing is bilateral — waiting to see how the city will respond, and then knowing it in its response — the city's approach is unilateral. Its men "knowing" the visitors does not depend on the visitor's response, let alone their consent. The

> knowledge in question is the exercise of a certain kind of power — the power to impose one's will coercively in a domination that subordinates and humiliates.

No matter how "know" is translated in this narrative, it is obvious that the Yahwist editor is contrasting appropriate and inappropriate behavior illustrated in the great chasm between hospitable and inhospitable advances. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is a certain degree of ambivalence in the choice of "to know" in the text, leaving room for debate as to meaning. Bailey (1955, 2-3) provides an excellent exegesis of this term, inquiring if coitus was the intended connotation in the text.

The material has another troublesome layer when it becomes apparent that hospitality was not necessarily extended to women, even within a family dynamic. The ultimate violation that one man could do to another was to treat him as a woman in a sex act. This reality allowed Lot, without hesitation, to offer his daughters, thus allowing the guests to escape the men awaiting them outside his door. Elliott (Elliott 1961, 134) comments,

> Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters made it neither right nor desirable, but in accord with that society, it was considered the lesser of two evils. Lot desired to be a courageous champion of the obligations of hospitality in a situation of extreme embarrassment. Since women in those days were regarded primarily as chattel or property, Lot cannot be blamed too much for his willingness to sacrifice his daughters. That he would capitulate so readily, however, does indicate his lack of genuine stamina and courage. . .

In agreement with Westermann, Elliott's compartmentalized defense of Lot's path of least resistance seems to be based on the cultural milieu of the day. In the end Lot is saved by his guests as they grab and pull him back into the house. They shut the door and then strike the men outside blind, further revealing their divine characteristics. Lot and his daughters escape while Sodom is destroyed and the chapter ends with Lot's daughters getting their father drunk and seducing him, enabling them to insure their lineage despite a lack of potential husbands.

In the prevailing culture, preservation of tribe and clan was paramount, superseding any boundaries regarding incest or sibling procreativity. Avowed atheist Ben Edward Akerley has attempted to chronicle all the sexually sordid texts found in the biblical narrative. Akerley (1998, 8-9) offers this conclusion.

> The tale of Lot and his daughters is a favorite topic when I do talk shows, so let me give you an idea of how a debate usually goes.
>
> **Baptist Minister:** In your *The X-Rated Bible*, are you saying that the Word of God is as bad as pornographic magazines like *Playboy, Penthouse,* and *Forum?*
>
> **Akerley:** I'm saying that *Playboy, Penthouse,* and *Forum* do not claim to be inspired.
>
> **Baptist Minister:** Oh sure, there's a lot of immorality mentioned in the Scriptures, but God always uses those examples to teach us a moral lesson about what we should *not* do.
>
> **Akerley:** What about Lot's two daughters getting their father intoxicated and then becoming pregnant by him?
>
> **Baptist Minister:** They did that because they were the only survivors after God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their perversion and terrible sinfulness.
>
> **Akerley:** But the account says that they hid in a cave near Zoar because Lot was fearful of the people nearby.
>
> **Baptist Minister:** Well then his daughters thought they were the only ones left on earth.
>
> **Akerley:** So why did they have to get Lot drunk? Wouldn't he have understood the wisdom of their plan to repopulate a devastated world?
>
> **Baptist Minister:** God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform!

Another inane response often given in seeking a polite conclusion to this kind of debate is, "There but by the grace of God go I." This is merely a convenient way to avoid the hard questions that come with serious biblical inquiry. Akerley (1998, 9) ends his summation by acknowledging,

> Apologists insist that even tales of sexual impropriety in the Good Book serve as a moral lesson. I must confess that I have searched long and hard . . . for one in this narrative and the only moral imperative that I can detect is that if two daughters want to commit incest with their own father, the older one should get her chance to fuck daddy first!

Though sarcastic, Akerley is critiquing the typical defensive commentary advocated by conservatives or traditionalists, sincere and otherwise, who circle the wagons of their own anxiety and reinforce viewpoints long regarded as orthodox. In many cases these are the people who fail to take the Bible seriously by taking it literally. Holding to an archaic and indefensible literalism makes a mockery out of such narratives. While some commentators fail to question the indiscretions displayed between Lot and his daughters, avoidance or ignorance is never an acceptable reason to do so. Jonathan Kirsch (1997, 38-39) observes,

> When it comes to the most grotesque and repulsive of Lot's conduct—his willingness to cast his daughters to the mob—the apologists offer two thin excuses. First, we are told that the ancient laws of hospitality imposed on Lot a sacred obligation to protect his guests, even at the risk of his family and his own life. The fact that the guests turn out to be angels . . . is entirely beside the point; a couple of nameless drifters . . . are no less worthy of Lot's hospitality than a team of heavenly messengers. Second, we are asked to believe that children were regarded as something less precious in biblical times than they are today, more nearly chattel than loved ones, and so a father was at liberty to do with his children (and especially his daughters) exactly as he pleased.

However, other scholars have argued that the laws of hospitality were of such import that Lot's actions would have been understandable. Kirsch (1997, 40) adds, "So we are asked to exonerate and even to praise Lot for offering his daughters to the mob in order to protect his houseguests," citing Gerhard von Rad who opines, 'The surprising offer of his daughters must not be judged simply by Western ideas. . . That Lot intends under no circumstances to violate his hospitality, that his guests were for him more untouchable than his own daughters, must have gripped the ancient reader.'" Kirsch (1997, 40) concludes, "The attitude of the biblical author toward Lot is not spoken out loud, but it is hard to miss in an open-eyed reading of the

Bible. Lot is depicted as neither a coward nor a champion; rather he is shown to be a clown: ‘A tragic buffoon’ . . . ‘a laughing stock,’ ‘a jester,’ ‘a passive fool’. . .”

> When it comes to the forbidden sexual union of father and daughter, however, the biblical storyteller is straight-faced and even solemn. Neither Lot nor his daughters are criticized in the Bible or the religious literature that tries to explain away their sexual misadventures in that mountain cave overlooking a blasted Sodom. For his part . . . ‘Lot is the victim, rather than the instigator, of this disgraceful affair,’ says one commentator. And even his daughters . . . are regarded as heroines rather than seductresses. Incest, the biblical author seems to suggest, is hardly the worst offense against the moral order, especially when survival of the species, the kingship of Israel, and the birth of the Messiah appear to be at stake . . . the fact is that the biblical world . . . regarded incest with far less horror than we might suppose by reading the catalog of sexual prohibitions in the Book of Leviticus. Sexual relations between blood relatives were *not* universally condemned in the faiths and cultures of the ancient Near East (Kirsch 1997, 40-41).

In the final analysis, “Thus the Bible betrays an attitude toward incest that is far more casual than one might expect from the stern pronouncements in Leviticus” (Kirsch 1997, 44). Feminist theologian Phyllis Trible, in her critique of misogynistic biblical text confirms, “Offsetting these pitfalls are guides for telling and hearing the tales. To perceive the Bible as a mirror is one such sign. If art imitates life, scripture likewise reflects it in both holiness and horror. Reflections themselves neither mandate nor manufacture change; yet by enabling insight, they may inspire repentance. In other words, sad stories may yield new beginnings” (Trible 1984, 2). She acknowledges further that “. . . the writer knows the terrain. From the start, certain theological positions constitute pitfalls, centering “in Christian chauvinism (Trible 1984, 2).” Kirsch (1997, 55-57) continues his analysis of the story.

> Whether Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God himself, or his angelic host, or, as some scholars have suggested, . . . a random seismic tremor, . . . the story of Lot and his daughters reminds us that God himself is depicted in the Bible as a moody and mercurial deity who is more often the destroyer than the creator of human life.

Lot's daughters, like his wife, are unnamed in the Bible—a considerable slight in a book whose authors seem obsessed with genealogies and the giving and meaning of names—but they show themselves to be bold, intrepid, and resourceful young women, willing to defy the taboo against incest to restore life to emptiness they see from their mountain refuge (Kirsch 1997, 58). Kirsch (1997, 60-61)) concludes his detailed analysis with a most interesting caveat,

> . . . Elsewhere in the Bible . . . we find the Moabites and Ammonites singled out among the many adversaries of Israel as worthy of special contempt . . . (Deut. 23:4, 8-9) . . .But the fact is that the Bible reserves a crucial role for these cave-born bastards in spite of their incestuous origins and the future clashes between their descendants and the Israelites. A Moabite woman named Ruth is destined to marry an Israelite man, and their bloodline will lead directly to the birth of David, the greatest of the kings of Israel (Ruth 4:18-22). An Ammonite woman named Naamah will be counted among King Solomon's one thousand wives and concubines—and, fatefully, it is Naamah who will give birth to Solomon's successor to the throne of Israel (1 Kings 14:21). And it is from the House of David and Solomon that the Messiah will come, in both the Jewish and Christian traditions.

It is unfortunate that, in retelling this ancient story, it is as if heterosexual impropriety should be overlooked or rationalized and quickly dispatched. Bailey's conclusions about the Sodom and Gomorrah story continue to inform the conversation.

> . . . We may conclude that the Sodom story has no direct bearing whatever upon the problem of homosexuality or the commission of homosexual acts. Hence it is no longer possible to maintain the belief that homosexual practices were once punished by a Divine judgement upon their perpetrators so terrible and conclusive as to preclude any subsequent discussion of the question. Still less can it be held that an act of God has determined once for all what attitude Church and State ought to adopt towards the problem of sexual inversion. This is not to say that homosexual acts may not, in a greater or lesser degree, be sinful; but only that their morality (fails) to be decided (like that of other human acts) by reference to the natural law, and in accordance with the principles of Christian ethics and moral theology, and cannot be considered settled by a natural catastrophe which occurred in the remote past (Bailey 1955, 28).

3.1.3 Gibeah and Inhospitality, a Sodom and Gomorrah Reprise? (Judges 19)

At the beginning of his commentary on the story of the Levite and the concubine at Gibeah, Robert G. Boling (1975, 271) uses the heading "Hospitality," this one word offering a concise synopsis of this horrific tale. Commenting on this Yahwist (Von Rad 1972, 281) story, Susan Ackerman (2022, 59) observes,

> Scholars have often noted the close parallels between the stories of Gen 19, where divine emissaries lodge overnight in Sodom in the house of Abraham's nephew Lot, and Judg 19, where a Levite sojourner from Ephraim and his entourage lodge overnight in Gibeah with another Ephraimite who is temporarily resident in this Benjamite town. Especially of note is the violent episode that happens once the evening proceeds in both tales; men from Sodom, in Gen 19:4-5 and Benjaminites from Gibeah, in Judg 19:22, come to the residences where the visitors are housed in order to demand that the divine emissaries (in Gen 19) and the Levite (in Judg 19) be sent forth "so that we might know them/him . . . In both stories, however, the strangers' hosts resist this gross assault on their male guests by offering female alternatives.

In these two texts the convergence of hospitality, sexual violence against women, and migration coalesce, the dichotomy between host and guest graphically on display in both narratives (Southwood 2018, 470).

William Krisel (2022, 267) discusses "the methodology of intertextual analysis of biblical texts consists of comparing two texts to identify points of thematic and lexical continuity between them." This certainly frames the debate when Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are compared. Krisel's (2022, 267) theory, noting that relying on the Masoretic (MT) textual version "can lead to misleading conclusions," that "using the case of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 as an example," he argues "that most of the claimed intertextual allusions in the latter text were introduced by a late redactor as literary embellishments to what was already a well-established narrative." He further acknowledges that "it is generally agreed that many biblical texts can be interpreted as critical and exegetical 're-readings' (*relectures*) of older authoritative texts" (Krisel 2022, 267). Krisel (2022, 270) agrees with other commentators that there are clearly parallels between Genesis 19 and Judges 19 (see Wellhausen 1885; Moore 1895; Budde 1897; Gunkel 1910; Burney 1919; Lanoir 2005; Edenburg 2016). Both narratives include "the theme of threatened homosexual gang-rape" which "introduces a dysfunctional blind motif in a narrative intrigue" that results in the murder of the woman, the Levite's concubine, in Judges 19 (Krisel 2022, 274). The intertextual intrigue becomes more complex, however, with the inclusion of 2 Samuel 13:12, the rape of Tamar, as an additional parallel text (Krisel 2022, 277). Krisel (2022, 281) concludes,

> My analysis of Judges 19 suggests that there is a single intertextual allusion in the earliest composition stratum of the text, in Judg 19,23—to the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. As Judges 19 recounts the story of a woman's brutal gang-rape and murder, the borrowing of Tamar's plea in 2 Sam 13,12 to her half-brother Amnon not to rape her makes literary sense. A later redaction then introduced glosses and interpolations that allude to Gen 19, 4-8. . .

Krisel (2022, 281) acknowledges that "Although this conclusion is speculative, it nonetheless suggests that intertextual analysis that is limited to a comparison of two texts in their final MT versions understates the complexity and subtlety of the gradual compositional development process of biblical texts." In the final analysis this means,

> As the interpretation of the phenomenon of intertextuality requires an analysis of the relative dating of two texts in order to determine which text is the hypo-text, it is fair to say that intertextual analysis is a diachronic methodology. However, as most commentators limit their analysis of intertextuality to a comparison of the final versions of the two texts in their MT versions, the study of intertextuality relies on a *de facto* synchronic methodology. This methodology implicitly assumes an authorial model in which a single scribe composed the hyper-text with a copy in hand of the hypo-text in its final MT version. This authorial model contradicts the general consensus view that most OT texts are composite and include glosses and interpolations added by successive generations of scribal redactors. Intertextual analysis should integrate diachronic analysis of the hyper- and hypo-texts to reach more reliable results (Krisel 2022, 280).

It is obvious from Krisel's (2022, 281) research that there is significant parallelism, what he calls "cross-fertilization" or "secondary scribal coordination," throughout the Hebrew Bible, a theory that also seems to inform the way the Gospels would eventually be composed, with one source dependent on the other for writing and editing. Southwood (1969, 476) notes that the narrative ". . . does put into stark perspective . . . the genuine vulnerabilities faced by migrants and the complex dynamics the metaphor of hospitality creates." She adds, "the metaphor of hospitality, both private and societal, is equally as pronounced in Genesis 19 as it is in Judges 19. Indeed, Lipton (2011, 207) argues that '[t]he entire episode [in Genesis 19] can be read as a meditation on hospitality.'"

The narrative begins, "In those days, when there was no king in Israel. . ." (Judg 19a). It was probably the narrator's intent to suggest that when there is no king in the land, chaos reigns and evil flourishes. Citing the final verse of Judges, Victor H. Matthews observes, "There is, however, a further ironic phrase added to the latter verse: 'all the people did what was right in their own eyes.' This may serve in a narrative that is otherwise relatively free of judgmental statements or tone as a passing judgment on the entire story, to provide some small justification for the lawlessness found in that enclave (Matthews 2004, 180). Carolyn Pressler supports this hypothesis, declaring, "The phrase, echoed in Judges 21:25, also provides the perspective from which one is to view the remaining chapters: This is anarchy; this is wrong" (Pressler 2002, 240). The storyline centers on a concubine, a secondary wife, who has left her Levite husband and returned to the home of her father. Either the Levite really adored her, or he simply wanted to retrieve what was legally, rightfully, his possession. The Levite assumes that she has been unfaithful or played the role of a harlot. Boling (1975, 273) notes that in some texts she is indeed labeled "a prostitute." After a cooling-off period of four months, her husband sets out to get her and bring her home. Upon his arrival at her father's home, he is joyously welcomed by his father-in-law who extends to his son-in-law hearty hospitality, renewing old acquaintances. There is ambiguity over whether the father affords this hospitality because his son-in-law is family, a Levite entitled to such accolades, or because it is the reasonably expected custom. Matthews (2004, 180) notes,

> The father's joy on the arrival of his son-in-law may be due to the father putting on a host's face to adhere to the regimen of hospitality. It may also reflect the father's concern over the break in relations between his daughter and the Levite. A bride-price may have been paid or at least gifts exchanged - neither of which the father would wish to return to the Levite. Furthermore, his hospitable actions stand in stark contrast to those of the citizens of Gibeah later in the narrative. They will also delay the Levite's departure, forcing him to leave in late afternoon and to stop that evening at Gibeah as he made his way toward home.

Following hospitable practices, the Levite son-in-law remains with his father-in-law for the customary three days. After being cajoled to stay longer, another feature of hospitality customs, and after all manner of normal apologies, the Levite finally leaves with his wife in the late afternoon of the fifth day. As Dennis T. Olson (1998, 876) observes, "The concubine's father practices an exaggerated hospitality, repeatedly insisting that the Levite remain to eat and drink and enjoy himself in a feast of male bonding over the course of five days." Soggin, describing the meeting at the father's house, notes that "thus the reconciliation is complete, as is also shown by the cordial and hospitable attitude of the father-in-law, as they are now "refreshed" and ready to continue their journey. This hospitality will be on display once more as the couple arrives at Gibeah. As the Levite and his concubine travel, they pass by the city of Jebus, a northern suburb of Jerusalem according to Soggin (1981, 286), which at that time was a Canaanite enclave. The Levite chooses not to lodge there for fear that he and his entourage would be treated poorly because they were foreigners. It was a decision that, at the time, would make perfect sense but would have serious negative consequences. As Pressler (2002, 242) notes, “Given the events at Gibeah, the Levite’s decision is horribly ironic. The supposedly hostile foreign city would have been a (far) better choice than the supposedly safe Israelite town.” Having bypassed Jebus, the weary travelers arrive at Gibeah, a tribal territory of Benjamin and thus an Israelite city, the rationale being that this location would be a safer option for the night. Surely, they would be safe among fellow Israelites. At this point, the similarities between this narrative and that of Sodom and Gomorrah become even more obvious. The traveling party waits at the gate for one of their tribal kindred to come out and greet them. They fully expect a local Benjaminite to offer them a hearty meal and lodging at his home. Instead, they encounter an old man returning to town from the fields, an Ephraimite, and thus an alien as himself (Olson 1998, 876). Readers will recall that Lot was a resident alien living in Sodom. Olson (1998, 876) reminds the reader,

> The deuteronomic law also instructs Israelites to be generous in hospitality to Levites, since they have no land of their own and their lives are to be dedicated in service to the Lord” (Deut 16:14; 26:12). Therefore, if the Israelites in the town of Gibeah had known their religious traditions and values as well, they would have fallen all over each other to offer hospitality to this man who is both a sojourner and a Levite.

The unnamed old man offers to take the travelers in for the night, extending to them the appropriate hospitality. “It is questionable whether such a resident alien even had the legal right to extend hospitality to strangers,” yet “his generosity puts the native residents of Gibeah in an extremely bad light” (Olson 1998, 876).

> The hospitality of the elderly Ephraimite’s home is now cast against the broader concerns of the host city, a population who are happy to leave migrants out in the open and who seem to interpret their vulnerability as an opportunity for abuse. In theory, the hospitality offered by the Ephraimite puts him in a position of power since he can police the conditions surrounding his own door and within his own home. The temporary “home” provided for the Levite and his concubine should, in theory, be closed off enough to offer shelter and open

> enough to allow guest to leave (unlike the restraining "hospitality" offered by the concubine's father earlier in the narrative). Nevertheless, this narrative mingles the concepts of hospitality, ethnicity, and migration (Southwood 1969, 475).

Olson (1998, 877) reminds the reader that "the scene is a clear echo of the Genesis story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in which the two angels of the Lord were traveling and receiving hospitality from Lot," and prior to that, from Abraham in Genesis 18:1-18. (Olson 1998, 878) also notes that "the pattern of exaggerated hospitality followed by violent inhospitality, occurred in an earlier narrative in Judges 4:17-22 in which the Kenite woman Jael lures an enemy, Canaanite general Sisera, into her tent for "protection, food, drink, and rest," according to hospitality customs. After giving him warm milk, and perhaps more, to encourage deep sleep, Jael "proceeded to pound a tent peg into the temple of his sleeping head." The narrative praises Jael for her actions. Olson (1998, 879) declares, "Israel's actions in Judges 19 contradict the instructions concerning the treatment of strangers and outsiders found elsewhere in Scripture. According to the larger biblical tradition, extending hospitality to strangers may be an opportunity to encounter God in the form of a human being in need." Olson cites the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18, entertaining "angels without knowing it" in Hebrews 13:1-2, and the last judgment in Matthew 25:40. He concludes, "Offering hospitality to strangers is an opportunity to encounter God. Abuse or neglect of strangers is an affront to God" (Olson 1998, 879).

A concern is expressed by the Levite that this well-intentioned gentleman might not be able to meet the necessary requirements and so the Levite offers a reassuring word that he and his entourage would demand minimal care and provisions. Athalya Brenner points out, ". . . the fact that an old man still worked in the field, not having sons to perform such tasks, may suggest that his economic resources were minimal. . ." (Brenner 1993, 176). According to the custom of hospitality, however, this is a rather unusual, albeit thoughtful and respectful response, risking calling into question a host's abilities while benignly insulting the one who is offering this ancient model of welcome.

The old man insists that he will provide full hospitality. Anything less would have would have been an insult, failing to meet the appropriate standard of expectation. The remarkable generosity of this "resident alien" is in marked contrast to the total lack of hospitality on the part of the local inhabitants. *They washed their feet*: this detail is not mentioned in Gen. 19, but it does feature in the previous chapter in the story of Abraham's reception of the three men at Mamre (Gen 18:4) (Martin 1975, 204). As the story continues to unfold, Pressler (2002, 242) describes the scene,

> Night overtakes the travelers at Gibeah. In the ancient Near East, hospitality to strangers was a sacred obligation, but none of the Gibeonites offer it. Their lack of hospitality comes across as loutish (v. 15). Only an Ephraimite, himself an alien in Gibeah, opens his home to the Levite and his party. That the host is Ephraimite may explain his sympathy for the Levite, who is from Ephraim. His resident alien status also suggests the host's vulnerability; he has no family network to protect himself or his guests from hostile neighbors.

This last line of Pressler's comments adds to the intrigue of what is about to transpire in the story. The logistics are negotiated and satisfactorily worked out and the weary travelers follow the old man, making their way to his home for what, for the time being, would be an enjoyable evening of leisure and relaxation. While they were all joining in the festivities, eating, and drinking and "enjoying themselves," the men of this Israelite city surrounded the house and demanded that the old man deliver to them the Levite in order that they might "have intercourse with him" (Judg 19:22) (Olson 1998, 879**).** Soggin (1981, 288) describes the mob as "toughs," or as Boling (1975, 276) calls them, "the local hell raisers," the Hebrew denoting "human beings who act in disregard if all laws, whether human or divine." The goal of the mob was to "batter," to "have sex" with these guests (Soggin 1981, 288). Inevitably, they will "ravish," literally "humiliate" the concubine, what Soggin (1981, 288) calls a euphemism. He adds,

> . . . as I have noted, while in Gen. 19 the homosexual violence is a fundamental element, given that the three 'angels' are seen as men, here the theme quickly disappears, as the toughs are happy with the concubine, cf. 20.5. As we have seen, this is manifest proof that this narrative is secondary in comparison with Gen. 19, which, moreover, is a much earlier story. . . (Soggin 1981, 288).

For the reader familiar with the Sodom and Gomorrah text this story of Gibeah is a deja vu, "here we go again" scenario. Unlike the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, however, and despite arguments to the contrary, according to the biblical writer, there is even less ambiguity in the intent of these townsmen. It must be acknowledged, however, that the language, by virtue of translation, once again leaves flexibility in interpretation. As in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah,

> The verb yd', "to know" has a wide range of meaning and is used euphemistically to denote sexual intercourse. However, it is never unambiguously used of homosexual coitus. The idiom "to lie with" is far more common for all varieties of sexual intercourse. Here yd' is deliberately ambiguous. With the offer of the young women (vs. 24), the ambiguity disappears. As in Gen 19, the initial and determinative offense is a violation of the law of hospitality. (Boling 1967, 276)

Once again, in many instances in the biblical narrative to "know" or "knew" is often used as a euphemism for sexual relations, though, as with Genesis 19 that is clearly not the case in Judges 19. The familiar phrase "He knew her and she conceived" is used frequently (see Gen 4:1, 17, 25, 19:5, 24:16; Num 31:17; Judg 11:39, 19:25; 1 Sam 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4; Mt 1:25; and according to some translations, Lk 1:34) [Clines 2009, 146-147; Botterweck 1986, 448-481; Ackerman 2022, 59]. As Ackerman (2022, 59) notes, "The language here draws on the Bible's well-known use of the verb 'to know' (*yāda* ʿ) as a sexual euphemism, meaning that what the Sodomites and the Benjaminites each seek is to assert their dominance over the strangers in their midst by subjecting them to homosexual rape. It is interesting to note that the NRSV translates the Hebrew with the ambiguous to "know" in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, but intentionally chooses the unambiguous "have intercourse" in the story of the Levite and his Concubine at Gibeah. In what is now a familiar scenario, based on the previous reading of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, the old man responds to their inhospitable demands by offering to them his virgin daughter.

In many ways the story of the inhospitality exhibited at Gibeah seems like a companion to the Sodom and Gomorrah text, a reading perhaps intended to address questions raised in the Genesis narrative. J. Alberto Soggin (1981, 282) observes that,

> . . . the theme of homosexual violence, basic to Gen. 19 and therefore developed coherently, cf. vv. 5-7, from which only a miraculous intervention can rescue the destined victim, vv. 10f., appears only briefly in Judg. 19, but is irrelevant and does not produce any effect, given that the toughs are content to rape the woman (v. 25), leaving the levite and the servant alone.

The theme of hospitality seems even more apparent when comparing the dialogue that takes place between the Levite and his father-in-law and then between the Levite and his host at Gibeah. This does not seem to be a concern of Soggin's commentary as he gives short shrift to the two hospitable episodes in the story. Once again, as in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, it is the men of the town who act inappropriately toward the visitors, the reader realizing that the purpose of the assembled mob is to physically violate the guests by rape or sexual abuse. A major difference in these parallel stories is that the writer points out that the horrific events in Gibeah take place within an Israelite enclave, adding another layer to the depth of the depravity being perpetrated. Both stories show the primacy of the practice of hospitality because in both instances, daughters and/or wives, i.e., women, are offered up as a sacrifice instead of the invited guests. Unfortunately, each story reveals the stark value of men versus women within that patriarchal culture. Once again, the desire of the men of Gibeah to "know" their guests appears as the occasion for the story and not the real issue at stake. It must be acknowledged, however, that it is certainly understandable how prohibition against nonheterosexuality became known as the primary issue in these stories. Assuming that "knowing" these visitors was tantamount to rape, sexual abuse in any form in no way reflects a contemporary understanding of the intimacy found between two persons in a loving relationship no matter their sexual orientation.

Clearly, any analysis of Genesis 19 is incomplete without an investigation of Judges 19. The story of Lot's exploits in Sodom and Gomorrah and the story of the Levite and his concubine contain striking similarities that seem more than coincidental, with the later Gibeah story providing commentary on the earlier Sodom and Gomorrah narrative (Olson 1998, 878). Unlike Lot's daughters who are saved at the last second by the quick-thinking actions of the host's guests, however, the men of Gibeah gang rape the Levite's concubine to the point that she appears to be dead and by all accounts is deceased. Their horrific actions belie homosexual desire, willingly perpetrating their insatiable lust for inappropriate sexual gratification using a female victim for their intended desire. Each story presents a case of a "migrant who receives the strangers," reflecting the hospitality first revealed in Genesis 18:1-8 (Westermann 1985, 300). Olson (1998, 878) notes that,

> The pattern of exaggerated hospitality followed by violent inhospitality occurred in an earlier narrative in Judges when the Kenite woman Jael invited the Canaanite general Sisera into her tent for protection, food, drink, and rest. She proceeded to pound a tent peg into the temple of his sleeping head (4:17-22). This breach of the ancient hospitality code had occurred among foreigners, but Jael's act contributed to the victory won against the Canaanites. It was part of the strange means by which 'God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites' (4:23). The story of Judges 19 likewise portrays an exaggerated hospitality followed by violent inhospitality. Unlike Judges 4, this act of inhospitality occurs "in the family" of Israel. The attack against the Levite's

> concubine involves Israel's attack, not against a foreign enemy, but against its own body politic. . .

There seems to be no foundation to support a "situational ethic" within hospitality customs and practices (see Fletcher 1966, 26-31). After all, this cultural phenomenon was intended to secure the safety of inhabitants and foreigners alike. It was not intended to provide an advantage for one party over the other.

Victor H. Matthews states, "Issues of hospitality and the close parallels between this narrative and Gen 19 are quite obvious" (Matthews 2004, 181). However, as Stuart Lasine notes, ". . . there is no agreement about the significance of that similarity. Some commentators are unable to decide whether the Gibeah outrage is dependent on the Sodom story, or whether the reverse is the case" (Lasine 1984, 38). Lasine (1984, 38-39) proceeds to point out,

> The relationship between Judges 19 and Genesis 19 is actually an example of "one-sided" literary dependence. By "literary dependence" I mean that Judges 19 presupposes the reader's awareness of Genesis 19 in its present form, and depends on that awareness in order to be properly understood. The dependence is "one-sided" because a reader can fully understand the story of Lot's hospitality in Sodom without knowing the story of the Levite concubine, whereas the events described in Judges 19 must be viewed together with Genesis 19 for the intended contrast between the two situations to make the reader aware of the topsy-turvy nature of the "hospitality" in Gibeah.

Lasine makes an interesting point regarding the two narratives, but since each narrative can stand on its own, it may be moot. Each text poignantly illustrates the primacy of hospitality in relation to aliens, foreigners, and strangers. The stories also reveal the unfortunate status placed on women during this time.

Olson is quick to remind the reader that, "Israel's actions in Judges 19 contradict the instructions concerning the treatment of strangers and outsiders found elsewhere in Scripture. According to the larger biblical tradition, extending hospitality to strangers may be an opportunity to encounter God in the form of a human being in need" (Olson 1998, 879). Olson then cites several other biblical examples from both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures, a reminder that these texts are ubiquitous in appearance. Not only does the old man offer his virgin daughter to the mob, but he shoves the concubine out the door for good measure, offering a possession that was certainly not his to offer. The concubine is raped until dawn (Judg 25b-26) (Olson 1998, 879). It is unclear which man pushes the Levite's concubine out into the fray, but Olson suggests it was probably the Levite from whose perspective the story is being told. "Other protagonists—the father-in-law, the master of the house—are regularly defined by some such title" (Olson 1998, 879).

The next morning, perhaps after a good night's sleep and well-rested to continue the journey, the Levite finds his wife lying in repose at the threshold of the old man's doorway. "Now, the woman for whom he had gone through so much trouble to retrieve was dead," not that the Levite particularly cared (Brenner 1993, 178). It is obvious to the narrator and the reader that she is dead, though the text never makes that declaration. It is an important caveat that the death of the concubine is never revealed, a suspenseful ambiguity no doubt intentionally included by the writer. As Lasine notes, ". . . there is little doubt that *the* reader is meant to conclude that the concubine is dead" (Lasine 1984, 45). This point is certainly debatable as the writer leaves room for the possibility that the Levite killed her prior to cutting her body into pieces. Soggin (1981, 288) claims ". . . the woman was dead, as LXX and Vg are concerned to add, leaving nothing to the imagination of the reader or the audience."

Lasine suggests that there are a variety of literary devices at work in this part of the text detailing the concubine's death. It is a carefully crafted depiction of the situation. Perhaps assuming his wife to be sleeping and resting peacefully after this long night, the Levite fails to realize she is dead. He finds her clutching the doorway, a posture suggesting a failed attempt to return to the safety of the house. The Levite demands that she "get up," and then assuming her unwillingness to comply, he orders her, "Get up, we're leaving!" (Judg 19:28). Finally, the Levite flippantly picks up the concubine's lifeless body, tosses it over his donkey, and sets off for home. Upon arrival at his home, he cuts her body into twelve pieces and sends one piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This action graphically illustrates the evil perpetrated by kindred against him and his property by the inhospitable Benjaminites. The Levite fails to acknowledge his responsibility in his concubine's death, as he either gave her over, or allowed her to be given over, to the angry mob. According to custom, however, his inhospitality toward the concubine would have been justified and he would not have been held accountable for her violent death. The murder of the concubine leads to a confrontation between the tribe of Benjamin and the eleven other tribes, resulting in the destruction of Gibeah and the virtual annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin. Only a few of the men of that tribe were spared and all the women were taken. These hostilities created the need to import women from elsewhere to repopulate the depleted tribe. This dilemma was resolved by putting the male inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead to the sword for their failure to join in the tribal battle. Four hundred young virgins were captured and brought to Shiloh, in Canaan, and eventually delivered to the tribe of Benjamin. The Benjaminites subsequently returned to their land for the purposes of procreation, replenishing the depleted tribe. All this took place because of the slaughter of the Levite's concubine. The historian Flavius Josephus offers a unique treatment of this story, placing blame on the concubine because of her stunning beauty (Josephus 1957, 152-154). Written in about 70CE, this material would have been familiar to first-century Jews, to the early Church and to those who writing, editing, and compiling the Christian scriptures.

While many Bible readers seem unaware of the story of the Levite and concubine at Gibeah, this text came to light as a required exegetical assignment for students seeking ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA). The denomination's Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCC) chose Judges 19 for the exam, with the assignment "In your role as the Associate Pastor for Christian Formation, you are leading a Bible study for your congregation's UKirk college-age ministry exploring unsettling passages in the scriptures. The final story you will be studying is 'the Levite's Concubine' (Judg 19:1-30)" [Miller 2023, 16]. Students were required to write essays on the passage of scripture, up to 1200 words presenting their interpretation, and another 600 words "outlining a 75-minute Bible study . . . they would lead with the imagined college ministry." The reactionary backlash was quick and fierce, with accusations that the text damages the cause of diversity within the denomination and plays into stereotypes about women in general, specifically singling out women of color, in matters of sexual violence. However, Olson (1998, 878) summarizes,

> The dismembered body of a woman who has been raped constitutes an outrageous horror in the midst of Israel. The portrait of this woman is a tragedy that has been repeated time and again throughout history from the ancient period until today. Violence, sexual abuse, neglect, and suffering have been the experience of far too many women in countries and cultures across the globe. The unnamed concubine in Judges 19 is a metaphor for all the nameless women who endure public or private abuse and suffering in our societies. This story of the Levite's concubine calls the reader to "consider it, take counsel, and speak out" (19:30).

The fact that this woman is referred to as the "Levite's concubine" is a reminder that women were considered property, nothing more than chattel, during this period, equated with livestock, and Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are reminders that hospitality was afforded as the prerogative of men but was not an expectation for women.

Traci Smith, arguing the text would rarely if ever be preached noted, “The reason is simple: the study or proclamation of a passage like this requires pastoral sensitivity and care . . . It requires *such* sensitivity and care, in fact, that I’m not confident I have the proper training” (Miller 2023, 16). No doubt that is one reason the text was chosen. Robert Lowry, chair of the committee, declared, “A reality in the church today is pastors have to be equipped to engage with the parish they serve on issues that might not have been talked about 20 or 25 years ago, including that of sexual violence. Scripture provides a rich narrative that touches on the fullness of human experience” (Miller 2023, 17). Lowry acknowledged that, “To people who have been traumatized, as a brother in Christ, my heart breaks for anyone hurt by an action of the church. We have a responsibility to own that as a church, and we regret that anybody was wounded by being part of the ordination process” (Miller 2023, 17). On March 15, 2023, the PCC “released a statement apologizing for the selection” of this controversial and difficult text, stating “We believed that our decision was defensible; however, we acknowledge that it caused harm. . .” (Araujo-Hawkins 2023, 17). The committee then drafted the following statement that was approved at a three-hour open session during their annual meeting, “In partnership with others across the church and led by the Spirit, it is now our responsibility to take steps forward that move us from this place of anger, pain, and frustration into a grace-filled space where greater wisdom may guide our future words and deeds” (Araujo-Hawkins 2023, 17). This episode is a reminder of the existing tension in relation to these kinds of biblical texts, scriptures that should be confronted, but with sensitivity and great care. In a letter to the editor, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann (2023, 7), retired from Columbia Presbyterian Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, opined,

> I understand, to whatever extent an old White man can, why the PCUSA exegesis exam on Judges 19 was, for some, traumatic and upsetting (news story,

> April). I can, however, think of two reasons why such a text must be in the purview of the church, in such an exam or elsewhere. First, the omission of it because it offends some people sounds strangely like the work of Governor Ron DeSantis (Florida), who wants to protect those upset by American history. Such a long-running silencing of such texts in the church produces a fantasy Bible (such as what we have in the lectionary) and in turn a fantasy church that dodges its hard work. It is important that we attend to our legacy in the church, including such texts, even if they must be handled with great pastoral sensibility. . . Second, this text at the end of the book of Judges intends to portray a society in which the rule of law has broken down because there is no king. We live in a society where the rule of law is under great threat. Such a text might help us to think seriously about the urgency of the rule of law and to identify more clearly those who crave lawlessness among us. I would hope that seminarians are surrounded by good teachers who can help them with the task of exegeting a difficult passage like this one.

Brueggemann's argument can be applied to every text discussed in this chapter. These graphic texts are avoided or ignored at the peril of those who will eventually need to address them appropriately. It is the duty of professionals in both the academy and the Church to struggle with these narratives so that they may be ready to engage in the challenging questions that will inevitably arise.

3.1.4 Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

"Leviticus, the name of the third book of the Pentateuch, has nothing to do with Levites. In Hellenistic times, the term 'Levites' meant priests, and this is what the Septuagint (Greek) and Vulgate (Latin) title *Levitikon* 'Leviticus' means" (Milgrom 1991, 1). In fact, Levites are only mentioned in one place 25:32-34 (Milgrom 1991, 1). While every priest was a Levite, not every Levite was a priest. Describing the content of the book, Milgrom (1991, 1) summarizes, "Leviticus includes such diverse matters as sacrifices, dietary regulations, ritual impurity, sexual relations, ethical precepts, the festival calendar, blasphemy, and the sabbatical and jubilee years" (see Levine 2022). It is no wonder the book is of such a highly critical nature, since its contents were foundational to every aspect of Israelite life. Commenting on the whole of the narrative, John E. Hartley (1992, xxix) affirms, "The Masoretic Text of Leviticus is a highly reliable text. As a part of the Pentateuch, the first part of the Hebrew Scriptures to be accepted as authoritative, it has been carefully copied from an earlier period."

The central concern of the book of Leviticus is a recurring theme, "Be holy, for I am holy!" (11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26). According to Meyer (2013a, 1) this book of laws is divided between Priestly texts (P; Lev 1-16) and the Holiness Code (H; Lev 17-26), a prescription of requirements for both the Israelites and the resident aliens in their midst, with chapter 17 serving as a "bridge" (Meyer 2012, 1) or transitional section. Meyer (2016, 98) opines, ". . . I understand Leviticus 17-26, or the Holiness Legislation, as a post-priestly text which was created in dialogue with older legal codes such as the Decalogue, the Covenant Code, the Deuteronomic Code and the Priestly Code, by means of a process of inner-biblical exegesis." Meyer (2016a, 98) adds, "Leviticus 17-26 is different from Leviticus 1-16 in the sense that it includes ethical issues which are mostly absent from the first sixteen chapters," though "much of this ethical content was generated in discussion with other legal codes. . ."

> . . . in the Holiness Legislation these ethical commands are integrated into the broader Priestly world view, where the cult and the rituals associated with the cult are still very much central. The Holiness Legislation is thus not only an attempt to move away from the cult to ethics, but rather more to integrate ethics into a worldview still very much dominated by the cult and its rituals. . . (Meyer 2016a, 98).

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. notes that the Hebrew root for "holy" appearing as an adjective, a noun, or a verb, occurs 150 times in Leviticus (Kaiser 1996, 985). Daniel A. Helminiak, who writes as a Roman Catholic priest, (1994, 46; also see 2000, *Millennium Edition*) declares, ". . . a main concern of the Holiness Code was to keep Israel distinct from (other tribes and clans)." The misconception about this book is that Leviticus was a prescription limited to the actions of the priests. While there are specific instructions to the priests, the corpus of the material contained within Leviticus addresses the behavior of the people. Jacob Milgrom (1991, 1) notes, “Although the focus of the book is on the priests, only a few laws are reserved for them alone” (i.e., 6:1-7:21; 10:8-15; 16:2-28). Milgrom (1991, 1) adds, “The reason is made apparent by the content.” The book calls on both priests and people to distinguish between the holy and the profane [common], between the clean and the unclean (Lev 10:10). Only by knowing the difference can the faithful make informed decisions about their behavior. Leviticus describes in detail prohibited actions, along with rules, regulations, processes, and protocols ordering Israelite living. For many biblical novices, this makes reading Leviticus a challenging exercise. That being acknowledged, Leviticus remains highly quotable, as do the two texts that indicate a presumably prohibitive ethic regarding homosexual relations. These verses are frequently taken out of context to condemn homosexual behavior. Leviticus, however, is clear in its general call for hospitable relations. Discussing Leviticus 19:33-34, Catherine Webb (2020, 12) observes, “In addition to this abundant hospitality, Dianne C. Kessler (2012, 377-378) sees Leviticus as the summation of a social system based upon reciprocal hospitality.”

> Leviticus 19 presents a set of behavioural rules as part of legal instructions for ANE (Ancient Near Eastern) Israelites in a post-exilic context. This chapter is found within the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26) and is considered to be a summary of core ideas that needed to be maintained in order to “enhance” and uphold Israelite identity in light of the fall of the Judean monarchy and a more diverse society. Lev 19:33-34 discusses the treatment of others and develops earlier ideas within the chapter. V. 18 exhorts the people to love their neighbour as themselves, whilst v. 14 specifically commands the Israelites to treat disabled people well. Additionally, v. 33 connects to v. 13, as both deal with the idea of oppression. Significantly, these rules are extended in vv. 33-34 so as to include non-Israelites (Webb 2020, 12-13; see Bosman 2018, 572, 575, 581).

The assumed dichotomy in the larger book is a reminder that texts should be read and interpreted based on the entire text rather than subjectively selecting isolated verses to make generalized points.

A general knowledge of background material is essential for understanding the context of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 that are a part of the Holiness Code (H) (Meyer 2013a, 1), texts that speak prohibitively about homosexuality. Leviticus 18, 19, and 20 are usually examined together because they are part of a larger section of the Holiness Code. Leviticus 20:13 is a repetition of a similar section that contains Leviticus 18:22, each one containing the prohibitive verses regarding heterosexuality. Leviticus 19 includes the admonition to respect or honor neighbor, with the command ". . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (Lev 19:18b). The only difference in the verses is in their ending. Leviticus 18:22 concludes with the declaration that "you shall not lie down on the place of a lying down of a woman" declaring that this act "is an abomination." Leviticus 20:13 ends with the indictment that not only is the act an abomination, but that the perpetrator "shall be put to death, their blood is upon them" (see Clines 2009, 485; Botterweck & Ringgren 1986, 591-604). As Gerstenberger (1996, 245) notes,

> These three chapters deal only marginally with cultic matters. Although their primary concern is with human daily life in its natural groupings, namely, the family and the local residential community, one might also presume that at the time of final redaction these natural groups were already integrated into the religious community of the postexilic period, since especially Leviticus 19 strongly emphasizes the holiness of the people or of the congregation of Yahweh as such. Chapters 18 and 20 are almost mirror-images of one another, containing comparable material differently developed.

Meyer (2016, 110-111) cites the work of Eve Feinstein (2014, 12-23) who,

> makes a lot of terms such as 'abhorrence.' . . . and 'abomination' . . . terms used in Holiness Legislation in chapter 18, but also in Leviticus 11 for forbidden foods. She also lists other verbs which describe a similar human response of

> disgust, which she formulates as follows: "to abominate, abhor, or revile something is to feel a sense of loathing toward it and to threat it in accordance with that feeling – to reject and shun it . . . The terms 'abominate,' 'abhor,' and 'revile' are examples of disgust language. As we shall see, terms for disgust are often used to describe certain physical elicitors, such as food and body products, as well as a wide variety of objectionable people, practices, and ideas.

The thrust of Meyer's (2016, 96) commentary in "regard to the pericope of Leviticus 19:23-25," which certainly informs surrounding texts, is that "there is a fair amount of debate about what 'uncircumcised', or actually 'foreskinned' . . . might mean, apart from the fact that the fruit cannot be eaten. . ." Obviously, there is a connection between the young fruit that should not be picked and the lack of circumcision of infant males, an indication of an abomination or violation that is certainly revealed in the sexual prohibitions listed in the Holiness Code. Perhaps this concern contains a subliminal commentary about human sexual relations.

Leviticus 18:22, which speaks to male-on-male sexual relations, is derived from a larger narrative detailing a variety of sexual taboo. This text seems to have a wider concern, keeping clear boundaries, making distinct a variety of practices traditionally associated with non-Israelite culture, particularly that of the Canaanites. Hartley (1992, 339) notes that "homosexuality is forbidden" and cites other biblical references to validate that prohibition (20:13; Rom 1:27; 1 Cor 6:9), adding that these acts are "something detestable. . . that God abhors," then citing Judges 19 as further evidence, seeming to ignore that these were efforts to enact violations associated with rape and not consensual sexual relations. Hartley (1992, 339) reiterates these concerns in his commentary on Leviticus 20:13, adding that "such an act carries the death penalty." Clements (1970, 55-56) suggests that "the previous inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, had been particularly perverse in their sexual practices, and this fact is presented as the divine justification for their expulsion and replacement by the Israelites." He adds that "the land itself could not tolerate the immoral habits and customs of these people. If the Israelites were to behave in the same way then they also would be vomited out by the land itself," a reaction to the principles of violating the natural order (Clements 1970, 56). Milgrom (2000, 1749) suggests that "this absolute ban on homosexuality contrasts strikingly with the Hellenistic and Roman world, where homosexuality was sanctioned with those of inferior status, such as slaves, foreigners, and youths." He notes that "those opposed to homosexual rights, in general, and to professing gays and lesbians in the military, in particular, have resorted to the biblical interdiction of their practice on pain and death" (Milgrom 2000, 1749). Milgrom cites an op-ed piece by James Michener who offers a rebuttal, using verse nine, "For everyone that curseth his father or his mother shall be surely put to death" to make his case, asking, "Would we be willing to require the death sentence for boys who in a fit of rage oppose their parents? How many of us would have been guilty of that act at some point in our upbringing?" (Milgrom 2000, 1749). Gerstenberger (1996, 254) notes, "for the ancient Israelite clans and their Canaanite or proto-Semitic predecessors, homosexuality—contrary to the prohibitions against mixing polar forces! (cf. Lev 19:19)—seemed dangerous," acts that would have been found under the heading of "abnormal," these kinds of relationships, though tolerated in some religious arenas, "have been condemned within the biblical tradition with varying severity even into the present." Balentine (2002, 158) suggests that Leviticus incorporates "an idiom used only for homosexual acts performed by heterosexuals," and that the ban only pertains to men. Further, he states that Leviticus "focuses . . . on heterosexual males performing homosexual acts with other males in the family unit, for example, nephew with uncle, grandson with grandfather (Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1786) [Balentine 2002, 159]. Of course, these prohibitions have been "regularly championed as a biblical mandate for the condemnation of homosexuality . . . the issue of homosexuality" long vexing "the religious conscience and moral scruples of the human community" (Balentine 2002, 158-159). Gerstenberger (1996, 297-298) acknowledges,

> The capital commination against male homosexuals has had catastrophic consequences (v. 13; cf. the discussion of Lev. 18:22). Sexual acts between members of the same sex have in part remained punishable offenses in the western legal tradition even today. Throughout church history, the biblical condemnation of homosexuality has led to a merciless persecution of or disdain for persons inclined or already disposed toward members of the same sex… Here, too, we encounter the discrepancy between public and ecclesiastically sanctioned opinion on the one hand, and actual sexual practice on the other. This is found not only here. We must after all ask just why the Old Testament excludes only male homosexuality. Were there no "lesbians" in Oriental antiquity of the sort described in the Greek legend? . . . The answer is probably more banal that this: Men were the ones creating these prescriptions concerning sexual life, and were the only, self-appointed specialists and judges… And yet homosexuality does not seem always to have been condemned this radically in Israel. . . David had a friend, Jonathan, Saul's son (1 Sam. 18:1-4), whose "love" was more valuable to him "than that of women" (2 Sam. 1:26). This emphasis on the key-word "love" in the tradition of David and Jonathan is noteworthy. . . It thus may be that in addition to his intensive relationships with eight primary women, David also cultivated a relationship with another man during his life.

In any case, ". . . in the view of the ancients, sodomy is not a private matter. It directly affects the welfare of the community . . ." (Gerstenberger 1996, 299). Procreation seems to be a determinant factor in all these prohibitions (Milgrom 2000, 1568). Kaiser, Jr. (1996, 1127) discusses the underlying concern in Leviticus 18:22.

> Homosexual behavior carries strong disapproval . . . perhaps because it too is connected with Canaanite practices . . . This verse labels it an "abomination," and it is included in the abominations condemned in vv. 26-30. The root from which *abomination* comes means "to hate" or "to abhor." . . . Homosexual behavior, until recently, has been regarded as an unnatural, perverted, or degenerate form of sexual relations by most Jewish-Christian morality. Many would argue that this reflects limited Israelite understanding and social context . . . and texts like Lev 18:22 are not to be considered eternally binding.

Gerstenberger (1996, 253) provides this commentary,

> Every community creates for itself a series of constitutive norms indirectly defined through prohibitives within the socialization process of young people (cf. the discussion of Lev. 19). For the ancient Israelite clans and their Canaanite or proto-Semitic predecessors, homosexuality . . . seemed dangerous. This presumably involved demonic fears, and all subsequent, more rational considerations concerning homosexuality (unnatural; anti-divine; obligation to procreate) are probably secondary.

The concern about nonheterosexual relations, what Helminiak calls "homogenital" relations, is framed by worship of the god Molek including a prohibition against child sacrifice (Lev 18:21) and bestiality, all of which seems mostly concerned about potential defilement and uncleanliness while maintaining ritual purity (Lev 18:23) (Helminiak 1994).

Jacob Milgrom seems to subordinate the details described in Leviticus, focusing more on the questionable assumptions that same sex relations was the defining event in both the Sodom and Gomorrah and Gibeah stories (Milgrom 2000, 1565). However**,** Milgrom never acknowledges the larger context of the two legal chapters involved, and thus ignores the broader ethical issues germane to each text. Disempowerment through the act of homosexual rape may be described in these narratives, but it is not the issue that leads to condemnation and retribution. Milgrom reminds his reader that the challenges presented by nonheterosexual behavior throughout the Near East are endemic to various cultures in the region. Nikki Black (2018, 1), cites the 1948 research of Alfred Kinsey, an American sexologist and researcher, who "concluded that an average of 1 in 10 people in the world are gay." The same would have held true in the ancient world despite the limited acceptance and understanding regarding issues surrounding human sexuality. Considering Egyptian mythology, and Hittite and Assyrian legislation, Milgrom notes, ". . . the difference between the biblical legislation and other Near Eastern laws must not be overlooked: the Bible allows for no exceptions; all acts of sodomy are prohibited . . ." (Milgrom 2000, 1566). Milgrom proposes several possible reasons for this prohibition, including idolatry; blurring of boundaries; wasting of male seed; and mixing of semen with other defiling liquids, though significant debate about these claims remains. Milgrom (2000, 1566) adds,

> Olyan's own explanation is based on his theory that our verse comprises two layers: an earlier one in which only the insertive partner is addressed, and the receptive partner (in 20:13) is not punished or even mentioned. His second layer is that "the laws of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 in their final setting may well be part of a wider effort to prevent the mixture of semen and other defiling agents in the bodies of receptive women, men, and animals, mixing those results in the defilement of the individual involved" (1994, 205) . . . The common denominator of all the prohibitions, I submit, is that they involve the emission of semen for the purpose of copulation, resulting in either incest and illicit progeny or, as in this case, lack of progeny (or its destruction in the case of Molek worship, v. 21). In a word, the theme (with Ramban) is procreation. This rationale fully complements (and presupposes) P's laws of 15:16-18. Semen emission per se is not forbidden; it just defiles, but purificatory rites must follow. But in certain cases of sexual congress, it is strictly forbidden, and severe consequences must follow (Milgrom 2000, 1567).

Milgrom (1991, 1568) argues that "Female sexual relations are nowhere prohibited in Scripture, nor anywhere else (to my knowledge) in the ancient Near East." Despite Milgrom's assertion, the apostle Paul alludes to lesbianism in a negative way in Romans (Martin 2020, 637-653). Back to his initial argument, Milgrom asserts, "The *legal* reason for interdicting anal intercourse . . . is the waste . . . of seed . . . which, in the case of lesbianism, does not occur" (Milgrom 2000, 1568).

> Finally, it is imperative to draw the logical conclusion of this discussion for our time. If my basic thesis is correct that the common denominator of the entire list of sexual prohibitions, including homosexuality, is procreation within a stable family, then a consolatory and compensatory remedy is at hand for Jewish gays (non-Jews, unless they live within the boundaries of biblical Israel, are not subject to these laws; . . .): if gay partners adopt children, they do not violate the *intent* of the prohibition. The question can be asked: Why didn't the biblical legist propose this remedy? The answer simply is that this option was not available, since ancient Israel did not practice adoption. . . (Milgrom 2000, 1568).

The statements expressed by Milgrom reveal the conundrum associated with any exegesis when literal interpretation becomes an overriding concern. From Milgrom's perspective the Holiness Code as prescribed in Leviticus outright prohibits male homosexual activity but fails to define the parameters of the behavior. Milgrom cites Olyan, noting that *miškĕbĕ 'iššâ* is a technical term, the plural always found within the context of illicit carnal relations, "all illicit cohabitations," and the singular implying licit relations (Milgrom 2000, 1569). This phrase only occurs in Leviticus 18 and 20.

> Thus since illicit carnal relations are implied by the term *miškĕbĕ 'iššâ*, it may be plausibly suggested that homosexuality is herewith forbidden for only the equivalent degree of forbidden heterosexual relations, namely, those enumerated in the preceding verses (D. Stewart). However, sexual liaisons occurring with males outside these relations would not be forbidden. And since the same term *miškĕbĕ 'iššâ* is used in the list containing sanctions (20:13), it would mean that sexual liaisons with males, falling outside the control of the paterfamilias, would be neither condemnable nor punishable. Thus *miškĕbĕ 'iššâ,* referring to illicit male-male relations, and the literal meaning of our verse is: do not have sex with a male with whose widow sex is forbidden. In effect, this means that the homosexual prohibition applies to Ego with father, son, and brother (subsumed in v. 6) and to grandfather—grandson, uncle-nephew, and stepfather—stepson, but not to any other male (Milgrom 1991, 1569).

Milgrom (2000, 1569) adds that the word for abomination, *tô 'ēbâ*, occurs 116 times in the Hebrew Bible and is used to describe a variety of offenses, many of them sexual in nature. Each instance indicates a breach of cleanliness, i.e., ritual purity. In his commentary, N. H. Snaith defines *tô 'ēbāh* and then categorizes this term, found in Leviticus 18:22, as commensurate with idolatrous actions connected with the cults of other gods, linking this verse with the preceding one that discusses children dedicated to temple prostitution (Snaith 1967, 126). He then concludes, "Thus homosexuality here is condemned on account of its association with idolatry" (Snaith 1967, 126). Regarding Leviticus 20:13, Snaith observes that "the Hebrew term *tô 'ēbāh* is a wide one, and means 'repugnant', an offense in the sense of being an offense against both God and man. It is used of various objectionable actions, especially when idolatrous actions are involved . . . but no one is quite sure what the Hebrew term means" (Snaith 1967, 126).

Perhaps, in the most comprehensive analysis of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Bruce Wells commentary describes this text in detail. He acknowledges that "the Hebrew Bible has little to say about homosexuality," and that the two verses under consideration "address only the matter of male homosexual relations," the statements taking "the form of rules or laws" that "appear within lists of sexual prohibitions mostly, but not exclusively, having to do with incest" (Lipka & Wells 2020, 123-124). Wells Lipka & Wells 2020, 124) also acknowledges that these texts "have been interpreted by most readers as blanket prohibitions on sex between men." In his synopsis of these two verses, the intention established by Wells is to contest the standard translation of this specific phrase and the usual interpretation that accompanies it, his intent on "both philological and contextual grounds" (Lipka & Wells 2020, 124). Wells argues that the adverbial accusative phrase "to lie" traditionally has the conventional understanding of "manner" or "mode" in the "act of lying," which he suggests is incorrect. His preference suggests "manner and those of location," which in terms of language creates a very different interpretation (Lipka & Wells 2020, 128). Wells (Lipka & Wells 2020, 130) cites Walsh, who "concludes that the main clause in these two verses refers to one who 'lies . . . the lying down of a woman'—that is, one who lies down as a woman would lie down." Thus, Walsh argues that these laws are addressed to a male who is the receiving (penetrated) partner in a male-with-male sexual relationship, and the prohibition seeks to prevent him from lying down in such a way as to be penetrated by another male" (Lipka & Wells 2020, 130). The straightforward translation thus "would be, taking into account its adverbial function, 'on the beds of a woman.' In this case, Lev. 18:22 would read, "And with a male you shall not lie on the beds of a woman; it is an abomination" (Lipka & Wells 2020, 132). He also cites Olyan in his 1994 article, who observes that the "conclusion is essentially this: the specific act referenced by the two verses is sexual intercourse that entails anal penetration by a male Israelite of any other male Israelite. 'Other sexual acts' between two men, says Olyan, lie outside the scope of these prohibitions" (Lipka & Wells 2020, 133-134). "For Olyan, then, the two texts from Leviticus are directing their comments primarily at the man who experiences 'the lying of a woman' with another man—i.e., he experiences the receptivity of the other man. He is the addressee of the law, and it is his act that the texts primarily prohibit" (Lipka & Wells 2020, 135). An issue at stake is the assumed prohibition in the text that a man is not to have sex with the husband of a woman, an act that would violate the covenant of marriage. "Such a line of reasoning might suggest that the prohibitions on male-with-male sex are intended to forbid sex simply with married men," Wells noting that external evidence supports the idea that a married woman had some control over the sexual exploits of her husband (Lipka & Wells 2020, 146-147). Wells (Lipka & Wells 2020, 151-152) summarizes,

> The laws of Leviticus 18 and 20 are addressed principally to men . . . According to my reading of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13, these texts were intended to prevent men . . . from sleeping with another male (זכר) who had a particular relationship with a woman (אשה) within the community. Any married male was forbidden, as well as younger males who were under the guardianship of such a woman. Should a man have sex, for example, with a male slave, he would not violate these prohibitions because the slave is neither married nor under a woman's guardianship. Furthermore, one should not necessarily assume that the man who slept with the slave has violated the rights of his own wife. Just as a husband who sleeps with a female slave or a female prostitute did not . . . so a man who sleeps with a male slave would not be deemed to have transgressed against his wife. Moreover, the slave would not be considered a violator because the laws were not addressed to slaves, and any such slave would be subject to whatever punishment his master deemed suitable.

Wells suggests that while scholars have offered a variety of perspectives on the questions raised by these texts, that they are simply an expansion of the commentary originating with the Ten Commandments regarding individual defilement, “one idea with several proponents” being “that these provisions sought to reinforce the gender boundaries and functions that H’s authors believed were right and proper and that would meet with favor from YHWH,” all of which led to a generally assumed prohibition of sexual contact between two men . . .” (Lipka & Wells 2020, 153). He also allows that “it is not unreasonable to consider the prohibition on male-with-male sex (whether qualified according to my arguments above or not) to be part of the set of comparatively new regulations added by the authors of these texts” (Likpa & Wells 2020, 154). Wells (Lipka & Wells 2020, 153) adds that “it is widely acknowledged that some of the prohibitions appear to be in conflict with traditions known from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible”. Wells (Lipka & Wells 2020, 156) concludes his argument regarding who may sleep with whom from the perspective of Leviticus, making several points while noting that “it means that the men with whom the law’s addressees may not have sex are qualified as males who are off limits by virtue of a relationship that they have with a particular woman. Sex with married men, therefore, would be forbidden as well as sex with any males who are under the guardianship of a woman within the community.”

> Whether or not this reasoning is congruent with the rationale(s) behind the other sexual taboos in chs. 18 and 20 remains to be answered. I have suggested that the emphasis in H on sexual boundaries may stem from concerns about group solidarity and distinctiveness. The rhetoric of the text emphasizes purity concerns, but the language regarding the need to behave differently from particular groups of foreigners may signal that additional considerations are motivating the authors to connect these rules with purity requirements. In any event, H seeks to establish strict boundaries around sexual activity of its community’s members and is specific about the individuals with whom a man may not engage sexually. Every person who is considered off limits is qualified in some way by the text, and, for male individuals who are taboo, that qualification comes with the phrase משכבי אשה (on the beds of a woman).

Esias E. Meyer references the apparent inconsistencies in Leviticus, specifically addressing issues named in the earlier Priestly (P) first half (Lev 1-16), juxtaposed to those found in the second half, which comprises the Holiness Code (H) (Lev 17-26), which was an older collection. Specifically, for the concerns of the current research in biblical/theological hospitality, Meyer discusses the second half which describes the dichotomy that existed between the Israelites' relationship to fellow Israelites and their relationship to strangers. Meyer (2015, 102) offers the reminder that the laws established for the Israelites were intended for the strangers who live among them as well. They are included in these obligations. He observes, "One could describe this as not meaning a 'turn to the other' as long as one qualifies this as not meaning a 'turn away from the cult'" (Meyer 2013a, 2). He cites J. J. Collins (2004, 151) who astutely declares, "The code does not lessen the importance of ritual and purity regulations, but it puts them in perspective by alternating them with ethical commandments. Holiness is not only a matter of being separated from the nations. It also requires ethical behavior toward one's fellow human beings" (Meyer 2013a, 2; Collins 2004, 151). Meyer (2015, 99) observes that "the struggle between the Israelites and the *gērim* depicted in these texts was . . . actually an inner-Judean power struggle between those who returned from exile and those who never left." Meyer notes that the concept of holiness is found in both halves of Leviticus, though they are distinct concepts as articulated within the two sections. Meyer (2013a, 2). points out that,

> In the second half of Leviticus, there is a movement away from this "narrow cultic focus" to broader issues. This movement is not really evident in Leviticus 17, which is usually regarded as the first chapter of the Holiness Code. Chapter 17 forbids profane slaughter and the eating of blood. This chapter is often regarded as a kind of hinge between the preceding half of Leviticus and the subsequent Holiness Code (see Meyer 2012). One community-related concern which now comes to the fore is the relation between the Israelite and the stranger (*gēr)*. Strangers are also forbidden to carry out profane slaughter and

> they may not consume blood either. The strangers actually appeared for the first time in the previous chapter (Lev 16), where they are also forbidden to work on the 7th day of the 10th month. In the rest of the Holiness Code, we find a clear communal focus in some texts, such as especially Leviticus 18-20 and also in chapter 25. Chapters 18 and 20 are concerned with sexual taboos, but especially in an extended family context, whereas chapter 19 is a strange mix of various kinds of legal texts, some reminiscent of the more cultic texts in the first half of Leviticus interested in both sacrifice and purity issues, whilst others remind us of the Decalogue and still others have been described as promoting "social justice".

Meyer (2015, 100) describes the *gēr* as "someone who comes from outside Israel or Judah and eventually settles there." Meyer's remarks remind the reader that aliens, foreigners, or strangers assimilated into the native population were considered part of the community and were expected to abide by the rules and regulations put forth by the cult of the Israelites. In answering the question as to whether it is possible to learn "anything from how the authors of the book of Leviticus thought that they and their addressees should treat the strangers in their midst," his "answer is a rather surprising 'yes'" (Meyer 2015, 100). He points out that "the noun *gēr* appears twenty-one times in the second half of Leviticus," clearly showing an emphasis on the stranger (Meyer 2015, 100). In terms of a socially just society, Meyer (2013a, 2) continues to flesh out this idea,

> It is especially the latter two categories, namely texts reminding us of the Decalogue and texts that are concerned with "social justice", which are described as more "ethical". Balentine (2002, 169) describes the laws of Leviticus 19 as "social ethics". Decalogue-like texts include Leviticus 19:3, 4, 11, 12, 16, 18 and 29. Texts that are often described as addressing issues of "social justice" include especially verses 11-18 in which one finds commandments against keeping the day labourer's wages until morning, or putting a stumbling block in the way of a blind person, cursing the deaf and being partial in judgement. These laws are aimed at protecting the vulnerable in society, the kind of thing one finds in some of the Latter Prophets. One also finds laws protecting your neighbour from slander and from being hated by the addressees, but instead addressees are commanded to love (vv. 17-18) their neighbours as themselves, an injunction made famous by Jesus. Similar commands are again found in verses 33-34, which forbid the addressees to

> oppress the stranger and, once again, the addressees are asked to love the stranger as themselves.

Meyer reminds his reader of the primacy of ancient hospitality inherent in these texts, though he might not choose to use that exact language. It is interesting to note, specifically regarding Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, and the host of other prohibitions cited in these ancient writings, that Jesus quotes none of them, either a significant omission or a key indicator that they were not important to his overarching message of socially just love. According to Richard Rohr (2018-2019, 56) alluding to the text cited by Meyer, Jesus' only quote from Leviticus is 19:18, "the one positive mandate among long lists of negative ones: "You must love your neighbor as yourself." The *gērim* are understood to be a part of the poor, those who are in need, and thus they are protected and treated as if they are a fellow Israelite (Meyer 2015, 103). While the motive might have been to assure that the Israelites kept their land, the result was nonetheless the same (Meyer 2015, 105-106). Even so, the *gērim* were not "included in the quest for holiness," and thus distinctions were kept in their incorporation into the cultic life of Israel (Meyer 2015, 113). Hartley (1992, 322) notes,

> The people are not to חונה, "mistreat" or "oppress" (cf. 25:14, 17; Exod 22:20 [2d1]; Deut 23:17 [16]; Jer 22:3; Ezek 45:8; 46:18), foreigners residing in Israel. Since aliens are ignorant of local customs, standards, prices, etc., and since they have little recourse in a dispute except for the honor of the host people, they are subject to all kinds of schemes devised to take advantage of them. Israelites, however, are to have special regard for strangers. They are to love them as persons like themselves (cf. v 18), and they are to treat them like אזרת, "natives." אזרת means "one born at home, a nation." This command to love is motivated by Israel's remembering that they had been resident aliens in Egypt. This motivation underscores the common human bond between aliens and Israelites.

Once again, the intent and purpose of these carefully designed rubrics was the maintaining of cleanliness and ritual purity, an accomplishment achieved by refraining from behaviors that mimicked the neighboring tribes and clans in any way whatsoever, particularly the Canaanites whose land they had seized. Helminiak (1994, 46) describes the differences that defined the pagan world. He reminds his reader that even among the resident aliens that they were not to worship foreign deities, specifically naming,

> . . . the Canaanite god, Molech, are other alleged Canaanite practices listed in this section of the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code prohibits all those acts. It calls them "abominations. . ." The point is that The Holiness Code of Leviticus prohibits male same-sex acts because of religious considerations, not because of sexual ones.

Helminiak provides an interesting summary of the challenges in interpreting and understanding Leviticus 18:22. He says,

> The situation in ancient Israel was very different from our own. Except under unusual circumstances, sex in our culture plays no role in religious rituals. No sex today, gay or straight, has the religious associations (or connotations) to which Leviticus objected. So the Leviticus code is irrelevant for deciding whether gay sex is right or wrong. Though the Hebrew Testament certainly did not forbid male homogenital activity, its reasons for forbidding it have no bearing on today's discussion of homosexuality (Helminiak 1994, 46).

It appears that what Helminiak intended to convey is that, in the instances where homosexuality is condemned, its relevance to today's contemporary setting is lacking. He then declares,

> This examination of homogenital acts in Leviticus provides a useful reminder. Rules of etiquette and courtesy and accepted social conventions are necessary for the harmonious functioning of society. Much of what we do or avoid in public depends on what is socially acceptable or unacceptable. To attend to this matter is part of being a virtuous person—or, said religiously, part of being a good Jew or a good Christian or a good member of any religion. . . On the other hand, social conventions and taboos are always shifting and changing. Indeed, when conventions are misguided, unreasonable or oppressive, they ought to be changed, and change in these matters often entails heated debate and outright conflict (Helminiak 1994, 54).

Leviticus indicates an emerging and evolving belief in Israelite culture that homosexual activity was unclean and thus prohibited. The main concern seems to have been maintaining ritual purity and refraining from any behavior inherent in Canaanite or other pagan cultures. In addition, the need to procreate and populate the Promised Land was a vital concern. Perhaps the rubric prohibiting masturbation, a stipulation based in the procreative concern that a man not waste his seed, stemmed from concern for future generations (Gen 38:9; Lev 15:16-17).

The problem with contemporary interpretations that perpetuate Holiness Code prescriptions is that a consistent biblical hermeneutic is rarely, if ever, employed in making the case. Many requirements governing Israelite life during this period seem obsolete and irrelevant in the twenty-first century. Even so, may Christians believe that it is acceptable to pull these two verses from Leviticus out of context and use them to defend a narrow point of view on the subject. This allows the biblical interpreter to piece together isolated texts that provide only a glimpse of a larger and more complex narrative regarding the cultural milieu surrounding sexual ethics of the time. A parallel can be observed that the Apostle Paul would encounter similar practices on his missionary journeys as the evangelist traveled throughout the Hellenistic world. His viewpoints on human sexuality echoed prohibitions named in the Hebrew Bible as he raised concerns about what he perceived to be sexual impropriety.

3.1.5 Romans 1:21, 26, and 27

Günther Bornkamm (1971, 96) declares that the epistle of Paul to the Romans "is not a general theological treatise. Like all the rest of Paul's letters, it bears on actual events." The apostle is dealing with reality as he finds it, knowing that his past experiences are informing his present and future predicaments (see Levine 2022).

> This is the reason why in this, the greatest of his letters, Paul says so much about himself, about his conversion and call, his life and work, the gospel which he proclaimed and the battles he had to fight, and also about his theology. Romans not only tells us the questions and experiences that made Paul a Christian, the servant of Christ, and the apostle to the Gentiles. It also shows how he worked at his ideas and their effects upon himself . . . Historically, Romans may be described as Paul's testament. But that does not mean that he composed it deliberately as a last declaration of his will before his death. Actually, he was

> still hoping to be able to start on his great missionary work in the west . . . In actual fact, if not literally, (however) the letter is his last will and testament. Paul's anxieties were all too well grounded . . . Romans tells us of the storms brewing at the time of Paul's departure for Jerusalem. This, as it turned out, was the beginning of the end. . . (Bornkamm 1971, 96-97).

Of the numerous epistles that Paul addressed to various churches, Romans is probably the most comprehensive work, detailing a vast inventory about the apostle's life and thought processes, along with the beliefs that framed his theology, including his complex views on human sexuality. Ernst Käsemann (1969, 249-250), describes the religious significance of Paul, declaring,

> Thus Paul remains confined in seven letters and for the most part unintelligible to posterity, not only to the ancient Church and the Middle Ages. However, whenever he is rediscovered—which happens almost exclusively in times of crisis—there issues from him explosive power . . . It is never long, to be sure, until orthodoxy and enthusiasm again master this Paul and banish him once more to his letters. However, the church continues to preserve his letters in her canon and thereby latently preserves . . . the one who for the most part only disturbs her.

Critiquing Paul's writings and subsequently his theology, Charles H. Talbert cites the work of Ernest Renan at the conclusion of *The History of the Origins of Christianity, Book III: Saint Paul.* Renan summarizes his estimation of the apostle.

> After having been for three hundred years the Christian doctor in an eminent degree, thanks to orthodox Protestantism, Paul seems in our day near the end of his reign: Jesus, on the contrary, is more living than ever. It is no more the Epistle to the Romans which is the recapitulation of Christianity, it is the Sermon on the Mount. True Christianity which will last eternally comes from the Gospels, not from the Epistles of Paul. The writings of Paul have been a danger and a stumbling block, the cause of the chief faults of Christian theology. Paul is the father of the subtle Augustine, of the arid Thomas Aquinas, of the sombre Calvinist, of the bitter Jansenist, of the ferocious theology which condemns and predestines to damnation (Talbert 2002, 1).

Talbert (2002, 1) acknowledges, "The distaste of people like Renan for Paul in the nineteenth century has its parallels today. Paul is often dismissed both for his theology and for his ethics. On the one hand, his theology runs counter to the dominant cultural trends. For many persons it is easier to adapt the historians' Jesus to the norms of political correctness than Paul. . ." Helminiak continues to set the stage for this discussion of Romans. He notes,

> There is only one Christian Bible text that actually discusses homogenital acts at any length. It occurs in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. This is the famous text from which people get the notion that gay sex is "unnatural." This is also the text from which they argue that venereal diseases—and today, HIV disease—are punishment for homogenital activity. This may also be the only Bible text that mentions lesbian sex. But considering to whom Paul is writing, how he is making his point, and to what end, all these conclusions seem to be wrong (Helminiak 1994, 61).

C. H. Dodd (1932, XIII) describes "The Epistle to the Romans" as "the first great work of Christian theology." Richard Bennett Sims (1973, 20) declares, "The Epistle to the Romans was written as a Christian manifesto by a veteran disciple who was committed to the fulfillment of his divine commission in Jesus Christ." Dodd then provides a key insight to the content driving Paul's theological convictions. Dodd (1932, XIII) says, "From the time of Augustine it had immense influence on the thought of the West, not only in theology, but also in philosophy and even in politics, all through the Middle Ages." N. T. Wright (1996) asserts, "Romans is neither a systematic theology nor a summary of Paul's lifework, but it is by common consent his masterpiece" (Kaiser 1996, 395). As to influence there can be no doubt about the role that imperial Rome played in shaping theology in general, and the moral compass, in the life of congregations of every stripe. This idea is most clearly revealed in Paul's detailed discussion about sexual ethics. A case could be made that Paul almost seems to have a fixation on human sexuality, to the point of obsessing on the subject. (For an overview offering a perspective on the evolution of nonheterosexuality in the Bible, culminating with what some scholars to be a presumed misinterpretation of a specific Greek term within the Pauline epistles, see White 2019). In 2 Corinthians 12:6-7 Paul speaks of his "thorn in the flesh" that he describes in theological terms. Many scholars have speculated as to the nature of this "thorn." Was he short or bald or fat? Did he walk with a limp? Was it physical? Or was it emotional or psychological? Some have suggested that this affliction was of a sexual nature, perhaps even of a homosexual kind (Spong 1992, 117-125; see Martin 2020, 637-653 for a full treatise on Paul and human sexuality). This theory is certainly mere conjecture and speculation, no empirical evidence to suggest this to be fact (Martin 2020, 638). There simply is no evidence indicating what the nature of his thorn might have been. All that is available are Paul's words, his testimonial that it was a matter of significance and never diminished during his lifetime.

Spong (1988, 149), providing background for the epistle, notes that Paul wrote Romans during a winter spent in Corinth.

> The Epistle to the Romans was written sometime before the year 58 C.E. The division in the Roman Christian community was uppermost in the mind of Paul as he wrote. In an attempt at reconciliation, he made an appeal for God from nature that was universal and not bound to the Jewish heritage (Rom. 1:20ff.). He also made an appeal for the primacy of the Jews in God's plan of salvation (Rom. 9-11) . . . It was within his apologia for universality that the verses that seem to condemn homosexuality were included.

The purpose of the epistle was to stress the absolute righteousness of God. Kaiser cites Wright (1996) who describes the meaning undergirding Paul's argument as the apostle sought to bring peace and harmony to the local congregation as the tenets of traditional Judaism intersected with the lifestyles commiserate with Hellenistic cultures, alien ways of life that would indeed have been out of bounds, taboo and unacceptable to any law observing Jew. He says,

> The phrase 'the righteousness of God" (δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ *dikaiosynē theou*) summed up sharply and conveniently, for a first-century Jew such as Paul, the expectation of the God of Israel, often referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures by the name YHWH, would be faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs.

> Many Jews of Paul's day saw Israel's story, including the biblical story but bringing it up to their own day, as a story still in search of a conclusion—a conclusion to be determined by the faithfulness of their God. As long as Israel remained under the rule of pagans, the great promises made by this God to the patriarchs, and through the prophets, had still not been fulfilled (Kaiser 1996, 398).

There seems to be a dichotomy or inconsistency at work in Paul's argument, as the apostle makes a case for trusting in the righteousness of God as a precursor to faith while holding on to the rubrics of the law as explicitly expressed in the Book of Leviticus. It is as if Paul is searching for a middle ground that will satisfy both a traditional formulation and a contemporary Christian understanding. As Talbert (2002, 1) notes, "The Apostle Paul . . . occupies a tenuous position within the canon of many modern people. In the nineteenth century his detractors were legion." Other than those not so veiled concerns, Renan perhaps had no other issue with Paul's letters. As Talbert (2002, 1) notes, "The distaste of people like Renan for Paul in the nineteenth century has its parallels today. Paul is often dismissed both for his theology and for his ethics. While Talbert may have been an early voice to offer these critical words of warning, he certainly has not been the last. Talbert (2002, 1) goes on to say in critiquing the critics,

> On the one hand, his theology runs counter to the dominant cultural trends. For many persons it is easier to adapt the historians' Jesus to the norms of political correctness than Paul. His teaching about justification apart from law is often viewed as a doctrinaire directed against Judaism. If he abrogated the Law, then he abrogated Judaism, so the argument goes. The Paul who advocated a law-free gospel is, therefore, wrongly regarded as anti-Jewish.

Renan then cites Francis Watson who answers this question posed by Renan: "Consider the following rhetorical question (with an assumed answer of NO): "Can a Paul who devotes his energies to the creation and maintaining of sectarian groups hostile to all non-members, and especially to the Jewish community from which in fact they derived, still be seen as the bearer of a message with profound universal significance?" (Talbert 2002, 1). This question leads to the heart of the matter, as Talbert affirms, "On the other hand, a misreading of Pauline positions of women and a correct reading of Paul's stance on homosexuality have gained him the hatred of many feminists and prohomosexual advocates" (Talbert 2002, 1). It must be acknowledged, however, that certain commentary in the epistles about women in the Christian scriptures are found in letters that were anonymously written (1 Tim 2:12) but are credited to Paul's hand, the one exception being his admonition that "women should be silent in churches (1 Cor 14:34-35). Many writers today speak of an apparent dichotomy between the teachings of Jesus and those of Paul. It is a fair accusation as Renan's sources are historically identified with conservative/evangelical theology. It is true that the apostle Paul never knew Jesus, though he certainly interacted with some of Jesus' disciples, particularly Peter, with whom he had great disagreement (Gal 2:11-14). While it is safe to assume that the two apostles would have had intense and intimate christological and theological conversations, there is no documentation available to confirm that theory. An objective reading of the Christian scriptures supports the view that there is a certain level of discrepancy between the themes forming the essence of Jesus' gospel message and the musings of Paul, a former Pharisee whose thinking was certainly in transition. Regarding biblical texts prohibiting nonheterosexual behavior, the Gospels are silent on the subject. Nowhere does Jesus provide any commentary on the issue.

Talbert suggests there needs to be a rehabilitation of Paul in contemporary churches, employing what he calls the "long view" in reclaiming the veracity of Paul's message. He cites New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann, who he claims has categorized "the real" Paul's religious significance.

> This Paul remains confined in seven letters and for the most part unintelligible to posterity, not only to the ancient Church and the Middle Ages. However,

> whenever he is rediscovered—which happens almost exclusively in times of crisis—there issues from him explosive power. . . It is never long, to be sure, until orthodoxy and enthusiasm again master this Paul and banish him once more to his letters. However, the church continues to preserve his letters in her canon and thereby latently preserves . . . the one who for the most part only disturbs her (Talbert, 1).

Talbert quotes church Sydney Ahlstrom who describes Paul's theological influence in this way. "Just as the European philosophical tradition, in Whitehead's famous phrase, consists of a series of footnotes to Plato, so Christian theology is a series of footnotes to Paul" (Talbert 2002, 1). Talbert reminds his reader of the numerous people of note who throughout history have been significantly impacted by Paul's words, specifically citing Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Dumitru Cornilescu, and Karl Barth, among no doubt, countless others. Rather than taking sides in this Pauline debate, perhaps the best solution is found in taking Paul's directives at face value while understanding them, as with all the biblical narrative, to be time-bound texts reflecting the knowledge of the day along with the cultural milieu into which they were written. After all, no matter one's opinion on this controversial, divisive, and polarizing figure, his writings have already withstood the test of time and no doubt, will continue to do so. This acknowledgment allows the contemporary interpreter the freedom to exegete these texts against the advances of scientific discovery and the natural evolutionary processes, societal and otherwise, that impact the human species. With that debate clearly stated, attention now turns to the specific verses of scripture from Romans that address nonheterosexual activity.

Talbert suggests that undergirding the major thrust of Romans advocating the righteousness of God is the fact that "Idolatry, moreover, leads to immorality" (Talbert 2002, 64). As Hellenistic Jews encountered the pagan culture of the Roman world, they were highly offended at the behavior they witnessed. To paraphrase and perhaps misuse a saying attributed to Ambrose, "Don't do as the Romans do" would have been the sober response to the rampant reprobation clearly on display by the citizens of Rome. According to Talbert (2002, 64), “Hellenistic Judaism contended that idolatry was the essence of the human predicament, not fate as ancient pagans believed.” It is into this dilemma that the apostle Paul injects both his traditional theological underpinnings based on the law and his newfound faith in Jesus. At the vortex of what was a wide-ranging debate on a variety of societal ills, Paul’s admonishments on sexuality are front and center, with same sex acts noted as particularly grievous sins.

Romans 1:21 is often cited as one of the prohibitive texts regarding nonheterosexual behavior. Verse 21 reads, “. . . For although they knew God they did not honor (God) as God or give thanks to (God), but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.” This verse is part of a larger narrative in which Paul makes his argument against immorality, but at this point does not name any specific transgression that is counter to the “righteousness of God.” Joseph Fitzmyer, who provides his own in-depth, comprehensive analysis of the issue, ties all these admonitions to the practices of pagans, certainly a focus of Paul’s concerns (Fitzmyer 1993, 281). It seems that a major component factoring into Paul’s rationale is that anything that resembles the activities commiserate with pagan culture is taboo and off limits. It is the same idea articulated in the Holiness Code detailed in Leviticus. Fitzmyer notes, “In other words, says Paul here, human wisdom among pagans did not come to a proper knowledge of God. Cf. Eph 1:17. What is denied in these passages is the real, affective knowledge of God that includes love, praise, reverence, and thanksgiving” (Fitzmyer 1993, 281). Of course, in only a few short verses Paul will begin to delineate the exact sins he claims are displeasing to God. In Romans 1:26-28 Paul addresses the issue of nonheterosexual relations, with verse 27 providing the clearest demonstrative prohibition. Fitzmyer (1993, 285) declares,

> The contrast between "women" and "males" in vv 26-27 shows that the "disgraceful passions" of which Paul speaks are the sexual perversion of homosexual activity. The depravity involved in such conduct is the merited consequence of pagan impiety and idolatry. Having exchanged a true God for a false one (1:25), pagans inevitably exchanged their true natural functions for perverted ones (cf. *De Abr.* 135; *De spec. leg.* 2.50; 3.37; and *T. Joseph* 7.8).

Fitzmyer confirms that in his analysis of the proclivities of these women, that he "is thinking of lesbian conduct" (Fitzmyer 1993, 286). He then points out that, "Paul thus insinuates the guilty nature of such conduct, for he uses of it the same verb as of idolatry in vv 23, 25. The noun *chrēsis*, lit., 'use,' is often used to describe sexual 'intercourse'" (Fitzmyer 1993, 286). Fitzmyer then notes that, "The noun *physis*, 'nature,' which occurs in the OT only in the Greek deuterocanonical books . . . occurs here for the first time" (Fitzmyer 1993, 286). He adds,

> Thus, *kata physin*, denotes living or existing in harmony with the native or natural order of things, a peculiarly Greek, especially Stoic, idea (*TDNT* 9.271, 264-65). This Hellenistic philosophical notion has colored Paul's thinking, but in the context of vv 19-23, "nature" also expresses for him the order intended by the Creator, the order that is manifest in God's creation or, specifically in this case, the order seen in the function of sexual organs themselves, which were ordained for an expression of love between man and woman and for the procreation of children. Paul now speaks of the deviant exchange of those organs as a use *para physin*. *Ep. Arist.* 152 implies that such unnatural sexual practices were characteristic of "most of the rest of mankind" or of "whole countries and cities," but not of the Jewish people: "we have been set apart from these things." Indeed, Josephus mentions that "the law [of Moses] knows no sexual connection but the natural intercourse with a wife (*tēn kata physin tēn pros gynaika)*, and that only for the procreation of children. . ." (Fitzmyer 1993, 286).

At this point the argument can be made that what was natural for some was unnatural for others and that Paul's worldview did not allow for that viewpoint. Surely there were many divergent contextual norms giving definition to both Israelite/Jewish and Hellenistic/gentile cultures. Spong (1988, 149) notes, "For Paul, nature was not separate from God but was rather a creation of God. He was not suggesting that there was a natural norm that was broken by homosexuality, but rather that homosexuality was itself a punishment meted out to those who rejected the God of creation."

> Homosexuality was thus for Paul not the sin but the punishment. The sin was unfaithfulness. This text was an indictment against faithlessness, with the suggestion that it would be punished with the identity confusion that manifested itself in homosexuality. If human beings could not discern the true God, they would be punished with undiscerning minds that would not discern other vital distinctions. It was an unnatural act for a heterosexual person to engage in homosexual behavior, he argued. He did not or perhaps could not imagine a life in which the affections of a male might be naturally directed to another male (Spong 1988, 150).

Based on his tradition, Paul clearly had a sexual paradigm at work that did not allow for nonheterosexual relations (Martin 2020). In the Hellenistic world nonheterosexual relationships were more commonplace, even accepted to a degree. It might be argued that the Hellenistic world, particularly with its Greek influence, had a broader mindset regarding human sexuality than did their proselytized Jewish-Christian who were seeking to evangelize them. It might also be argued that nonheterosexuality would certainly have been a strange sight to Paul. It is doubtful that either he or his contingent would have had any concept about diverse sexual practices. It must be noted as well that nonheterosexual activity was obviously a part of Israelite culture even if it was taboo and forbidden. The fact that the Holiness Code in Leviticus addresses the issue speaks to the fact that it was prevalent and a concern, perceived to be a threat to cleanliness and ritual purity. It is interesting in the way Paul made exceptions for circumcision and strict dietary laws while maintaining strict observance of other issues. There certainly appears to have been a clear agenda at work in the writings of Paul. It is interesting that New Testament scholar Paul Achtemeier (1985), in his commentary on Romans, skirts the issue altogether, choosing to generalize about the broader issues of idolatry and immorality, while failing to discuss the specifics of Paul's myopic focus on nonheterosexual behavior.

Achtemeier is not alone in that avoidance of the subject, perhaps conflicted between personal opinions juxtaposed to apparent biblical imperatives. For many, the conversation about this critical debate and dialogue has been uncomfortable.

Commenting specifically on verse 27, the crux of Paul's argument about nonheterosexual relations among both men and women, Fitzmyer focuses on the use of the term *Orexis*.

> *Orexis* expresses a human or animal desire, but is often used in a pejorative sense. Not only are women in paganism so affected, Paul recognizes, but men as well. The adv. *homoiōs* indicates that Paul was thinking of female homosexual conduct in the preceding verse; the parallelism with this verse makes it clear. Abandoning heterosexual intercourse, men too indulged in homosexual acts, as is made explicit in the next part of this verse. . . So Paul euphemistically describes male homosexual activity. In 1 Cor 6:9 such persons are described as *malakoi*, lit., "soft ones" (Vg "molles"), usually interpreted as men or boys who allow themselves to be treated as women. . . Paul is clearly referring here to the conduct of active male homosexual persons and is merely echoing the OT admonition of such homosexual activity; see Lev 18:22; 20:13; Deut 23:17; 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7; especially the Sodom story (Gen 19:1-28), often alluded to elsewhere in the OT (Judg 19:22-26; Isa 1:9-10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Lam 4:6). Cf. *Sib. Or.* 3:594-600: "Surpassing, indeed, all humans, they [Jewish men] are mindful of holy wedlock and do not engage in evil intercourse with male children, as do Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Romans, spacious Greece and many other nations, Persians, Galatians, and all Asia, transgressing the holy law of the immortal God." . . . Paul regards such homosexual activity as a perversion, a deviation, a wandering astray from what is right (*planan*, "to err, wander astray"). He knows nothing of the modern idea of homosexuality as an inversion, but not a perversion, as such writers as J. J. McNeill (*The Church and the Homosexual*) [Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976], 55-56) would have us believe (Fitzmyer 1993, 287-288).

Paul's argument comes full circle as he returns to the theme of idolatry as immoral including the various ways his understanding of idolatry threatens the "righteousness of God." Paul describes the way that idolatry is manifest in human behavior in general and human sexuality specifically. In Paul's mind idolatry and immorality are part and parcel of the same nature, all of which are inseparably linked as sinful activity (Helminiak 1994, 73). Helminiak sums up the ongoing debate about Paul's perceived waffling and definite warnings,

> If Paul does not think that homogenital activity is wrong, why does he say that it is uncomely and disreputable? And why would Paul ever say such things when he is writing to the Romans? Homogenital sex was an everyday part of their world. They thought it perfectly natural for men to be attracted to other men. While there was concern about some excessive and abusive practices, the Greeks and Romans saw nothing improper in such sex in itself. Why does Paul bring up the topic at all?

Helminiak (1994, 73) adds, "Paul states there is something socially unacceptable about male-male sex." Perhaps nonheterosexual activity was personally uncomfortable for Paul. This would certainly be understandable knowing Paul's background as a Pharisee. Paul's encounters with Greek and Roman cultural norms may simply have overwhelmed. Spong (1988, 151-152) summarizes his analysis of Paul and homosexuality by declaring,

> Even with the context explained and the words analyzed, it still appears to me that Paul would not approve of homosexual behavior. It also appears to be obvious that Paul did not understand either the origin or the effects of a homosexual orientation. The fact that he viewed it not as sin but as punishment would cause one to question his assumptions.

While Spong's theory is logical and well presented, his argument could be applied to all the presumed prohibitive texts in the Bible, acknowledging that the authors of these ancient texts were not privy to the insights of human sexuality that are now commonly accepted.

> What do we know about Paul that might help us to understand better the meaning of his words? He revealed much personal data in his epistles. He never married. He seemed incapable of relating to women in general, except to denigrate them. His whole theological passion came out of an enormous sense of being unworthy and a sinner, a self-definition that had to be fed by some powerful self-negativity . . . This was the portrait of a man who had known some inner conflict. . . In these attitudes Paul's thinking has been challenged and transcended even by the church. Is Paul's commentary on homosexuality more absolute than some of his other antiquated, culturally conditioned ideas? . . . Unfortunately, when Paul discussed many issues, including homosexuality,

> he did not always tell us whether this was personal opinion or revealed tradition (Spong 1988, 151-152).

He thus concludes,

> Paul cannot be taken literally. He did not write the Word of God. He wrote the words of Paul, a particular, limited, frail human being. But he had contact with a powerful experience that changed his life, and his changed life was instrumental in changing millions of other lives throughout . . . Christian history. Can we use his words to get into the power of his experience? Can we participate in that experience and know something of that life-giving power? Can we then translate that power into words that do communicate in our day with assumptions and presuppositions that are in touch with reality as we know it? (Spong 1992, 105).

Such scholarly musings give pause to traditional interpretations and understandings that have dominated Christian dialogue for centuries, thus allowing for new ideas and possible enlightenment regarding these ancient texts and the context in which they were written. A careful reading of letters attributed to Paul highlights numerous texts that challenge the sensibilities of contemporary thinkers. Spong (1992, 91) has listed some of them.

> I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! (Gal. 5:12); Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. (Phil. 3:2); Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eye service, as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart. (Col. 3:22); If any one will not work, let him not eat. (2 Thess. 3:10)
>
> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. (Col 3:18) . . . Let her wear a veil. For a man ought not cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.) (1 Cor. 11:6-9); If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:9); God gave them [the Jews] a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day. (Rom. 11:8); It is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor. 14:35); I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. (Rom. 11:13, 14).

Perhaps the same logic must be applied to Paul's letters as is usually reserved for the Holiness Code in Leviticus and other proscriptions from the Hebrew Bible, that when understood within a contextual whole, that picking and choosing individual or isolated requirements is not an appropriate solution to determining contemporary moral and ethical guidelines. It is dangerous to compartmentalize any of the biblical narrative, reading and interpreting individual texts as if they were written in isolation. Every text has a context!

Spong reminds his reader of the similarity between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures when it comes to the sparsity of available material regarding content of this nature. There is simply a dearth of information on the subject, that in and of itself a key indicator. Spong (1990, 148) says,

> When we turn to the attitude of the Christian Scriptures toward homosexuality, the inconclusiveness found in the Hebrew Scriptures is still present. We have already observed that there is total silence on this issue in Matthew, Mark, Luke/Acts, and John. Paul is the most quoted source in the battle to condemn homosexuality. . . Paul was quite clear . . . Paul certainly appears to be stating that homosexuality is evil.

3.1.6 The Remaining Texts: 1 Corinthians 6:9b-11a; 1 Timothy 1:10; 2 Peter 2:6; and Jude 1:7

The content of the remaining scriptures used in the prohibitive argument are somewhat vague, but they do appear biased toward the condemnation of nonheterosexual behavior (see Levine 2022). 1 Corinthians 6:9b-11a declares, “Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you.” Paul is consistent in his argument, and staying true to his hermeneutic in Romans, his concern is with a wide range of societal ills that lead to idolatry, with human sexuality being one aspect among many. Paul fails to define a “sexual pervert,” or what constitutes sexual perversion. J. Paul Sampley follows Paul’s train of thought, but comments on the whole list of vices, rather than providing commentary on each one individually (Wright 1996, 856-859). William F. Orr and

James Arthur Walther (1976, 195) also refrain from analyzing each vice, rather focusing on Paul's emphasis on what he considers barriers or impediments to inheriting the kingdom of God. Based on the corpus of Paul's writings, it could be argued that he had an obsessive fixation about sex, a myopic focus that drove a clear agenda, dominating the other vices that the apostle condemns. The same argument can be applied to 1 Timothy 1:10 in which the pseudonymous writer provides a rationale in support of the law as continuing to be a good thing. As with Paul's listing of vices in 1 Corinthians, this writer also recites a list of perpetrators of egregious acts, including "sodomites." Knowing the context of other epistolary writings from this time, it is safe to assume that the writer in this instance is speaking of nonheterosexual activity. No explanation is offered in the text, however, thereby opening the door to a variety of interpretations. Considering the corpus of Paul's letters, however, it is apparent that the apostle was describing nonheterosexual relations in these specific instances.

Both 2 Peter 2:6 and Jude 1:7, the final two texts being discussed, speak to the transgressions of Sodom and Gomorrah. In no way does the II Peter text speak to homosexuality as the root cause of Sodom and Gomorrah's affliction and destruction. This anonymous writer discusses sin in general terms with a stern warning that retributive punishment is a distinct possibility for those who transgress against God. The writer of 2 Peter 2:6 declares, ". . . if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes (God) condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were ungodly. . ." To use this text in any argument about nonheterosexual behavior demands a stretch of the imagination, accepting an already inherent bias about the subject. Jude 1:7, however, is a little more complex because it is more detailed in its description of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. Verse seven affirms, ". . . just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." The phrase "unnatural lust" surely suggests a commentary specifically addressing the attempt of the men of Sodom to rape Lot's houseguests. Even so, the case can be argued that Jude's interpretation that these men were lustful is a biased opinion derived from an understanding that had emerged and evolved in the early Church, interpretive license based on the sexual obsession of many of the Church Fathers who had become fixated on what they regarded as the height of moral indiscretions. Rape and lust have nothing to do with one another, though this text is a reminder that traditional Judaism and the followers of the way in the early Church had certainly come to associate the story of Sodom and Gomorrah with non-sexuality as taboo and that this understanding continued to gain momentum, becoming the standard interpretation that would be proffered down through the centuries even until postmodernity. Jude's assessment is a reminder, however, as has been shown, that the Bible itself is conflicted as to the meaning behind the story of both Sodom and Gomorrah and the Gibeah text. On this issue the Bible fails to maintain a consistent biblical hermeneutic, leaving a doorway into an honest debate and dialogue about the underlying context of these two major stories.

3.1.7 Conclusion

In his research, Daniel A. Helminiak provides an analysis of the biblical texts in question, offering theories about the compilation of these texts including the cultural milieu that spawned their writing. He begins his argument with the declaration,

> "The Bible condemns homosexuality. It says so in black and white." That is what some people claim, and they impressively back up their case with quotes from the Bible. But others claim the matter is not as simple as that. These others also believe in the Bible, but they do not believe the Bible condemns lesbian and gay sex. Who is right? What is going on? (Helminiak 1994, 17).

Helminiak (1994, 21) then provides a cogent synopsis of the challenges confronting any serious biblical interpretation.

> People differ passionately about what the Bible actually teaches. . . How one reads the Bible, the way one interprets the texts—this is the key issue. . . Some will say we should take the Bible as it reads and not "interpret" it. But "interpretation" simply means getting the meaning out of a text. In this sense, there is no reading the Bible or anything else without interpreting. Without a reader, a text is only . . . markings on a page. In themselves these markings mean nothing. To have meaning, they have to pass through someone's mind. Understanding the words, determining the meaning of the text, is interpretation. Any time people read anything, they are interpreting.

Helminiak offers a word of warning about the dangers of biblical literalism, a methodology that many claim but no one employs. No one accepts every "jot and tittle" in the biblical narrative. Even the most rigid make exceptions when it suits them. What parent, no matter how offensive their child may be, would have their rebellious son stoned by the elders? (Deut 21:18-21). The Bible can and should be taken seriously, but never literally! Helminiak suggests the five brief texts discussed in this section "are concerned with something other than homogenital activity" and "boil down to only three different issues" (Helminiak 1994, 108). Helminiak shares his conclusions pertaining to homosexuality as impurity, as described in the Holiness Code.

> First, Leviticus forbids homogenitality as a betrayal of Jewish identity, for supposedly male-male sex was a Canaanite practice. The Leviticus concern about male-male sex is impurity, an offense against (Israelite) religion, not violation of the inherent nature of sex. Second, the letter to the Romans presupposes the teaching of the (Israelite) Law in Leviticus, and Romans mentions male-male sex as an instance of impurity. However, Romans mentions it precisely to make the point that impurity issues have no importance in Christ . . . 1 Corinthians and 1Timothy condemn abuses associated with homogenital activity. . .: exploitation and lust. . . So the Bible takes no direct stand on the morality of homogenital acts as such or on the morality of gay and lesbian relationships. . . the Bible's longest treatment of the matter, in Romans, suggest that in themselves homogenital acts have no ethical significance whatsoever . . . If people would still seek to know if . . . homogenital acts *per se* are right or wrong, they will have to look somewhere else for an answer. . . The Bible never

> addresses that question. More than that, the Bible seems deliberately unconcerned about it (Helminiak 1994, 108-109).

Apparently, the only point of agreement is that disagreement will continue to dominate this conversation with sincere people on both sides of the equation. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that one group demands the best of modern scholarship, unafraid of new discoveries regarding biblical criticism because it is just that—criticism! These are people who understand the Bible to be a living document, despite being timebound, the full revelation of its content still being uncovered and explored. On the other hand, there are those who fear any form of biblical exegesis and find subsequent analysis and interpretation suspects at best. As one individual once described intellectual curiosity and academic pursuits pertaining to the biblical narrative as "intellectual calisthenics." These are the people who believe that they believe the Bible verbatim and that they genuinely take its words literally. It is a simple approach belying complex, complicated problems. Sadly, there will continue to be no compromise around issues of human sexuality because there is no common ground regarding the nature of scripture or its role in informing and impacting the world today.

Meyer, in much the same way of this research, has wrestled with the book of Leviticus as an instance of embracing the stranger juxtaposed against the backdrop of *herem* texts that advocate for annihilation of enemies. He reminds his reader that "the Bible is a collection of violent books" (Meyer 2011a, 1). Meyer has even dared to venture into the world of Practical Theology, attempting not only to bridge an academic gap, but to bridge the chasm in much of the Bible between the Israelites and the alien, foreigner, or stranger, invoking what Meyer calls "social capital" (Meyer 2013b, 1). Referring to Leviticus, Meyer (2013b, 2) attempts "to generate some interdisciplinary debate. It may well be that Biblical Criticism has something to offer in a debate going on in Practical Theology." He cites W. J. Bergen (Meyer 2013b, 2; 2005,

4) who states, "The difficulty of using modern explanations for ancient rituals is compounded by the fact that we cannot study the society in which the ritual operates. All we have is the text of the Bible as a guide to the specifics of 'Israelite society.'" As Meyer (2013b, 2) notes, "We only have texts and texts are not rituals which can be directly observed." Meyer (2011a, 7) concludes,

> When one formulates the problem of what role Bible critics could play in reading violent biblical texts, one has to start off with a rather naïve proposition: what Bible critics do with the Bible matters to ordinary people. I am not sure that it really does. I am not really sure that ordinary believers really take their cue from Bible critics. We must acknowledge that there is a vast difference between the way that lay Christians read the Bible, and what Bible critics and other theologians do with it. Taking this gap seriously is one of our biggest challenges.

Meyer is unfortunately correct in this assessment, and it is this gap that must be closed if congregations are to become biblically literate and relevant in the postmodern world. Acknowledging that "churches and religions are built on certitude," Meyer declares that "if future ministers and pastors read biblical texts more responsibly, ordinary readers will hopefully follow suit" (Meyer 2011a, 7).

In the final analysis it comes down to the reader and interpreter of scripture as to the way these presumably prohibitive texts will be understood and invoked in the context of human life. From the conclusions reached by Helminiak in his commentary on the Christian scriptures, it is apparent that conversations surrounding human sexuality, specifically nonheterosexuality, and the Church were only beginning, clearly in their formative or embryonic stage. The issues surrounding nonheterosexual behavior and orientation have evolved and conversations indicating a more open dialogue reflect that reality in today's postmodern world. As Meyer (2015, 114-115) notes in his conclusion describing the interaction between the Israelites and the *gērim* who lived among them,

> It should be obvious that we are also in need of this kind of pragmatism and freedom in our world. Pragmatism helps us to make peace with the world as it is, but also to find a way to cope with what we have, a way which is just and fair. Freedom is something we need to give to others who are different from "us." "They" need the freedom to be different from us, while at the same time receiving respect and protection from us. Apparently, these concepts were well understood by the authors of H.

While same sex relations are clearly the occasion for these presumably prohibitive texts, they are not necessarily the issue primary that caused the perceived need by the writer to address this specific concern. The argument can be made that persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation in their own unique way represent the aliens, foreigners, and strangers of contemporary society. As Jill Bierwirth (conversation, June 25, 2023) observes, "The Bible can either be used as a weapon or to welcome." Assumptions about hospitable welcome and inclusion come into focus, clearly articulated in the Christian scriptures, fully reflecting the mission and ministry of Jesus, specifically articulated in his preaching and teaching as he invited all persons into his sphere of being, modeling an openly accepting and affirming posture, and doing so without hesitation or reservation toward those he regarded as the least and the last.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOSPITALITY AS A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT: SOME KEY EXAMPLES

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Challenging questions arise when contemporary Christian communities seek to practice hospitable inclusiveness while maintaining a clear identity around the many issues confronting the Church and the churches. This pivotal dilemma for local missional churches is not unlike that which existed among the ancient Israelites as they sought to practice hospitality while maintaining holiness (see Peterson 2005, 212-222). “Hospitality, as it has been understood for thousands of years, is a gift, unconditional, outside politics, giving food, shelter and aid . . . to a stranger who may not speak your language or know your ways, and asking nothing in return” (Denaux 2012; Dooling 1990; Grottola 1998; Kang-Yup 2013 [this May issue has numerous articles on biblical hospitality]; Kirillova, et.al. 2014; Mau n.d.; Mishan 2023; Murray 2023; Oropeza 2022; O’Gorman 2005; O’Gorman 2007a; O’Gorman 2007b; O’Gorman 2010; Pavey u. d.; Pohl 1995; Pohl 1999a; Pohl 1999b; Pohl 2002).

How does a twenty-first century church live out its vision, mission, and core values within its ever-evolving cultural context? How does a church initiate hospitable practices that embrace and celebrate diversity, while honoring the covenant at the core of its self-understanding? How does a church welcome everyone, knowing full well that no church suits the beliefs or meets the needs of everyone? One major challenge confronting local churches in the twenty-first century is how to offer hospitality to people of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. Achieving a hospitable goal requires intentionality toward embracing expansive inclusivity and audacious welcome, along with a willingness to be vulnerable, to acknowledge when efforts fail to meet a standard understood as a need within a local missional church. Congregations that recognize and accept these challenges would benefit from exploring the Hebrew Bible, specifically texts emphasizing acceptance of aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers, extending the hospitality of God to their neighbors.

4.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY

As chapter three has shown and now this chapter will show, Southwood's theories about migrants and migration are a key component in any discussion of hospitality, especially when examined against the backdrop of the biblical narrative, specifically the intersection Genesis 18, 19, and Judges 19 that reveals much nuance about ancient Near Eastern hospitable expectations and practices. Southwood (2018, 470) explains,

> . . . The presence of migration and the theme of "guest" and "host" make Genesis 19, and in the linked tradition of Judges 19, particularly apt for analysis that uses modern literature coupling hospitality and migration as a heuristic tool. Indeed, as well as being thematic, hospitality may also function in the narratives as a metaphor for immigrants and host communities.

Southwood then invokes Genesis 34, the story of the rape of Dinah, a woman who had migrated among the Hivites, an outsider who and had reached a level of agency as an alien, foreigner, or stranger within that community. Raped by Shechem son of Hamor, a prince in the region, this text further reveals both the disregard for women in this ancient culture and the complexities underlying an assumption of systemic hospitality in the ancient Near East. Despite "going forth" and displaying "her confidence, mobility and her level of assimilation," Dinah remains exposed to the subjugation of women that pervaded the culture. Her actions seem based on an assumption about her safety and security among a people she had come to know and trust. "The land where she lives as a migrant seems to be the kind of 'home' that instills 'the guest with a feeling of hope and a sense of being 'propelled' forward. . . [a] hospitality [which] provides not only a place to be safely still, but also the hope of moving'" (Southwood 2018, 481). Even so, "in contrast to the Benjaminites of Judges 19 or the Sodomites of Genesis 19, the Hivites as a group demonstrate a more positive type of hospitality which welcomes strangers and draws them into the group" (Southwood 2018, 482). This welcome is made evident by Dinah's presence among this specific people, having agency in the process. Dinah is eventually vindicated by her brothers whose "anger and distress at their sister's rape can only be exacerbated by the fact that her rapist is a member of the host society" (Southwood 2018, 283). Southwood (2018, 483-484) concludes,

> The theme of hospitality pervades all three narratives. In Judges 19 and Genesis 19, individual hospitality is cast against the metaphor of the migrant as the uninvited, vulnerable guest. In contrast, in Genesis 34, the host society is keen to assimilate and genuine hospitality is offered. However, in all three narratives, the theme of sexual exploitation of migrants emerges. In Judges 19 and Genesis 19, this is done by vast groups from the host society whereas in Genesis 34 it is done by a prince. A further common theme is the link between sexual exploitation and the concretisation of boundaries. Since the party in Judges 19 who seek asylum are unfamiliar migrants, the Benjaminites understand this as an opportunity for abuse. Through this act of sexual exploitation, a sharp division is drawn between Benjamin and Israel, a division concretised violently in the subsequent narrative (Judges 20-21). Similarly, a stark division is drawn between Sodom and Lot's family in the narrative of Genesis 19.

Southwood (2018, 484) concludes her discussion of migration and hospitality, noting that,

> In current times with so many on the move and seeking asylum, the metaphor of hospitality seems to transcend language and cultural barriers. However, only by reimagining what hospitality should be is it possible to break away from the damaging consequences of the metaphor. Perhaps one way of doing so is to describe migrants as individual fellow humans with tremendous potential who are welcomed, indeed invited, to be at home with us. To rephrase, "These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them" (Gen. 34.21).

Southwood's synopsis of the problem reveals the complexities of hospitality in all its many forms despite the need for hospitable relations as advocated in many biblical texts. Southwood (2018, 472) defines hospitality through the lens of J. G. Molz and S. Gibson (1969, 15) who claim,

> Defining hospitality is not just about the gift of repose, but also about the gift of hope. Making the guest feel at home is not just about seeing to his or her physical comfort or embodied needs (though these are certainly important); it is also about instilling the guest with a feeling of hope and a sense of being "propelled" forward . . . hospitality provides not only a place to be safely still, but also the hope of moving. For what is security if it isn't the capacity to move confidently? . . . A home has to be both closed enough to offer shelter and open enough to allow for this capacity to perceive what the world has to offer and to provide us with enough energy to go and seek it.

The danger in any hospitable practice is that it becomes overly possessive or protective, controlling in any proprietary way, assuming what the "guest" needs at the expense of what they might want. The danger, something to which Southwood (2018, 472) warns, is that biblical narratives and modern literature on the subject, as well as popular culture, have the capacity to fall into this trap, homogenizing migrants into categories that interpret them as others, the very thing that authentic hospitality should prohibit.

Meyer (2013b, 1) discusses the formation of what is described as "social capital," the parameters guiding various people groups in their communal lives, "a network established between people." He cites Cas Wepener and Johan Cilliers' (2010, 417) definition that includes the horizontal dimension of "bonding" that occurs between people, complemented by the vertical dimension of "bridging" the "ties that transcend various social divides, such as religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status." This balance prevents "the horizontal ties from becoming a basis for the pursuit of narrow and even sectarian interests." For the purposes of this study, the idea of "social capital" seems foundational when incorporated to convey the interactions portrayed in the cultic communities of the Israelites in relation to their neighbors, those referred to in the Hebrew Bible as aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers. Meyer (2013b, 2) quotes Wesley J. Bergen who notes, "the difficulty of using modern explanations for ancient rituals is compounded by the fact that we cannot study the society in which the ritual operates. All we have is the text of the Bible as a guide to the specifics of 'Israelite society.'"

4.1.1 Holiness Code and *Herem* Texts

This chapter will continue to reference the Holiness Code (H) in Leviticus that helped this people develop their unique national and religious identity while empowering them to move among the peoples and nations around them in both their travels and their settled lives. The Holiness Code (H) helped the Israelites understand themselves in relation to God and neighbor. The Hebrew Bible describes the difficulties these people faced as they discovered how to live into their uniqueness while relating to others of different religious, social orientations, and organizations (see Gen, Judg, and 1 Sam). The ways the Israelites interpreted their struggles and conflicts reveal their progress as a people. The Holiness Code (H) offers a window into the process of their becoming. In the Christian scriptures the reader will recognize a continuation of this process as it continues to unfold in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The audacious hospitality of Jesus' ministry was so radical that it would eventually and unintentionally become a completely new and unintended religious movement.

This chapter will consider several narratives found in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures that may provide for deeper exegetical exploration into the development of ancient Near Eastern hospitality as a biblical and theological theme running throughout Christianity's sacred texts. Although no prohibitive texts are focal points in this chapter, the reader will recognize connections between the texts explored here and certain prohibitive texts discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter will enable the reader to make parallels and recognize disconnects as it provides a context for and commentary on the prohibitive texts by offering alternative interpretations. This chapter will also discuss *herem* texts, which advocate for the annihilation of an enemy for the purpose of maintaining cultural and religious integrity (See Collins 2004; McConville 2010; Nelson 1997; Niditch 1993; Stern 1991; Versluis 2016). These texts provide a counter-narrative to hospitality in the Israelites' dealings with aliens, foreigners, and strangers. Necessary safeguards developed among these peoples to ensure safe travel during their ongoing search for better grazing lands (de Vaux 1961, 10; Koenig 1985, 2; Koenig 1992, 299). By maintaining such safety measures, the Israelites could appropriately enter relationships with tribes and clans they encountered in their sojourns, while maintaining cultic purity.

Martin (2014, 6). citing W. Vogels, offers the reminder that "any reader of the Bible is aware of the numerous conflicts, wars, and barbarism that are described, not only by the nations, the 'others', but also by Israel itself. All these texts are . . . a counter-witness to hospitality." Various storylines tend to define hospitality by how it looked within relationships between the Israelite nation and its neighbors. The contrasts between hospitality and hostility, however, were far more complex. The Hebrew term *herem* carries multiple meanings, including conveying the idea of devotion and destruction (Lilley 1993, 171-173; see Castellano 2012). The numerous *herem* texts in the Hebrew Bible present an opposing worldview for the Israelites, revealing the polarities in their relationship with other cultures, those referred to in some texts as aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers. Lilley describes *herem* as the "uncompromising consecration of a property and dedication of the property to God without possibility of recall or redemption" (Lilley 1993, 171-173). Samuel Rolles Driver defines *herem* as "a mode of secluding, and rendering harmless, anything imperiling the religious life of the nation" (Driver 1896, 98). John Arthur Thompson observes, "the total destruction of the enemy and his goods at the conclusion of a campaign" (Thompson 1974, 73). The invocation of *herem*, when enforced, reveals the chasm between hospitality and hostility. This phenomenon is profoundly described throughout the Hebrew Bible in the adventures of the Israelites as they encountered and engaged neighboring tribes and clans. Once again, it is important to delineate the kind of engagement expected when the Israelites confronted aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers as they were encountered during the Israelite journey to their new land. This was particularly noteworthy as they interacted with the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan, a land they believed was promised to them and was therefore, by divine right, theirs to claim as their own. Deuteronomy 20 advocates for the annihilation of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, all falling under the rubric of the principles of *herem.* The Israelites were commanded to wipe out these inhabitants on the grounds that, "they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices which they have done in the service of their gods, and so to sin against the Lord your God" (Deut 20:18). It must be noted, however, that the Israelites provided an escape to these adversaries by offering terms of peace, allowing for the indigenous peoples to become slaves (Deut 20:10-11). The practice also appears in Numbers (25:1-18) as justification for war against the Midianites, and in 1 Samuel 15 where Saul exterminates the Amalekites. Amos Yong (2008, 110-111) suggests that,

> . . . over time, the sojourners welcomed into their midst became residents who had shed their "alien" status. Hence, we see Israel accommodating these further developments so that there are laws regarding the poor, the temporary resident, and those who have now been sufficiently assimilated into Israel so as to have attained certain rights and privileges as "insider" community members. . . At the same time, Israel's openness to the stranger was not unrestrained. Of course, YHWH's prohibition against idolatry meant that there is a "far less welcoming attitude toward those termed foreigners from . . . the idolatrous nations." This

> exclusive posture is later retrieved in the postexilic period, and especially is visible in the remnant communities of Ezra and Nehemiah. The concerns of these communities over foreign marriages reflect . . . concerns to maintain ethnic purity. . . But this exclusivist trajectory represents only one side of the postexilic memory of the stranger in ancient Israel. On the other side, we see . . . that the God whose redemptive hospitality was first made known to Abraham and his descendants . . . continues to speak to a postexilic community dispersed throughout the wider ancient Near Eastern world. And it is this multicultural character of ancient Israelite hospitality that is seen more clearly in the Hebraic wisdom literature.

Notable texts invoking *herem* are found in the book of Joshua, a narrative in which God's warriors attacked the cities of Ai and Jericho. The book of Joshua also illustrates an example of hospitality in the case of Rahab, who gave safe shelter to the men who were spying on Jericho in anticipation of its demise (Josh 2:1-24). It is also in the book of Joshua where God sanctions violent actions, directly assisting in the slaughter of the Amorites by making the sun stand still to allow more daylight for Joshua and his men to complete their mission (Josh 10:12-14). These actions were by intent not by accident! Such was the prevailing mythology surrounding the justification for dividing and conquering enemies, even if those events were prone to extreme hyperbole, embellishment, and exaggeration.

4.1.2 Hospitality as a Biblical Theme

By analyzing a wide variety of texts, this research hopes to aid missional churches in becoming inclusive faith communities, particularly as they struggle with issues related to persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation and search for ways these persons might be hospitably welcomed and included into the full life of local parishes. Lee Roy Martin (2014, 1) elaborates on the important role the Hebrew Bible plays in the development of contemporary models for hospitable practices in the Church. He notes,

> scholars often appeal to the Old Testament as a model to be emulated. . . the following elements of Old Testament thought might serve as theological underpinnings for a renewed and revisioned Christian practice of hospitality in today's multi-faith environment, in that, (1) all humans bear the image of God,

> (2) all humans are relational creatures, (3) all humans are dependent upon each other and (4) all humans are travellers hosted by God (Martin 2014, 1).

Martin adds that the need to renew and revise the significance of Christian hospitality stems from the fact that "many communities are now populated with citizens who have little in common with one another, and, as a result, each is suspicious of the other" (Martin 2014, 1). Intentionally radical hospitality is needed to create a sense of safety, connection, and belonging within such diverse communities. In describing the link between Christian hospitality and the Hebrew Bible, Yong (2008, 108-109) declares,

> The springboard for . . . discussion of ancient Israelite hospitality derives from St. Stephen's speech in Acts 7. Here he recites the journeys of the forefathers of Israel: of Abraham, who was told, "Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you" (7:3); of Joseph, who was sold into Egypt (7:9); of Moses, who was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter into his household (7:21-22) and later "became a resident alien in the land of Midian" (7:29); and of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were "resident aliens in a country belonging to others" (7:6) . . . we find that it is Abraham (the "founding father" of the three Western monotheistic religions) and his relatives (Lot and Laban) and descendants (Isaac and Jacob) who are at the center of the paradigmatic hospitality narratives in the Hebrew Bible . . . the Abraham narrative is significant not only because of his exemplary hospitality but because his life served as an archetype for ancient Israel's nomadic, national, and exilic experiences. . .

Biblical and Practical Theology interact in the development of hospitality as a theme in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures. Perhaps the best study of this is Daniel L. Smith-Christopher's *A Biblical Theology of Exile* in which he describes relevant ancient narratives and considers their theological relevance for missional church practices (Smith-Christopher 2002, vii). Smith-Christopher addresses "the difficult question of the historical status of the exile, building upon . . . recent, more technical scholarship," and calling into question the validity of the "deep characterization of exile reported in the Old Testament text," suggesting "that exile is largely an ideological construct designed to advance the influence and legitimacy of one segment of emerging Judaism" (Smith-Christopher 2002, vii). The author declares, "I write this theology of exile in the wake of major shifts in biblical studies in the last twenty years, especially surrounding the term *postmodernism*" (Smith-Christopher 2002, 1). Believing it possible to do biblical theology in this current era, Smith-Christopher writes from a socio-theological perspective, while allowing each text to speak to a larger narrative. "Biblical theology unavoidably involves a tension between faith and history" both "now seen as endeavors that involve an inexact matter of perspective and bias—an accusation that a previous generation of biblical scholars directed almost exclusively to enterprises that involved explicating faith-related issues" (Smith-Christopher 2002, 2). In other words, Smith-Christopher acknowledges that his research and writing are not grounded in traditional biblical exegesis and subsequent hermeneutics. Smith-Christopher acknowledges the need to look for new meaning in old texts certain texts to encourage dialogue about and find new meaning in them. Smith-Christopher concludes, and this research concurs,

> . . . I do not think that an exile biblical theology for modern Christians depends on the cogency of my attempt to analyze biblical texts historically and theologically. I have no ambition to write definitive statements—only to provoke dialogue and try to clarify my own thoughts on the matter. As I have gratefully acknowledged throughout this work, many others (more capable than I) are working on the same issues. In this I take great comfort and further invite critical dialogue and response to an unfinished product (Smith-Christopher 2002, 203).

It takes courage, determination, perhaps a bit of gravitas, to step out of traditional paradigms of scholarship to do the work of discovery, searching for more or different meaning lurking within a narrative that might speak a relevant word to contemporary readers.

One major challenge in defining biblical hospitality is that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures use a variety of terms to convey the concept of hospitality or aspects thereof. Koenig (1992, 299) asserts, "The Hebrew Scriptures contain no single word for hospitality, but the activity itself is prominent, especially in the patriarchal stories and accounts in the book of Judges." Koenig adds, "In these narratives the practice usually illustrates [bedouin] traditions having to do with a resident's obligation to nourish and protect travelers who find themselves in hostile environments" (Koenig 1992, 299). The Septuagint (LXX) offers little assistance in reaching a definition because Greek translations of ambiguous Hebrew terms are no more precise than older translations. "The word most often associated with hospitality in the LXX and the NT is *xenos*, which literally means foreigner, stranger, or even enemy. In its derived sense, however, the term comes to denote both guest and host alike" (Koenig 1992, 299). When used as a verb, *xenizein* typically describes "the extending of hospitality" (Koenig 1992, 299) [1 Pet 4:9, Heb 13:1-13]. The difficulty is compounded in both Greek and Hebrew idioms when translated with their English equivalents. Exhaustive critical analysis of these types of linguistic variations is lacking, resulting in loosely or even erroneously categorized as either charity or hospitality texts, when the two terms are used interchangeably in various translations.

As the narrative of the Hebrew Bible unfolds, storylines tend to define hospitality by describing how it worked in relationships between the Israelites and their neighbors. In subduing the local inhabitants, the Israelites conquered and possessed, often raping, pillaging, slaughtering, and seizing property. The relationship between the notions of *hospitality* and *hostility*, however, was much more complicated. A reading of specific texts reveals a history of conflicting interactions, some encounters relating impromptu confrontations or long-simmering animosities (Deut 20:1-20; Num 20:14-21; Josh 5:13-6:27; Judg 6; 1 Sam 14; 2 Kings 15:29, 18:9-12; Isa 10:5-19; 2 Chr 1-22**).** In one text the reader may be exposed to tolerance or acceptance, and in another to mutual agreements and treaties such as the one reached with the Gibeonites in Judges 9. In yet another narrative, war by divine sanction may be declared and carried out. In some cases, orders to attack included specific instructions to annihilate every living thing, animal and human alike. According to the writer, editor, or compiler of a given text, all these responses are somehow blessed by God as divinely ordained, the participants believing in God's aid for the onslaught and conquest. To the victors belonged both the spoils and the story. Believing that they followed God's commandments, the Israelites often chose the paths of least resistance. In many ways they followed the least common denominators outlining terms of agreement, engaging in hostilities rather than practicing hospitality. The unfortunate result was that there were winners and losers, the winners making what was perceived to be a rightful claim in taking, seizing the land in question. These actions only added to the ongoing conflicts and distrust.

4.2 HOSPITALITY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

A careful reading of the Hebrew Bible reveals that hospitality begins to develop as a biblical theme early in the biblical storyline, with Abraham's reception of his three mystery guests in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis (see London 2018). Martin describes the story of Abraham and his visitors by the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18), an event that outlines a model for employing the customary practice of ancient biblical hospitality, a recurring theme that is found throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures (Martin 2014, 2). Relying on Martin's research, Catherine Webb (2020, 39) delineates "five core components of OT hospitality." These include:

1) Travelers did not seek out hospitality. Rather, it is implied through their location choice, such as city gates (Judges 19), town squares, or even facing a potential host and waiting for the invitation (Genesis 18).

2) The host (usually male) offered a modest invitation in a public space that was predominantly accepted. Declining was an option, but was considered an insult to the host with the potential for violent or hostile reactions.

3) The level of hospitality could be extended (but not reduced) once the traveler had accepted the offer to become a guest. Three-day stay was generally maximum.

4) The host provided food, drink, water for self-washing feet, rest, protection and care for animals.

5) The host accompanied the traveler-turned-guest as they left, continuing their assurance of protection (Webb 2020, 39).

Though not readily apparent, a close investigation supports the hypothesis that there is an inherent interdependence among these symbiotic texts, an intentionally implied relationship connecting this ancient cultural practice and the texts that indirectly describe the features, form, and function of hospitality. This certainly appears to be the case in the narrative history describing the evolution of Israelites and their emerging monotheistic faith tradition. Even a brief analysis reveals that hospitality significantly informs much of the content of these various texts, particularly as the early Israelites encountered and engaged various people, groups, tribes, and clans variably referred to as aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers. According to their own myth, after escaping bondage in Egypt, the Hebrews sojourned in the wilderness prior to their settlement in the Promised Land. During this time, they established boundaries between themselves and other tribes and clans while honoring their evolving religious identity and theology. As part of their interaction when encountering peoples of other cultures, the Israelites developed boundaries that would impact the ways that hospitality was invoked and exercised. While the faith principles undergirding such boundaries would have begun to form much earlier, Meyer (conversation, May 2023) notes, "most of these boundary-drawing techniques developed" during Israel's exile in Babylon (587 BCE), and in the post-exilic periods (see Num

25, Ezra, Neh). Centuries later, adaptations of such techniques would offer Jews and early followers of Jesus much needed clarity in their emerging identity, as they engaged Hellenistic peoples, especially after the second destruction of the Temple by Roman occupiers in 70 CE. By consistently observing ceremonial and societal boundaries as carefully detailed by the Priestly writer in Leviticus 11-15 and in the Holiness Code (H) which follows in Leviticus 17-26, the Israelites could maintain purity and identity during times of famine, war, or exile. These guidelines empowered this resilient nation to withstand frequent challenges and threats to the Israelite way of life.

A canonical reading of the Bible reveals the tension experienced by those who settled the land of Canaan, engaging in battles that resulted in slaughter, annihilation, and/or removal juxtaposed to creating livable boundaries that respected those who were considered the other. These polarities created the apparent textual and realized dichotomy and disconnect expressed within the biblical narrative, but also reveals the struggle to develop hospitable rules of engagement guiding these ongoing confrontations. Illustrated at a minimum as détente and sometimes characterized by peace and goodwill, the inconsistencies in these encounters between these groups reveals an oft schizophrenic, perhaps bi-polar, relationship often adversarial in nature and sometimes marked by sanctioned violence (see Collins 2003; Miller 2015). Occasionally the reader is exposed to negatively biased attitudes, an inherent prejudice against other cultic peoples who stood as obstacles, tribes and clans getting in the way of a presumably divinely sanctioned manifest destiny rightfully carried out by those who understood themselves as select, the chosen people of God on a clearly ordained mission. Certainly, confusion abounded as these new settlers pioneered their way into these frontiers, often causing reactivity rather than responsive behavior. The treatment exhibited by all these insecure survivalist tribes and clans reveals an obvious love-hate relationship between them, the xenophobic fear toward those understood to be unwelcome interlopers always creating great anxiety.

4.2.1 Abraham, Sarah, and their Guests at the Oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-8)

Lee Roy Martin (2014, 1) emphasizes the important role narratives from the Hebrew Bible can play in the development of contemporary models for hospitable practices in the Church. He notes,

> scholars often appeal to the Old Testament as a model to be emulated. . . the following elements of Old Testament thought might serve as theological underpinnings for a renewed and revisioned Christian practice of hospitality in today's multi-faith environment, in that, (1) all humans bear the image of God, (2) all humans are relational creatures, (3) all humans are dependent upon each other and (4) all humans are travellers hosted by God (Martin 2014, 1).

Martin adds that the need for a revisioning of the significance of Christian hospitality stems from the fact that "many communities are now populated with citizens who have little in common with one another, and, as a result, each is suspicious of the other" (Martin 2014, 1). Therefore, intentionally radical hospitality is needed to create feelings of connection, safety, and belonging within such diverse communities.

The Yahwist (Speiser 1963, 85, 87; Von Rad 1972, 164) writer of Genesis 18 introduces the reader to Near Eastern hospitality as both an event and a theme throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah and their unexpected guests at Mamre in Genesis 18 (see Peterson 2005, 212). Lee Roy Martin (2014, 1) observes that "throughout the history of discussions on hospitality, Abraham has served as the exemplar of biblical hospitality." Martin describes the story of Abraham and his visitors by the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18) as an event revealing the Hebrew Bible's model for the practice of ancient biblical hospitality, a theme that then recurs throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures (Martin 2014, 2). Commenting on this text, Von Rad (1972, 205) says, "those times when hospitality was the only real virtue were the ones primarily concerned with such narratives," alluding to other ancient writings, specifically Greek sagas such as the *Odyssey*. Von Rad (1972, 205) notes that "accordingly, all of them have the motif of a test, a question about the preservation of strangers who are unknown at least in the beginning; and this thought must also be considered in the exposition of our narrative." Fretheim comments, "Abraham's hospitality has several characteristics: It extends to strangers, toward those who appear unexpectedly; it follows certain protocol: seeing, running to meet, honoring, inviting, refreshing, preparing, serving." Fretheim (1994, 463) then adds that "bowing, an everyday gesture, was appropriate for all visitors, not only for important people**.**" Citing Isaiah 55:1-3, Proverbs 9:5-6, and Luke 24:13-35 as examples, O'Connor (2018, 262) reminds her reader that, "biblical meals are often occasions of divine revelation. In Gen 18, the meal Abraham prepares for his visitors expresses customary hospitality, but he offers it with unusual energy and care," as indicated by his haste to share the best of what he has, including a valued calf. Through such abundant hospitality, "the meal itself becomes a sacred setting for Abraham's encounter with the divine. The three visitors are present to receive nourishment from him, but it is Abraham who receives nourishment from them." Westermann notes (1985, 276), ". . .This scene portrays in masterly fashion and detail process Abraham observes: the arrival (vv. 1b-2a), the invitation (vv. 2b-5), and the hospitality (vv. 6-8)."

> The narrative begins with the unexpected arrival of strangers, the invitation to them and to hospitality. Enough has been said of the great importance of hospitality in the life of the nomads and bedouin as well as in the life of sedentary peoples of early cultures. The visit of a stranger could be of vital, decisive importance for the one visited. The stranger comes from another world and has a message from it. This is the starting point of a great number of narratives in which an event is set in motion by one coming from afar. The admonition in Heb. 13:2 is based on it: remember to show hospitality, "for

> thereby some have entertained angels unawares." It is only later reflection that says they are gods in human form or heavenly beings (see also Acts 14:11; 28:1-6. . .) (Westermann 1985, 276-277).

Three unidentified men, including one who Abraham appears to identify as the leader or spokesperson (Speiser 1963, 129, 131), and eventually revealed as divine beings or angels, pay a visit to Abraham and his traveling caravan at Hebron. Fretheim (1994, 463) notes that "Yahweh has assumed human form . . ." Cyrus H. Gordon and Gary A. Rendsburg (1997, 116-117) point out that "The closeness of men to gods in this period is a social phenomenon for which we must develop a feeling if we are to understand the biblical texts."

> . . . In Hebrew society it was not abnormal for people to experience theophanies, that is, to see divine manifestations, and converse with the apparition. Nor would it be odd to attribute divinity to strangers, whose behavior might be appropriate to angels on divine missions. From the biblical viewpoint, it was nothing supernatural for three divine beings, in the form of men, to visit Abraham, who entertained them in good Bedouin fashion with water for washing before a meal of bread, milk curds, and meat (Genesis 18:1-8) . . . (Gordon & Rendsburg 1997, 117, 318).

Martin (2014, 2) cites V. H. Kooy (1962) who notes, the "main practices stem from nomadic life when public inns were a rarity and every stranger was a potential enemy." Martin (2014, 2) also cites T. R. Hobbs (2001), who adds,

> The function of hospitality is to transform an unknown person (who may pose a threat) into a guest, thus removing the threat (cf. 2 Samuel 12:4; Job 31:32 and other texts). Hospitality was a necessity for nomadic peoples because there were no hotels in the wilderness. Even within the towns and cities there were often no inns available. In the ancient world, travel could be dangerous . . . From the perspective of the host, hospitality could be dangerous as well; therefore, hospitality was not offered to everyone. Two types of travellers would not be welcomed as guests. . . Both traders and marauders "are without a home base, and, as such, are anomalous and regarded with suspicion" (Martin 2014, 2).

Martin (2014, 4) adds, that "the rules of hospitality as displayed in the story of Abraham can also be confirmed in other biblical texts, including: Genesis 19:1-11; 24:15-61; 29:1-11;

Exodus 2:15-22; Judges 19; 1 Samuel 25; 2 Samuel 12; 1 Kings 17:8-16 and 2 Kings 4." One source describes the setting by the oaks of Mamre as "a fine description of oriental courtesy and hospitality" (*Oxford Annotated Bible [NRSV]* 1989, 22). The arrival of these mysterious guests to Abraham's tent functions as the first scene in the larger drama of Abraham becoming the progenitor-in-waiting of many nations as well as the father of the nation of Israel through the child God would give to him and his wife Sarah in their old age. At the center of this dramatic encounter, the reader is introduced to the ancient custom of Near Eastern hospitality. In the story of Abraham and his three visitors, there is an explicit order or sequence of events illustrating the custom of hospitality. This story might even serve as a formula. Despite being a sojourner in a distant land, Abraham suddenly and unexpectedly becomes a host. Bruce J. Malina notes that "The legendary story of Abraham's immigration into the land of Canaan marks the beginning of the patriarchal period. In this period, Canaan (later Palestine) was fully populated. Abraham was not a nomad moving about trackless wastes. Rather he immigrated into a region controlled by monarchic cities and their kings" (Malina 2001, 146). Subsequently, there are numerous texts in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures in which hospitality is implied, providing the context of a given storyline (Josh 2:1-24; 2 Kings 4:1-44; 1 Sam 25: 1-44; Isa 11:6-9; Lk 1:46b-55; 5:27-39; Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:31-44; 8:1-9; Lk 9:12-17; Jn 6:1-14). This phenomenon will be shown frequently in the life and ministry of Jesus who becomes the host at numerous dinner parties, functioning in that capacity despite his being a houseguest.

Following God's command, Abraham obediently left his native country and kindred in search of an unknown land (Gen 12:1). God declares "And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding. . .” (Gen 17:8). At this point in which Abraham welcomes his guests at Mamre, he is no longer an alien, having settled at the oaks of Mamre. He has settled in the land he was promised. Three visitors appear at Abraham’s tent during the hottest time of day, “when the way-weary traveler seeks shelter and the resident seeks shade” (Gunkel 1997, 192). Surprised by their arrival, and perhaps to protect his household from potentially hostile men, Abraham runs to meet and greet the men while they are still some distance from the camp. In so doing, Abraham creates an opportunity to extend his offer of appropriate hospitality, “his differential forms of address” suiting “the situation of a host in the presence of august visitors. . .” (O’Connor 2018, 260). O’Connor (2018, 261, 263) notes that “the narrator accentuates Abraham’s prominent role in organizing his household to provide a prodigious welcome,” adding, “his alacrity and thoroughness in receiving strangers sets a high bar of hospitality and contrasts sharply to the inhospitable behavior of the men of Sodom in the next chapter” (19:4-10). Speiser (1963, 129) notes, “his spontaneous hospitality to seemingly ordinary human beings is thus all the more impressive.” Abraham directs his wife Sarah to prepare cakes for their new guests and instructs his servant to prepare a calf, choosing one that is “tender and good” (Gen 18:7). Abraham carries out each step of his hospitable practice with obvious enthusiasm and attention to detail, offering his best efforts for his guests in the way the hospitable customs of the region required.

> The haste is in deliberate contrast to the quiet beginning. It is worth noting that no one is in a hurry elsewhere in the patriarchal stories; here it is haste in the service of others: he saw . . . ran . . . bowed down . . . the invitation, the acceptance, the entertainment is an element of early civilization whose proper meaning is for the most part misunderstood. We understand civilization primarily in relation to objects (products of civilization); early civilization . . . unfolds itself in human relationships. . . hospitality in modern culture is practiced by and large within a chosen circle, whereas in Gen. 18, to whomever needs it. The strangers are invited (see also Lk. 24:29) because they are weary from their journey, hungry and thirsty, and need Abraham’s hospitality. So

> Abraham is completely at their service; hence his availability, haste, and concern. This too is the context in which one is to understand Abraham's bowing down before the three men. . . One who comes as a stranger is honored because a dignity may be his without there being need of any external sign thereof (Westermann 1985, 277-278).

The writer of Genesis 18 reveals the urgency at play in the story, Abraham jumping into action, running from his tent to meet them, greeting them with deference and respect (O'Connor 2018, 260), a scene reminiscent in the parable of the prodigal in Luke 15 in which the father rushes from the house to greet his wayward son. O'Connor (2018, 259, 260) notes that "Abraham's character differs from previous chapters. Here he is nervous, rushing and scurrying about before his mysterious visitors . . .", jumping "into action to provide elaborate hospitality as expected in the ancient Near East whenever strangers come to one's home." Speiser (1963, 129) observes that "Abraham is startled, but recovers quickly, and the generosity of his welcome is enhanced by his attempt to disparage his efforts." O'Connor (2018, 261) cites Oded Borowski (2003, 22) who declares that "hospitality was one of the most important customs observed throughout Israelite society . . . one might look at hospitality as a cornerstone institution of Israelite culture. There is no reason to assume that this was uniquely Israelite, but other cultures did not leave records of this practice." O'Connor (2018, 261) cites Westermann (1985) as she offers some background on the history of Near Eastern hospitality.

> In desert traditions . . . local people have a duty to feed and protect strangers in the hostile environment. That Abraham's hospitable actions occur in the heat of the day suggests the travelers' need for water and nourishment. Often hospitality offered to the stranger garners a return favor or gift for the host. Possibly the strangers' reiteration of the divine promise of a son to Sarah may serve as the return gift. Something similar happens when Abraham's servant goes to Mesopotamia to obtain a wife for Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac (Gen 24:1-49). . . Yet the ancient tradition of hospitality to strangers also involves the recognition that visiting strangers may be other than they appear (Westermann [1985] 276-277). Such is the belief in the New Testament book of Hebrews that reminds readers, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing

> that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2). We never know who strangers might be or from where they come. . .Welcome everyone because, no matter how wounded and decrepit or healthy and beautiful, strangers might carry the light of God to us. So it may be with immigrants and homeless people, with refugees and wanderers. Who knows how they may reveal God to us? (O'Connor 2018, 261).

Hospitality is offered equally to anyone, regardless of their station in life, though these kinds of proactive safeguards assure the unwitting host that proper protocols are in place especially if the guest turns out to be a person of note or import. Gunkel (1997, 192) further describes the unfolding drama,

> Suddenly they are there. Divine beings always appear in surprising ways (Gen 21:9; 22:13; Ex 3:2; Josh 5:13; cf. also Zech 2:1, 5; 5:1; 6:1). They also disappear in equally mysterious ways (Judg 6:21; 13:20-21; Tobit 12:21). This element of surprise expresses authentic religion in native form—reverence before the secret of the deity. Human beings only know what the deity reveals to them. Most remains obscure.

Gunkel (1997, 192) notes that the Bible tells us that the visitors look like men and so that is how Abraham perceives them. The narrator, however, knows differently. Scholars differ as to when Abraham realizes that the visitors are of divine origin. E. A. Speiser (1963, 131) assumes an early awareness, while Fretheim (1996, 462) is not certain about the timeline of Abraham's becoming aware of the hidden identity of these men of mystery and intrigue.

The hastily prepared meal no doubt would have constituted a lavish feast for all parties involved, considering the setting for this unexpected and unlikely encounter. Despite the extreme conditions, fueled by the oppressive heat, Abraham moves quickly. "No exertion, even in behalf of strangers, is too much where hospitality is concerned" (Speiser 1963, 129). Abraham "took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate" (Gen 18:8). Two observations: people eat while angelic beings do not! This point only adds to the confusion of an identity that soon will be revealed as divine in nature. Second, it is important to note that Abraham and Sarah follow customary gender specific roles. Male and female responsibilities were carefully and clearly delineated in the ancient world, particularly in matters governing the customary practice of hospitality. J. Gerald Janzen (1993, 53-54) provides a thorough synopsis of ancient hospitality as described in Genesis 18.

> The scene in 18:1-8 portrays the courtesies of hospitality in a traditional society. The specific courtesies may vary from people to people, but the widespread practice . . . hospitality in traditional cultures testifies to a basic . . . awareness is of a common humanity that runs deeper than . . . distinctions of kin and stranger, friend and enemy. This common humanity calls for a response in which one treats the stranger and the enemy as one would treat kin. When outsiders few in number and far from their home are in need of sustenance, one may not ignore their need or take advantage of them, but must give them food and shelter and send them peaceably on their way. Such hospitality may be taken to reflect a sense—however obscure—that all people enjoy divine hospitality through . . . the food and shelter by which they are sustained in the world. Such divine hospitality . . . images God in one's relation to others. It is not surprising, then, that Abraham's hospitality to three men should turn out to be his hospitality to God. As God is imaged in human relations, God becomes present in them.

"Abraham's hospitality has several characteristics: It extends (welcome) to strangers, toward those who appear unexpectedly; it follows a certain (prescribed) protocol: seeing, running to meet, honoring, inviting, refreshing, preparing, serving" (Fretheim 1996, 463). In this regard hospitality becomes a sacred act offered to the deity through . . . care and nurture of fellow human travelers.

> The story speaks of theophany (*theo-phaneia*, a visible manifestation of deity), which is perceived by faith and not by sight. Abraham is confronted by an ordinary phenomenon, the visit of three men to his home, and he responds without theological overlay. It is only in retrospect that he discerns that he has been visited by God. . . When God appears at the door of any person's life, that mysterious intervention in the ordinary is seldom obvious at the time. God remains wholly other, even when God meets the eye as wholly same. God is

> always the hidden God, even in revelation, who appears to us as the hidden God at times and in ways we least expect (Alston, Jr. 1988, 398).

It is always possible that an individual might mistake a delusion or hallucination for a manifestation of the divine. As Spong writes, "So who is God? No one can finally say. That is not within human competence. All we can ever say is how we believe we have experienced God, doing our best to dispel our human delusions. . ." (https://www.inspiringquotes.us).

Every act played out in the drama by the oaks of Mamre reflects the practice of hospitality as formed in the region and endemic to the culture. When hospitality is extended to the stranger, it assures the total well-being of the one who extends and the one who receives. The practice of hospitality ensured the survival of everyone involved and became imbued over time with theological underpinnings. If the visitation of these three men was a test designed to measure Abraham's hospitable nature, then he passed brilliantly. Gunkel notes that this form of testing is typical, as the deity comes in human form to make a discreet assessment. He says,

> In this belief, however, "lies the most sublime sanctification of hospitality: one will be hesitant to turn away a stranger who could be a heavenly god visiting in human form" (Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* 14, xxixff., 1114, ix). The deity wants to test Abraham here in this fashion. Consequently, the men remain standing before the tent in the attitude of those who silently seek admission. (Gunkel 1997, 193).

Anonymity appears to be the watchword of these mysterious theophanies. As a sidebar, Gunkel (1997, 193) suggests that an anonymous visitation by a deity might be at the root of Matthew 25:31-46 in which Jesus is reported to appear to those differentiated as sheep or goat by virtue of whether they render aide to those in need. Fretheim (1996, 464) observes,

> The motif of hospitality extends into the NT. Jesus specifies that the lack of hospitality serves as grounds for judgment (Mathew 25:43). Acting on behalf of one of "the least of these" constitutes an act on behalf of God. Hospitality toward God is not simply a spiritual matter, but a response of the whole self in the midst of the quite mundane affairs of everyday life. Although we are not

> always able to identify the presence of God in the midst of life, God assumes flesh and blood in the neighbor (1 John 4:20).

Summarizing Abraham's encounter with his mysterious guests, Gunkel (1997, 193) writes,

> Every element in the following intends to depict how extravagantly hospitable Abraham was, how brilliantly, therefore, he stood the test. His decision to host them is made immediately and will be carried out immediately. To the best of his ability, then, he tactfully shortens the uncomfortable situation of asking for them. The householder acts in this manner when he wants to especially honor a guest. He bows deeply before the strangers as though they were princes (2 Samuel 9:6; 14:4; 1 Kings 1:47). החתשה is a technical term for a certain bow: the knee on the ground, "the nose in the dust" (Genesis 91:1). With many and the most courteous words he requests the honor that they deign to enter his tent. Oriental courtesy is more prolix and submissive than ours. The inferior avoids saying "I" at first in addressing the superior in order not to be a nuisance, preferring instead the self-reference "your servant" (Genesis 33:5; 42:11; 2 Samuel 24:21; 2 Kings 8:13; etc.).

Not only does Abraham address the baseline needs of the weary travelers, but he prepares for them a lavish, extravagant meal, including meat. The host far exceeds his obligations to, and the expectations of, the guests. This text serves as a paradigm because of the time-honored custom of hospitality was practiced, so that guests might be honored with such care that it would bring honor to the host as well.

The description of the events under the oaks of Mamre leads directly to the graphic scene which unfolds in Sodom. Westermann (1985, 274) reminds the reader that "Gen.18:1-16a, in its present context, is part of a larger narrative complex which covers chs.18 and 19. It was originally a self-contained narrative consisting of the introduction, the visit of the three men to Abraham (vv. 1-8), and the promise of a son (vv. 9-16a)." Westermann's observations are a reminder that Genesis 18 and 19 should be read as a continuous narrative rather than as independent, isolated texts. There is a clear message implied when considering the unit as one narrative, something not readily apparent when read as an independent or isolated text. The story of Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18 leads directly into the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, considered the quintessential prohibitive narrative addressing the issue of non-heterosexual behavior.

In their discussion of homosexuality and hospitality Gerald O. West, Sithembiso Zwane, and Charlene van der Walt take a unique approach with the seamless transition from Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18 to Lot's home and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. They invert the order of the chapters which allows the reader to better understand the way that these two stories inform one another, each one dependent on the other for interpretive transparency. In their ". . .moving textually from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18 and moving contextually from concerns about homosexuality and exclusion to concerns about hospitality and inclusion," the authors have opened new windows of discovery and new avenues of discussion. Their goal is, that through contextual Bible study, students can deploy "the methodological capacities of biblical studies, using both literary-narrative and socio-historical modes of analysis, to identify and read with marginalized 'voices' in and behind biblical texts" (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 5-6). They note, "these ancient biblical voices become the dialogue partners of the contemporary marginalized sectors" employed by the Ujamaa Centre's Contextual Bible Study at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 6). They then add, "the embodied incipient theology forged within marginalized bodies becomes an organized marginalized group's public theology. Such local public theologies become additional resources within a movement's social struggle for change" (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 6). Specifically germane to their conversation is,

> . . .the most recent developments of what is a long praxis process grappling with Genesis 19-18 in the context of increasing South African and African attention to "homosexuality". The inverse order is deliberate. We began, historically and hermeneutically, with Genesis 19, grappling with this text as a site of struggle

> because of the condemnatory and destructive reception history of this text in our communities; we then move from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18 (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 6).

The Ujamaa Centre sees itself as serving "social movements with biblical scholarship not primarily as a form of 'research' but as a contribution to potential social change (as praxis)" (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 7). In this regard their work could be compared to Osmer's third task, answering the question "what's going on" as well as tapping into a major driving force behind this research. The Centre notes, "the primary focus here is praxis, with reflection as a constitutive component of that praxis" (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 7). "The Ujamaa Centre began working with Genesis 19 as part of its work in the area of gender-based violence in the late 1990s," (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 9) a major aspect of the story of Lot at his home in Sodom and Gomorrah. They note,

> . . . Genesis 19 was a strategic choice, offering us the opportunity to open interpretive space for faith-based engagement with the emerging topic of "homosexuality", while also addressing the topic of male rape. The logic of our choice of this text at the time (1990s) was that by using this allegedly homophobic biblical text we might deconstruct homophobic receptions of Genesis 19, reading the text instead as a condemnation of (heterosexual) male rape. . . (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 9).

The Centre interpreted Genesis 19 through the lens of Genesis 18 which is a transparently hospitable text, the antithesis to the actions of the mob at Lot's house in Sodom. Through this re-reading of Genesis 19 within the literary-narrative of Genesis 18, the linkage of the two texts,

> provided significant capacity for community-based conversation about 'homosexuality' by posing the question of whether Genesis 19 had anything at all to do with 'homosexuality". Genesis 18, so clearly a narrative about Abraham's rural hospitality to three strangers, provided the narrative frame for recognizing Genesis 19 as equally clearly the story of Lot's urban hospitality to two of these very same strangers (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 9-10).

The Ujamaa Centre's work with these pivotal texts caught the attention of the Pietermaritzburg Gay & Lesbian Network with whom the Centre had been in relationship since 2013, motivating further conversations "that constructed contestation between notions of 'homosexuality' and notions of 'hospitality'" (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 10).

> The appropriations of the LGBTIQ+ community, discriminated against and stigmatized on the basis of their sexual identity and orientation, enabled us to embark on yet another cycle of See-Judge-Act, for among the comments these participants made was the following inversion of the text's usual appropriation: "'The church is like Sodom, just as the men of Sodom wanted to subject others to their power, so the church wants to subject us to its power. Re-reading this text reminds us to question each and every text; God himself will come down to judge the church, just as God himself came down to judge Sodom!' This theme was taken up by others, who asked, "Could not this text, as it is interpreted by Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jesus, be read as a story about receiving and welcoming homosexuals into our churches?" (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 10).

West, Zwane, and Walt continue their discussion by noting,

> . . . the detail of biblical text has the potential to disrupt 'church theology-type' interpretations of the Bible, so the Ujamaa Centre's CBS honours textual detail, drawing responsibly on the work of biblical scholarship, but shaped by our ideo-theological accountability to a liberation theology or "prophetic theology" trajectory. The redaction composition history of the Abraham saga-cycle in general and of these in particular (Genesis 18:1-15) is complex . . . Our delimitation of Genesis 18:1-15 is itself an ideo-theological choice, providing literary-narrative textual detail to deconstruct the homophobic reception history of Genesis 19 on two fronts. First, Genesis 18:1-5 offers textual resources for recognizing "hospitality" resonances across these texts; and second, Genesis 18:6-15 offers textual resources to extend the notion of hospitality to notions of inclusion . . . These CBS have shifted from a re-reading of Genesis 19, to a re-reading of Genesis 19 as part of a larger narrative that begins in Genesis 18, to a re-reading of the sagas with which Genesis 18 begins. In doing these related CBS, LGBTIQ+ communities have been affirmed, and those who have condemned them using Genesis 19 have been given textual pause and cause to reconsider. Proclamations of hate have been transformed to gestures and words of welcome. Welcomed strangers have shared gifts. Exclusion has been transformed into inclusion (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 19, 20, 23).

The work of the Ujamaa Centre has not only allowed but has advocated for and empowered different community contexts to summon "the Bible to speak words of life in the midst of theologies of death" (West, Zwane, & Walt 2021, 23).

4.2.2 The Book of Ruth

"Opinions about the purpose of Ruth are as diverse and contradictory as those about its date. . ." (Bush 1996, 48). Marjo Korpel (2001, 1) notes, that the book of Ruth "is one of the shortest books of the Bible and has often been described as a relatively simple story, a charming folktale with little theological depth. In more recent times, however, research into the structure of the book has led to the conviction that quite on the contrary it is a literary masterpiece." John Dominic Crossan (2012, 69) describes the book of Ruth as a challenge parable, and indeed it is challenging in the way it confronted the xenophobic fears of the Israelites. The book of Ruth serves as a wonderful apology for hospitality, not only toward aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers, but more specifically toward women, who throughout the Hebrew Bible are relegated to inferior social status.

The book of Ruth is devoted to the challenges presented by clannish segregation, tribalism, and national purity in a time of conflict, when various peoples were brought together by events beyond their control. Such circumstances created social climates in which the boundaries of hospitable practice were stretched to include new ways to ensure the survival of one's people. The importance of the survival of the nation of Israel for Ruth's story leads to greater openness toward immigration and intermarriage.

The book of Ruth embraces the Moabites, who are linked to David, "a fact which challenged narrow religious outlook and demanded of the people of Israel a responsible reinterpretation of attitudes toward non-Israelite peoples" (Kennedy 1970, 465). "The theme of care for others is . . . heightened because of Ruth's Moabite ancestry" challenging exclusivistic perspectives as a baseline in the novella (Sakenfeld 1999, 4). The book of Ruth places an emphasis on "challenging the limitations of traditional ethnic barriers" prevalent in Ezra and Nehemiah, perhaps "read as a challenge to community purity perspectives of the late pre-exilic Deuteronomistic History, with its emphasis against relationships with the local Canaanites" (Sakenfeld 1999, 5). As Sakenfeld (1999, 5) declares, ". . . the repeated need to challenge narrow exclusivism in the life of the ancient community should remind readers that the story of Ruth addresses a perennial issue in the human community." Edward F. Campbell, Jr., (1975, 35) citing R. G. Boling 1975, 276), points out that the book of Ruth may have once been an appendage to the book of Judges, specifically countering the inhospitality on display in Judges 19. The two books "are completely contrastive," with the story of the Levite and the Concubine at Gibeah, with "old institutions . . . thoroughly misapplied . . . in the whole miserable performance, they have obviously lost track of Yahweh completely" (Campbell, Jr. 1975, 35-36). "The contrast with the Ruth story is striking," with many commentators observing that this story is placed right after the book of Judges, not only because of their chronological connection, "but also to the contrast between the two portrayals" (Campbell, Jr., 1975, 36). Kandy Queen-Sutherland (2016, 33) notes that "at its core . . . the book of Ruth is concerned with a theology of redemptive self-definition," working "toward a fulfilled future, a future that perpetuates the true intentions of God's covenant." Queen-Sutherland (2016, 33) observes that "the ability to have some sense of historical context with regard to its authorship allows the modern reader a means to understand better the motives and purpose of the narrative."

> Who wrote such a story and why? What were the political, social, and religious conditions under which it was written? What specific issues was the story of

> Ruth attempting to address, or what unjust conditions was it trying to satisfy? The answers to these questions are not found overtly in the text (Queen-Sutherland 2016, 33).

Although the book of Ruth lends itself to speculation on some points, the call for inclusiveness is at its core. The Ruth narrative remains relevant in a twenty-first century world struggling with mass migration, sometimes referred as the "migrant problem," which calls for a better understanding and integration of biblical/theological hospitality into the complex relationships that challenge those living in the postmodern world.

Ruth's story can be described as a love story that values kindness and delivers hope. Athalya Brenner (1999, 162), comments on the broad interpretations available to the casual reader, saying,

> The book of Ruth can and has been read as an optimistic, idyllic story of integration, as polemic against exogamy and xenophobia (see Ezra and Nehemiah), as a story of love, as a story of duty and *hesed*. It has also been read as a story of traditional Jewish conversion. These readings and others are possible. . .

It is interesting to note that Brenner's reading of the book of Ruth tends to focus on the negative image of women in the storyline. *Hesed* (חסד), a Hebrew term associated with the book of Ruth, generally means goodness or kindness, as well as the extending of mercy (Brown, Driver, Briggs 1906, 338-339; Botterweck & Ringgren 1986, 44-64; Clines 2009, 126). Clines (2009, 126) describes the term as "loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, love, and mercy." Occurring 245 times in the Hebrew Bible, the term speaks to human interactions and interpersonal relationships (Lipinski 2001, 45-46; Botterweck & Ringgren 1986, 45). *Hesed* implies covenantal living and indicates reciprocal action, a mutuality of concern (Lipinski 2001, 46). In some translations the idea of "dealing kindly" is conveyed, though that is a stretch of its literal meaning, the rubrics involved being far more obligatory than altruistic. It is not only an attitude but a course of action as well. "It is an act that promotes life. It is intervention on behalf of someone suffering misfortune or distress. It is a demonstration of friendship or piety. It pursues what is good and not what is evil. Thus, the most appropriate translation of *hesed* is 'goodness,' 'grace,' or 'kindness'" (Lipinski 2001, 51; see Queen-Sutherland 2016, 37). The meaning of *hesed* in the Dead Sea scrolls, for more than half of the passages including it, is the plural "acts of kindness" (Lipinski 2001, 64). Lipinski writes,

> . . . Kindness can most surely fulfill its function of preserving and promoting life, thus strengthening society, when it follows and is explained by certain social norms . . . (Lipinski 2001, 51-52) . . . God's kindness towards an individual places that individual in a new relationship with his neighbor, a relationship based on Yahweh's kindness . . . Thus *hesed* shapes not only the relationship of Yahweh with human beings, but also that of human beings among themselves (Lipinski 2001, 63).

Hesed "is especially . . . seen in the lifestyle modeled for us by both Ruth and Boaz in those actions that the narrator specifically designates *hesed* through . . . Ruth's commitment to Naomi . . . and Boaz's generosity to Ruth. . ." (Bush 1996, 53). *Hesed* speaks of the individual's relationship with God, "precisely because it is what Yahweh requires . . ." (Lipinski 2001, 50), and conveys "abounding in faithfulness" (Koehler and Baumgartner 1994, 337**),** as well as "loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, love, mercy and . . . "mercies, (deeds of) kindness" (Clines 1993, 1-7). Perhaps the best image of *hesed* is found in Micah 6:8, "(God) has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" In this verse it is easy to recognize the connection between the term *hesed* and the more elusive term *hospitality*. Finally, "the kindness of Yahweh became the content of his covenant with Israel. But even in this late stage of development (in the etymological evolution of the term) our concept did not become a legal term. In it we hear overtones of promise and grace, mercy and unexpected kindness, not of law and obligation" (Clines 1993, 64).

The romance between Boaz and Ruth becomes a union blessed by the writer and by God. By extension, then, God blesses unions between Israelites and outsiders in general (Campbell 1975, 28-29). Such unions are providential. Campbell declares, ". . . God's activity in the Ruth book is very much that of . . . one whose manifestation is not by intervention but by a highly exercised providential control. . . God is the primary actor in the drama" (Campbell 1975, 28-29). Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer (1996, 919) comments,

> . . . Naomi comes from and Ruth immigrates to a community in which foreigners (particularly foreign women) traditionally were viewed with suspicion, as a potential source of temptation to sin (as in, e.g., 1 Kgs 11:1-8; Prov 5:1-20). Many biblical references indicate that Ruth's ancestry and culture were held in contempt by the people of her new homeland. If Israel had an official "immigration policy" in the time of judges, undoubtedly Moabites would have been listed as "undesirable elements." Moabites were banned from the assembly of the Lord because of their ancestors' sins. In order to decide who corresponds to a "Moabite" in our society, we need to consider not just those who are strangers in our midst, but those whom we have banned from the fellowship of worshipping Christians.

Alter points out the irony of a foreigner such as Ruth having character above reproach, particularly since she is linked to Genesis 19, as a descendant of Lot and one of his incestuous daughters. Alter (2015, 58) notes,

> Even such presumably exemplary figures in the national history as Jacob, Joseph, David, and Solomon exhibit serious weaknesses, sometimes behaving in the most morally questionable ways. In Ruth, by contrast, there are no bad people . . . Ruth's Moabite origins have led many interpreters—convincingly, in my view—to see this story as a quiet polemic against the opposition of Ezra and Nehemiah to intermarriage with the surrounding peoples when the Judeans returned to their land in the fifth century BCE. . .

The book of Ruth, therefore, may be understood as a polemic against xenophobia in general as well a reconsideration of earlier prohibitions regarding intermarriage with foreigners. It is important to point out, however, that Ruth religiously assimilated into Israelite beliefs and practices, thus abandoning her own faith tradition and making for an easy and seamless transition. The Hebrew Bible consistently recognizes the tension that existed between the Israelites who understood themselves as chosen by Yahweh, and their neighbors whom they regarded as polytheistic pagans. Alter (2015, 59) goes on to say,

> It is hard not to see in the boldly iconoclastic invention of this plot an argument against the exclusionary policy on foreign wives propagated by Ezra and Nehemiah. This would also make the fifth century BCE, at the moment when intermarriage was an urgent issue, a plausible time for the composition of the book . . . If the writer set out to make Ruth the Moabite a thoroughly good person in order to implement his argument for openness to exogamy, he also had a rare gift for making good characters convincing, manifested from the very beginning. . .

The outcomes seem to fluctuate somewhere between tolerance and acceptance, keeping distance, or outright hostility. It can seem that the God of the Israelites suffers from a personality disorder, in one moment inclusive and gracious, and in the next moment malevolent and vengeful**.** Israel sometimes celebrates the demise of foreign adversaries, a direct result of the cultic religious practices of these neighboring tribes and clans as they worshipped false deities, specifically those who followed Baal. By participating in these pagan religious practices, these non-Israelites were confirmed to be godless, justifying the harsh treatment leveled against them. No doubt it was believed that they deserved everything they got! The book of Ruth radically confronts the danger of these narrow and misguided attitudes revealing the residual of a deeply engrained and reinforced xenophobia, all buoyed by elitism, prejudice, and nationalistic pride. The book of Ruth condemns the exploitive abuses underlying the unfortunate consequences of prejudice and persecution.

The book of Ruth is a reminder that, when critiquing and quoting the Bible, one must examine the broader context of the writings. As Larkin (1996, 11) notes, while referring to the book of Ruth, along with the book of Esther and the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50,

> Thematically, what all these three stories have in common is that all are literature born of enforced residence in an alien land. All of them bring together Israelite and foreign cultures, and between them they show a range of different attitudes in Israel to foreigners, united by the common insistence that meaningful human relations are possible across national barriers and even that the Lord works to bring them about.

In the final analysis, the reader of various biblical texts is left with an interpretive decision about what kind of God this was, in relation to a broad multicultural humanity, and what kind of human beings the people of God should become. The way persons of faith should live and interact within the growing global continues to be influenced by theology even today, especially among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, who share sacred stories, but view them uniquely within a specific culture.

4.2.3 The Book of Jonah

Conventional biblical wisdom is often the interpretive engine driving an understanding of the book of Jonah. The book of Jonah is either used as an apology demanding the necessity of evangelism, appealing to evangelistic zeal and fervor, or it is described as showing the consequences of disobedience, as seen in Jonah's attempt to flee from God and his initial refusal to preach to the Ninevites. This interpretation posits the belief that the disobedient are estranged from God and that they will be punished by this God for their lack of obedience. God's judgment is sudden, sure, and swift, bringing retributive justice, judgment, and wrath on those who do not follow the rules and go their own way.

The focus of the book of Jonah is God's unmerited forgiveness of Israel's enemies. Alter points out the counternarrative in Jonah, ". . . Only in Jonah is a man called to deliver a prophecy to the general populace of an altogether foreign, and hostile, nation" (Alter 2015, 136). The text portrays Jonah as fleeing *down* to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. He boards a ship and goes *down* to Joppa, eventually being discovered cowering *down* in the hold of the ship, while the other passengers prayed to their gods for deliverance from a raging storm. After Jonah admits his fear of the God of Israel from whom he is hiding, he is thrown overboard, *down* into the rough sea, descending *down* into its waters until he was devoured by a huge fish, going *down* into its belly. While this kind of mythological interpretation surrounding this story makes for captivating preaching and teaching, in many respects it completely misses or ignores the intended focus of the narrative. The book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece, using a variety of techniques to convey the story, all of which alerts the reader to the intent of this tale. Crossan (2012, 77) describes this short tale as another example of a challenge parable "because of, on the one hand, what the standard biblical tradition *expects* of prophets and, on the other, what it *does not expect* of Gentiles." Jonah's mythology contains suspense, hyperbole, exaggeration, understatement, surrealism, word repetition, paronomasia (word play), irony, parody, and satire, all condensed in what is a rather short narrative (Klooster 2019, 12-14, 35, 38, 42). Marinus Klooster (2019, 26, 27, 29, 32) describes this work as allegory, didactic fiction, midrash, and novella. Rather than seeking the destruction of a reprobate foreign city, a fate that had consumed Jericho, Sodom and Gomorrah, Gibeah, and other enclaves, God seeks to redeem the citizens of Nineveh, the "great city," who are portrayed as completely unaware of any sense of impending punishment. It is interesting that,

> Jonah engages with no Israelites in the story. . . he has an exchange with the polytheistic mariners, then he addresses the Ninevites, and his closest connection is with two presumably insensate living things, a very large fish and a leafy plant. The God with whom he has such difficulties because of his Israelite nationalistic mindset is not chiefly the God of Israel but the God of the whole world, of all creatures large and small (Alter 2015, 137).

Somehow, these Assyrians had captured God's attention and were the recipients of divine grace, mercy, and forgiveness if they would only repent. And, of course, they did, creating a firestorm of anger in Jonah, who knew they would do so and did not wish for them to be spared, but rather suffer the fate of an angry and vengeful God.

Douglas Stuart (1990, 431) asserts that ". . . Jonah is one of the best remembered biblical characters. People otherwise largely ignorant of the scripture's content have heard about Jonah and the 'whale.'" Alter (2015, 135) explains,

> We know nothing about the author of the Book of Jonah or his geographic location, and only a rough approximation can be made of the time of the book's composition. The main evidence for dating is linguistic: there are quite a few turns of phrase that indicate this is Late Biblical prose, a kind of Hebrew not written till after the return from the Babylonian exile in the fifth century BCE. The book's universalist theology probably also argues for a relatively late date because one does not find this sort of rigorously world-embracing monotheism until Second Isaiah, the anonymous sixth-century prophet of the Babylonian exile.

Alter points out how confusing it can be for scholars to categorize or label the Jonah narrative, because of its numerous themes.

> It has been called everything from a Menippean satire to an allegory, but none of these identifications of Jonah is entirely convincing. I would see Jonah as its own kind of ad hoc innovative narrative. It aims to recast traditional Israelite notions of prophecy in a radically universalist framework. The prophets of Israel all work in an emphatically national context. Their messages are addressed to the people of Israel, often with explicitly political concerns, and the messages are manifestly directed to the fate of the nation . . . That may be one reason why Jonah is accorded no verbal prophetic message, only that single brief prediction of catastrophe which, if one is supposed to think of such considerations, he would have spoken not in Hebrew but in the language of the Assyrians (Alter 2015, 137).

Commenting on the storyline, Fretheim observes, "More often than not the big fish has gotten all the attention. This is as true today as in any past generation. Ask Christians or Jews, or any person on the street for that matter, what the book of Jonah is all about. The fish will figure prominently in most replies" (Fretheim 1977, 13). Fretheim adds that the book has also been used "as a touchstone of orthodoxy," built around a literal acceptance of its content (Fretheim 1977, 13). These perspectives, however, "tend to ignore the fact that the miracle of the fish plays a relatively minor role in the story (it is mentioned in only three verses!). Moreover, commonly betraying minimal acquaintance with the book as a whole, (readers) have been prone to shift attention away from the more significant aspects of the book and the question of its message then and now" (Fretheim 1977, 13-14).

The book of Jonah is a text about hospitality in the way it respects the other, while confronting Israel's dangerous inclinations toward xenophobia and nationalism. As A. J. Glaze, Jr. asserts, "the book of Jonah exposes . . . a narrow nationalism and shows the redemptive design of God for all mankind." Stuart (1990, 434) notes, that "at one time it was popular to assume that Jonah was written as a kind of universal treatise against the rigid, narrow reformist views of Ezra and Nehemiah," because "in ancient Judaism the book served as a bulwark against the narrow particularism that allowed Jews to think they alone were worthy of God's blessing while other peoples were not." Jonah is the only prophet sent by God "to proclaim a message in a foreign land" (Limburg 1993, 22). Limburg (1993, 24) then cites Westermann as saying, ". . . a story narrates a series of events from a point of tension to the resolution of that tension.'" The story of Jonah certainly falls within this definition. "Modern scholars assume that Jonah is an anonymous short story of theological fiction" (Nogalski 2011, 401). Jack M. Sasson (1990, 24) observes that in its wider context, ". . . Jonah is regarded as an excellent intermediate . . . change in Israel's theology and . . . a broadening of its intellectual vision." It reveals "Israel's struggle for ethnic integrity" while illustrating, "the universalistic creed adopted in prophetic circles within Israel" (Sasson 1990, 24). "More significant than the order of transmission is the theological perspective of Jonah, which differs from the remaining writings in the Twelve," containing "a message of impending judgment on a hated nation (Assyria), but the book turns on the unparalleled acts of repentance of that nation, resulting in YHWH's decision not to punish Nineveh" (Nogalski 2011, 405). Jonah speaks of Nineveh's repentance and deliverance, but "Nahum condemns Nineveh and portrays its destruction" (Nogalski 2011, 405). The foreigners in the story, both the sailors and the Ninevites, are portrayed as "model characters." In contrast, Jonah is portrayed throughout the book "as obstinate, arrogant, unwilling to change, and self-centered," his bigotry evident as he sulks at the end of the story (Nogalski 2011, 406). Rather than delivering judgment, God extends forgiveness and mercy to the citizens of Ninevah (Nogalski 2011, 407-408). The indictment of Israel is revealed in Jonah's anger that God shows "compassion on the nations" (Nogalski 2011, 405). The story of Jonah may be read as a model of God's concern for all people, and for universal concern among all peoples for each other. Israel's archenemies were the Assyrians, including the citizens of Nineveh, and here is a story calling for the Israelite nation to engage and embrace their Assyrian adversaries.

> *Nineveh* was the capital of Assyria for the last one hundred years or so of its life. Assyria had been responsible for some of Israel's greatest disasters. The northern kingdom was so totally destroyed in 721 B.C. that its tribes disappeared from history (see 2 Kings 17). In the years following, Assyria devastated the southern kingdom, Judah; it was miraculously saved only in the final hour (see 2 Kings 19).

Fretheim (1977, 40) then adds,

> Assyria thus remained the object of contempt in Israel's eyes for generations. Nineveh became a symbol of violence and oppression. The entire prophecy of Nahum, delivered sometime shortly before Nineveh's downfall in 612 B.C., gives a picture of this city in the eyes of Israel . . . calling Nineveh the bloody city, full of lies, booty and dead bodies . . . , a city that could be likened to a shapely harlot out to seduce all nations (3:1-4; see Zeph 2:13-15) . . . Two ideas

> are at work in the story. The first is that Israel hated the Assyrian citizens of Nineveh and would no doubt have supported its destruction. The second is that God desired that the Ninevites repent and be spared, choosing to be in relationship with them and affirming that God loves even the worst of enemies. This picture of Nineveh was transmitted through the generations. . . (Fretheim 1977, 41).

The Israelites' hatred of the Ninevites, combined with God's desire to redeem them, creates a teachable moment for the children of Israel. God wants Nineveh's repentance from their evil, but not their conversion to the Israelite way of life. No wonder Jonah flees on a ship headed away from that city. He had no desire to be God's emissary to this evil people. The idea that the Ninevites might deserve God's attention, much less God's care and compassion, was too much to bear. That they might repent of their wickedness and be spared divine punishment was a possibility Jonah could not entertain. At the end of the story, Jonah sits all alone, pouting because he did not get his way and the Ninevites did not get what was coming to them. Regarding the Jonah narrative, Alter (2015, 138) observes,

> God exercises magisterial control over storm winds, fish, livestock, and plants as well as over human beings of all tribes and nations, and (God) asks the recalcitrant prophet why he should "have pity" for an ephemeral plant and not for a vast city of clueless human beings and their beasts. It is beautifully appropriate that the story ends with the beasts, and with a question. It is no way clear how Jonah will respond to the question. Will God's challenge lead him to a transformative insight about God's dominion over all things and all peoples, or will it prove to be a challenge that is quite beyond the myopia of his ingrained prejudices? The trembling balance of this concluding ambiguity perfectly focuses the achievement of the Book of Jonah both as an enchanting story and as the shaking up of an entire theological world.

The story ends without resolution, the reader never knowing if Jonah chooses to repent of his xenophobic ways and understanding God's universal love for all human beings, created in the very image of the Divine.

Scholars are divided regarding the purpose of the book of Jonah, though most agree that a degree of universalism is at the core of the text. Phyllis Trible (1996, 488) notes,

> The older view that Jonah espouses universalism to combat nationalism and exclusivism fostered by the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah has withered for lack of evidence. The book contains no allusions to the reform measures of the fifth century BCE, nor does it portray Jonah as a nationalist. Its universalism is not an attack on Israel; its tone is not polemical; its contents do not report enmity between Israel and the Gentiles. Correspondingly, the book is not a missionary tract to convert non-Israelites. Jonah does not disparage the gods of the sailors or try to make them Yahweh worshippers. Even when, after the storm, they worship Yahweh, they do not repudiate their own gods. Furthermore, the report on the repentance of the Ninevites says nothing about their conversion to Yahwism . . . Neither the theme of polemic against nationalistic Israel nor that of conversion for the nations accounts for the purpose of the book.

Trible also speaks to the idea of the whole of creation being a significant aspect of the book of Jonah, citing its ecological emphases and the value placed on the animals who are "on par with human beings" (Trible 1996, 483). This perspective allows for new interpretive possibilities with a specific focus on hospitality from a broader perspective. This imagery opens up a whole new world of interpretations. Elsewhere in the biblical narrative, the Psalms reflect similar hospitable ideas about creation.

Jack M. Sasson makes a similar argument regarding the wider hospitable aspects of the book of Jonah in his discussion of the dating of the narrative, also providing examples supporting the universalist argument. He offers this assessment,

> . . . many scholars find it necessary to place (Jonah) in the development of Hebrew theological consciousness or to treat it as a document in Israel's struggle for ethnic integrity. On the one hand, Jonah is seen as instructing pagans on the truth of Israel's God. On the other hand, it is said to illustrate the universalistic creed adopted in prophetic circles within Israel. In either case, Jonah is regarded as an excellent intermediate for a change in Israel's theology and thus reflects a broadening of its intellectual vision . . . If the book is evaluated from a New Testament perspective (perhaps because it cites Jonah and his "sign"), Jonah's mission to Nineveh can be seen as endorsing the

> transport of God's word to foreign nations. But Hebrew Scripture gives such an assessment scant support (Sasson 1990, 24).

In conclusion, James Limburg (1993, 34-35) declares,

> The book of Jonah testifies that *God cares about all of the earth* . . . God is described as compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, and filled with steadfast love — this time not toward the people of Israel but toward the people of Nineveh! God loves Israel, the people of God, but God also cares about the Ninevites, the people of the world. The story begins with God's decision to send a prophet to this huge but wicked city and ends with God's declaration of concern for its people and even for the animals that live there.

Perhaps the best analysis of the book of Jonah is found in Trible's commentary. She reminds the reader that the book is open to several interpretations and that each has value and makes a significant contribution. She says,

> The book of Jonah does not disclose its purpose, and speculation has not secured it. This uncertainty matches the meager knowledge about its origin, date, composition, genre, and setting. Nonetheless, the book offers an abundance of literary treasures, theological complexities, and hermeneutical possibilities. . . Interpretations that remain faithful to the diversities and the mysteries best convey the challenges that this cacophonous story provides contemporary communities of faith (Trible 1996, 490).

Perhaps the secret to interpreting the book of Jonah is found in that one illusive word many scholars carefully and selectively use to unlock its mysterious transcendence, and that is "universalism." In the book of Jonah, the reader is quickly made aware that Yahweh, while being intimately understood in the unique way that the Israelites discovered, is a God for everyone, for all persons, and that God's love and mercy, grace and compassion, extends likewise, even to all animals and the rest of the created order. "In ancient Judaism the book served as a bulwark against the narrow particularism that allowed Jews to think they alone were worthy of God's blessing while other peoples were not" (Stuart 1990, 434). God seeks to be in relation with all of creation even as it is in harmony with itself. This includes the most estranged of the human creature, for no one is beyond the grasp of God.

The books of Jonah and Ruth reflect inclusive leanings also found in the larger group of narratives known as Hebrew wisdom literature, though they do not fall into that category. Yong (2008, 112-113) asserts,

> I propose here that ancient Israelite wisdom not only foreshadows the multicultural character of divine hospitality declared through the many tongues of the postexilic experience but also provides bridges for understanding how such hospitality is pertinent to the contemporary interfaith encounter. This thesis flows from the now widespread recognition that the canonical wisdom sayings reflect the influence of the ancient Near Eastern cultures, especially of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan, on the mindset of Hebrew sages. . . there is no doubt, at least at the canonical level, that the wisdom material was collected and preserved by a postexilic community coming to terms with its diasporic situation. Hebrew Bible scholar Ronald Clements notes that it was "this uniquely international origin of wisdom, its claim to express universally valid truths, and not least to present a teaching about life that knew no national boundaries, nor based itself upon a single revelatory act of the past, that made wisdom so important to Israel in the post-exilic period"; hence, this wisdom "could address its promised benefits to Jews who found themselves part of a wider, and often scattered, community who inhabited a God-created universal order." . . . the wisdom material opened up the Israelite view of God's salvation history toward the wider scope of creation history itself. This expanded theological vision . . . anticipates the many tongues of the Day of Pentecost made possible by the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:17) . . . (Clements 1990, 18, 20, cf. Yong 2008, 112).

Despite incongruencies in the texts of the Hebrew Bible, there is a vast amount of material advocating for a theology of "extravagant welcome" as an expression of radical hospitality. By understanding and embracing the ancient custom of Near Eastern hospitality, missional churches can move forward in becoming inclusive communities of faith, particularly as they engage persons from the traditionally marginalized LGBTQQIA+ community.

4.3 HOSPITALITY IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

For Christians, hospitality will become fully apparent and understood through the one called Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. Two phrases from the Gospels give insight into the life and ministry of Jesus while making a compelling case for hospitality in the Christian scriptures: “he had no place to lay his head” and “his own receive him not” (Mt 8:20; Jn 1:11). These two statements, along with a host of longer narratives, provide context for the kind of hospitable practice advocated by Jesus (see Denaux 2012). One commentator describes Jesus as one who had no place to call home, and thus was a “stranger” in every place, thus incorporating familiar imagery from the Hebrew Bible (González 2010). Justo L. González translates the second phrase, offering his literal understanding of the Greek, “He came to what was his own, and what was his own did not accept him” (Jn 1:11). González (2010, 43) suggests this was not merely a matter of local or Jewish rejection, but rejection on a cosmic scale; God’s chosen people rejected God’s chosen one.

The Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus seem obsessed with the theme of hospitality. Even as Luke tells of Jesus’ birth, we learn that “there was no place for them in the inn” (Lk 2:7b). The phrase, “there was no place for them in the inn,” may indicate that the inn was full. The first readers of this story, however, would have immediately understood that the lack of lodging was euphemistic language. While there could have been vacancies at the inn, housing a woman about to give birth might have been problematic, perhaps requiring every male guest to leave the premises. The only way for the innkeeper to offer hospitality to all was to offer other lodging to the birth mother. Matthew Thiessen (2020, 26; see 15, 27-40, 71-72, 77-79, 101 for his full discussion; Thiessen 2012, 16-29; Whitekettle 1995, 393-408 for a depiction of the stages of impurity) suggests that the innkeeper provides the couple accommodations in his stable, thus meeting the cleanliness requirements germane to the cultural milieu, while guaranteeing hospitality for all the guests. While traditionally vilified, the inn keeper provided a hospitable environment for the couple. From the outset of Luke’s

Gospel, this physician and historian establishes hospitality as a feature prominently displayed through the life and teachings of Jesus.

The Christian scriptures, like the Hebrew Bible, employ no definitive term for "hospitality" (Vinson 2008, 324). Richard B. Vinson notes that "Luke uses the verb 'receive' (*dechomai*) in situations where one person offers hospitality to another: 9:5, in the directions to the twelve; 9:48, in the principle of receiving the messenger = receiving the sender; 10:38 and 19:6 use the compound *hypodechomai*, which is synonymous" (Vinson 2008, 324). Some translations such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), choose to translate the root φιλέω (phileo) as hospitality, though this is quite a stretch for a word usually translated as one of the three forms of love found in the Christian scriptures. It appears to have been the prerogative of translators to interpret *phileo* as "hospitality" rather than "love". For example, Hebrews 13:2 is often translated, "Do not neglect to show *hospitality* to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." While "love" might be the literal translation of φιλοενία (philoxenia), "hospitality" certainly links the idea as expressed in Hebrews, which cites the book of Genesis, echoing an image from Genesis 18 in which Abraham welcomed his three unnamed guests. These strangers appeared as men, but according to the text, were in fact divine beings. Related texts include Romans 12:9-21, particularly verse 13; 1 Clement 1:2, 10:7, 11:2, and 12:1; Shepherd of Hermas 8:10 (Stählin 1974, 113-146).

A cornerstone of Judaism, the *Shema Israel* (שמע) boldly declares, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4). This supreme commandment of the Hebrew Bible, along with its accompanying mandate to love neighbor as self (Lev 19), were the rules within which Jesus fulfilled his hospitable purpose, carrying out his mission and ministry directed specifically toward the oppressed. The

Shema was the spring from which all his teachings and acts of love flowed. It is impossible to understand the Christian scriptures or follow in Jesus' footsteps without this same foundation. This supreme law is at the heart of biblical hospitality in general, and the gospel of Jesus in particular. Yong (2008, 101) states,

> We begin with Jesus as the paradigm of hospitality because he represents and embodies the hospitality of God. Indeed, as the authorized representative of God's salvific hospitality, Jesus is inhabited by and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14; cf. Acts 10:38) in order "to bring good news to the poor. . . , to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18b-19).

Yong (2008, 101) notes that Jesus, the anointed one, was constituted pneumatically and pneumatologically, "including his ministry of hospitality. . ." Yong (2008, 101) adds, ". . . Jesus characterizes the hospitality of God in part as the exemplary recipient of hospitality," in his role as guest turned host. Even when a guest in someone's home, Jesus inevitably becomes host, serving the household. Luke uses meals as a medium by which Jesus invokes hospitable practices, leading, Yong to observe "that it is in the various meal scenes in the Gospel wherein we see the most eager recipients of the divine hospitality," offered to the poor and the oppressed first, rather than to the religious leaders (Yong 2008, 102). Jesus calls the religious leaders to repentance while encouraging hospitality to flow freely in planned or impromptu gatherings. ". . . Jesus frequently upsets the social conventions of meal fellowship (e.g., Jesus does not wash before dinner), and even goes so far as to rebuke his hosts. . ." (Yong 2008, 102). These same dynamics will be seen in the work of his disciples following Jesus' death, in the missionary enterprises of Paul as he carries the gospel to the Hellenistic world "a recipient and conduit of God's hospitality," and then "manifested throughout the first century church" (2008, 104-105). Yong (2008, 105-106) suggests,

> . . . that a Lukan theology of hospitality reflects the trinitarian character of the hospitable God. The God who invites humanity to experience his redemptive hospitality in Christ by the Holy Spirit is the same God who receives hospitality of human beings as shown to Christ and as manifest through those who welcome and are inhabited by the Holy Spirit. In this trinitarian framework, Jesus is the normative, decisive, and eschatological revelation of the hospitable God, the Son of God who goes into the far country. . . the hospitality of God to the ends of the earth and to the end of the ages. . .

Ernest van Eck, describing a new missional identity and ethical standard in Mark's Gospel that invites those labeled outsiders to participate in God's realm, notes that this development violated "the set order of the world (holiness) as perceived by the prevailing ideology" (van Eck 2003, 1, 8). Jesus' healings were a direct countermeasure to traditional practices.

> Jesus, as God's agent and patron of his kingdom, immediately after his pronouncement of the dawn of this new reality, starts his mission by making the kingdom visible. God's kingdom is a kingdom directed at outsiders with a patron that, in his patronage, cushions the vagaries of social inferiors (outsiders or marginalized) by endowing those who are loyal to his kingdom with the overarching quality of kinship. Moreover, the gospel of this kingdom proclaims and enacts God's justice *vis-á-vis* the injustices of the gospels and kingdoms of Rome and the Temple elite. This becomes clear in the patronage the Markan Jesus endows without distinction to outsiders in Mark's narrative world. . . (van Eck 2003, 8).

Yong observes that in response to these developments, the Church, as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, "makes available and embodies the hospitality of God through the practices of individual members," each becoming a recipient of and conduit for, God's hospitable nature and practice, specifically "through ever-shifting sets of human interrelationships" (Yong 2008, 106-107). Yong adds, ". . . many tongues require many hospitable practices because the life of the church includes its mission in a pluralistic world, . . . extending the ancient . . . conception of hospitality so as to include the hospitable treatment of strangers" (Yong 2008, 107). Yong continues,

> If the gifts of many tongues equals the empowerment toward many hospitable practices, then Christian hospitality today remains, paradoxically, both unlimited and yet constrained—unconditional and yet conditioned—by the trinitarian economy and hospitality of God . . . I argue first that because Christian hospitality proceeds from the magnanimous hospitality of God, it is founded on the incarnational and pentecostal logic of abundance rather than that of human economics of exchange and scarcity. . . (Yong 2008, 118).

Yong's understanding of hospitable practices as having roots in an abundance perspective rather than a scarcity mindset, can undergird hospitality within the contemporary Church in much the same way that it fostered ancient Near Eastern hospitality among the Israelites so long ago.

4.3.1 Song of Mary (Luke 1:46b-55)

While all the Gospels contain material related to ancient Near Eastern hospitality, it is in the Gospel of Luke that hospitality is most prominently revealed. The writer of the Lukan narrative sets the tone early in the texts with an eloquent soliloquy called the Song of Mary, also known as the Magnificat. This narrative belies its calm demeanor, revealing at its depths a scandalous, subversive demand for social justice. In that regard it mirrors many of the prophecies from the Hebrew Bible. Against the prevailing dominance of *Pax Romana*, "it is precisely this experience of life under Roman rule that is alluded to in Mary's Song" (Pickett 2009, 425). The Gospel of Luke from its outset provides "a counter-narrative inasmuch as the divine beneficence and healing mediated through Jesus are set in contrast to an experience of imperial society as one of scarcity and subjugation." New Testament scholar Raymond Pickett is conducting research regarding "biblical resources for a missional ecclesiology that uses the arts of community organizing to cultivate communities of faith committed to social transformation" (Pickett 2009, 425). He sees the Gospel of Luke as a vital contributor, as this narrative "tells the story of Jesus as a vision of salvation that is covenantal and communal, encompassing every dimension of life, including the economic" (Pickett 2013, 37). Mary's song, the Magnificat, boldly introduces Luke's reader to this emphasis and initiative, reflecting all that is to come in the remainder of Luke's Gospel, this version having "more to say about economic realities, including poverty and wealth and the use of possessions, than any other New Testament document" (Pickett 2013, 37).

The Magnificat is a reminder of a similar song in the hymn sang by barren Hannah, a thankful response to her discovery that she was miraculously pregnant with Samuel (1 Sam 1:20). It also recalls other heroic stories, including the song of Deborah in her praise of Jael (Judg 5:24-27) who kills Sisera with a tent peg as he slept, and Judith (Apocrypha, Judith 12:12) who cuts off Holofernes head while he slept after a tryst in his quarters, both of whom through their feminine guile brought down the proud and powerful, a strong sentiment expressed in Mary's Song. In those two stories, these women turn the hospitable tables, one as host, the other as guest, violating the customary principles and practice of ancient Near Eastern hospitality as they turned on and killed their evil guest, an adversary threatening the tribal and cultic concerns of Israel. Both women were praised for their heroic acts in defense of the Israelite nation, the language in the accolades attributed to Hannah being the same as that used in admiration of Mary.

Susan Connelly (2014, 8) observes, "unfortunately, we often present a very wrong picture of Mary in the Church. Art, music and homilies more often than not emphasize her submission to God's will as passivity, her obedience as subjection, and her 'yes' to God as something sweet, small and feeble. The fact that a woman dares to speak in a narrative of such import, in a day when women were without voice and subjugated to an inferior status, is an indicator that the writer was making a not-so-subtle statement. Feminist theologian Jane

Schaberg (1987, 92) adds that, “Commentators have often remarked on the seeming inappropriateness of the tone and sentiments expressed in Magnificat, as attributed to Mary. That is, they are thought to be inappropriate in the mouth of a young girl who has just miraculously conceived the Messiah and received the glorious promises of his destiny.” After all, everyone in that time believed they knew a woman’s place! Mary echoes the prophets of old, speaking truth to power in a text that has had a long history of controversy in the Church, with many in authority attempting to silence this short but profound text. Schaberg (1987, 92; see Hendrickx 1984; Stegemann 1984 & Miranda 1974) adds, “The Magnificat is a song of liberation, personal and social. It praises God’s liberating actions on behalf of the speaker, actions that are paradigmatic of all God’s actions on behalf of the lowly, the oppressed, the suffering. It has been called ‘one of the most revolutionary documents in all literature, containing three separate revolutions’: moral (v 51), social (v 52), and economic (v 53).” Written in past tense, as if these promises were already fulfilled, “the Magnificat trumpets joy in and seems to imply personal knowledge of the accomplishment of God’s justice” offering a word of hope to all the needy in a divinely appointed response (Schaberg 1987, 92). Schaberg (1987, 92; see Soelle 1984) cites Dorothee Soelle, who describes the Mary of the Magnificat as “a subversive, a sympathizer.” Guatemala once banned its public recitation in the 1980s while British authorities tried to silence the song at Evensong at an earlier time, the Magnificat also banned in Argentina because of its use to call for nonviolent resistance to the ruling military junta in the mid-1970s (Connelly 2014, 12). Dietrich Bonhoeffer invoked the Song of Mary as a counternarrative to the mindless evil perpetuated in Nazi Germany, proclaiming,

> The Song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who

> speaks out here . . . This song . . . is a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth (Connelly 2014, 8).

Bonhoeffer's words reverberated against the wickedness that was consuming a nation and its people, a nonviolent message that would transcend the ages, eventually inspiring civil rights icon Martin Luther King, Jr. in America, becoming a witness in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Connelly 2014, 12). Connelly continues, declaring that "the Magnificat is a whole world-view," traditional prose expressing the Jewish faith, "in a God who hears the cry of the poor, the God who exalts the lowly, the God who brings life out of sterility" (Connelly 2014, 8-9). The Magnificat will play out in numerous texts in the Gospels which reflect the Great Reversal advocated by Jesus, the last as first, the weak as strong, among many other examples. Connelly's commentary paints the Magnificat as a mirror in which everyone must look and take account. He adds that the story of the Last Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew provides an excellent example offering further detail about divinely hospitable expectations.

> How we treat our fellow human beings is a question that we must address to ourselves, not to God. The checklist for the Last Judgment exists, and it makes clear that we are not going to be asked how many church rubrics we faithfully observed, or whether we were left or right, conservative or progressive. We're going to be asked how we welcomed the stranger, visited the detention centres, housed the homeless, stood up for asylum seekers (Connelly 2014, 9).

She concludes her summation by speaking of the plights that threaten to diminish our humanity,

> These realities compel us to listen. We are not here to solve all crises and maintain equilibrium. We are to listen, to see what is going on, and to be converted, converted to the utter single-mindedness of following Jesus in whatever situation. Only within the endless cycle of conversion will we know what to do . . . But do we must. We cannot settle for an over-spiritualisation of Jesus' words, or Mary's. Let us not dress up timidity as prudence. Let us be willing to sing in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "the passionate, wild and revolutionary song of Mary" as it should be sung, with full voice, exulting in God, reckless in the knowledge that we are loved, committed to the total

> ongoing personal and communal conversion required by the Gospel, and to act from the stance of joyful but weeping disciples (Connelly 2014, 10-11).

Responding to Connelly's article, Krish Mathavan MSC (2014, 11) declares, "Magnificat calls forth and stirs us into action to be God's instruments to help bring about what is promised." He echoes Connelly's assertions, acknowledging that,

> . . . the Magnificat suggests our faith is not one of individual piety but one with social implications on the national and world stage. As Susan points out, there are always the poor and powerless to exalt and the rich and powerful to unseat, and to be able to see this and act on it through ridicule or tears requires one to go down the narrow path of conversion individually and communally (Mathavan 2014, 12).

He observes that "we do not start from scratch in this work for justice" because God's Spirit is already on the move within us and beyond us (Mathavan 2014, 13). He concludes his analysis of Connelly's work.

> Whatever the case I have realized the revolution must start first of all in us, at which point we can then sing wildly and passionately with Mary about how our souls cannot but proclaim the greatness of God. In this way the Magnificat can become for us a manifesto of both individual and social transformation. Its content is definitely worth our reading and re-reading, and a continual reflecting of it in our lives (Mathavan 2014, 13).

Having allowed Mary to reveal both her vulnerability and her inner strength, the stage is now set to foreshadow Jesus' hospitable feast as host. The writer of Luke's Gospel through Mary's song has directly confronted the roots of injustice, laying bare all that is to come, a stern, stark warning to Paul's "powers and principalities" who believe they exercise ultimate sway. The Song of Mary, this Magnificat, offers a social justice directive, providing the baseline for the practice of hospitality, a custom that will be revealed throughout Luke-Acts.

4.3.2 Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40)

The second chapter of Acts sets the stage for the remainder of Luke's second volume by describing the events that took place at the first Pentecost following Jesus' death and resurrection. Also known as the Feast of Weeks, this celebration was a Jewish festival that on this specific occasion revealed the coming of the Holy Spirit poured out on all flesh, fulfilling the prophecy of Joel (2:28-32) and illustrating God's universal love. This broad inclusion of people from various nations reflected the expansion of the gospel to all persons everywhere. Subsequent stories in the book of Acts describe specific events revealing this hospitable welcome and inclusion. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch begins this conversation. Philip was both a lay person and a gifted preacher who had made quite an impression on Peter and John (Chance 2007, 85). In the first of two stories, Philip successfully preaches the gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-8), a long-despised peoples of mixed-race descent, modeling once again the radically hospitable behavior exhibited by the early Church. The Samaritans respond enthusiastically, with many converting and being baptized and embracing the gospel with fervor and zeal. Included among them was a man named Simon who was a magician, the unlikeliest of candidates for conversion. Through these stories, Luke has introduced his readers to the tenets of a gospel of hospitality and begins to extrapolate further the radical nature of the gospel, citing improbable, perhaps even implausible conversion experiences. Each of these candidates would normally have been far off the radar of their intentionally chosen Jewish-Christian evangels, the unlikeliest of converts on both sides of the equation. In the next two stories the universal appeal of the gospel is made clear, defining a hospitality that is without question or reservation extended to, welcoming and inclusive of all persons.

In the second story (Acts 8:26-40), the reader of the book of Acts is exposed to a revolutionary conversion experience in a most unlikely encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch. This high-ranking eunuch was "a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury" (Acts 8:27). His position afforded him prestige and certain powers as an officer of the court. Carver (1916, 86) points out that "Ethiopia was at that time a rather vague term for territory lying south of Egypt." Chance (2007, 136) clarifies that, "Ancient Ethiopia is not identical to the modern country (known) by this name. Ancient Ethiopia is the same as the nation of Cush in the Old Testament" (Genesis 10:6-8) and was in the area now known as modern Sudan. Regarding the story of Philip and the eunuch, G. Campbell Morgan (1924, 212) notes, ". . . here commenced that wider movement in the activity of the Christian Church, of the beginnings of which, the remainder of this book of the Acts of the Apostles tells the story." The reader is never told of any prior religious persuasion of the eunuch, but the text states that he had gone to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27b-28). Luke sets the stage for the unfolding drama by having Philip come upon the eunuch's chariot while its occupant is reading the "suffering servant" narrative from the book of Isaiah, (Isa 53:7-8), a text rich in metaphorical Messianic overtones. Philip extends hospitality by asking the eunuch if he understands what he is reading; the Ethiopian replies in exasperation, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31). The eunuch then extends an invitation to Philip to join him on his chariot for a tutorial. They engage in an impromptu theological dialogue, their discourse focusing on a new understanding of the ancient scripture. Brian D. McLaren (2010, 181-182) ponders just how this castrated male seeker might have experienced the good news of Jesus through the prophet Isaiah's words.

> Would the image of cutting—a sheep about to have its neck slit or a lamb about to be sheared—have special significance to a eunuch? Would humiliation and

> the denial of justice strike a responsive chord with him? Would the word 'generation' (or 'descendants') have special meaning to a man incapable of producing a next generation? . . . Philip responds by telling him the 'good news about Jesus,' using this passage as a starting point (Isaiah 53:7-8). This good news, we must remember, is not the version shaped by the Greco-Roman narrative; it is the good news of the kingdom of God, the message proclaimed by Jesus and shaped by the Jewish narratives of creation, liberation, and reconciliation. It is the message embodied in a man who was stripped naked and publicly humiliated, despised, rejected, and misunderstood, a man without physical descendants, a man who was cut and scarred forever. The eunuch obviously feels that this good news and relates powerfully to him personally . . . (McLaren 2010, 182).

Philip's radical hospitality then bears fruit as he rides along with the eunuch, using the Isaiah prophecy to explain the gospel of Jesus. Suddenly, water is found, and the eunuch inquires "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" They both exit the chariot and Philip dutifully baptizes the new proselyte. It has been suggested that the eunuch's question about being baptized indicates a prior attempt and failure, so that this seeker had previously been denied baptism because of his "physical mutilation" (Stagg 1955, 108). New Testament scholar Frank Stagg (1955, 108) declares,

> The Ethiopian . . . was "unhindered" in his request for baptism. The very word, "What *prevents* me?" is basically the same word in Greek with which Acts is closed. The word here is a verb, *kōluei*; the closing word of Acts is an adverb, *akōlutōs*. The idea expressed by these words is precisely the thing with which Luke was most concerned. He traced the story of how the gospel was *liberated* and how (persons) of all classes and races were liberated by it. "Unhindered" was his thrilling theme. No one can truly appreciate it, except as he (or she) too is liberated—from sin, from self, from narrow nationalism, from provincialism and particularism, from racial pride and prejudice—and as he (or she) finds himself (or herself) in Christ Jesus related to humanity and eternity.

Although the conversion of the eunuch introduces a process toward conversion that seems routine, the characteristics of the one being converted and baptized were anything but ordinary. Stagg (1955, 107) argues that "This marks the third major area into which the gospel has reached: first Jews only; then Samaritans, who were of mixed blood; and now God fearing Greeks." The use of the term Greek is used here as an idiom referring to anyone of gentile heritage. Stagg notes that the first two groups described were Jewish proselytes and that the third group, Gentiles, were in fact students of Judaism, perhaps suggesting a somewhat limited reach, maintaining a closed circle. The fourth and final group would be addressed in Luke's description of the conversion of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-40), signaling that the missionary focus would expand exponentially, and the good news of Jesus would be freely offered to all humanity as an evangelistic priority of the Apostles (Stagg 1955, 107). As G. Campell Morgan (1924, 212) notes,

> We have seen the first movements, indicated in the commission of Jesus, "In Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria." Now we have the first movement beyond, toward "the uttermost part of the earth." We almost invariably speak of the opening of the door to the Gentiles as having taken place in the house of Cornelius (see next story), and of Peter being the first messenger of the evangel to the Gentiles. That may be true, or it may not. There is a question as to what the Ethiopian's nationality really was. I believe that by race he was Ethiopian, that is a Gentile; and therefore, . . . not to Peter . . . but to Philip the deacon was given the work of first expanding the commission of Jesus so as to win one for Him from among the number of those who by the Jews were looked upon as outside the covenant of promise.

David S. Dockery (1990, 426) adds,

> Philip's ministry accomplished two important things in the mind of the early church. First, he preached to Samaritans. This episode marked the initial advancement of the post-resurrection Christian mission to a non-Jewish community (cf. John 4:5-42). Second, he baptized a Gentile . . . in Luke's mind and in his readers as well, the gospel reached the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

For those proselytes whose religious background was traditional Judaism, this paradigm shift was not only monumental in scope but might have seemed inappropriate and perhaps even impossible. Not only were opportunities for conversion and baptism being extended to aliens and foreigner, but in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, several barriers were leveled to the ground. A Gentile of some persuasion, the eunuch was less than a whole person under Jewish law, which prohibited participation in temple cultic worship to those with physical imperfections. The Hebrew Bible has much to say about men devoid of their testicles, their inability to procreate being source of condemnation. The Deuteronomist writer unequivocally declares, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (Deut 32:1). “The Deuteronomic text explicitly states that castrated men cannot enter the assembly of the Lord (Chance 2007, 136).” Therefore, as the late New Testament scholar John B. Polhill asserts, “If this man were a literal eunuch, his conversion would represent a double advance in the universalism of the Gospel, overcoming *physical* as well as racial barriers. . . It is not an incidental that Luke uses his key word ‘hindered’ at verse 36. The hindrances to the universal Gospel are coming down” (Polhill 1974, 482). McLaren (2010, 182-183) reminds his reader that “as an Ethiopian—a ‘person of color,’ we might say—he was obviously not Jewish,” and would not even have been allowed in the court of the Gentiles because of his physical condition, castration being considered a “defect,” raising the pivotal question, “is there a place for me in his kingdom, even though I have an unchangeable condition that was condemned forever by the sacred Jewish Scriptures?” McLaren notes that “Philip doesn’t speak. Nor does he leave for Jerusalem to consult with the apostles there, nor does he convene a five-year committee to study the subject. Instead, he simply acts . . .” (McLaren 2010, 182).

> The sign of the kingdom of God that began in Jesus—a place at the table for outcasts and outsiders—continues in the era of the Acts of the Apostles. The poor are accepted, and the sick. Samaritans are accepted, and Gentiles, including Africans, and here, even the ‘sexually other’ . . .The old ‘other-excluding’ sanctions—against the uncircumcised, against the ‘defective’ . . . have been buried in baptism, left behind as part of the old order that is passing away. As Philip and the Ethiopian disciple climb the stream bank, they represent a new humanity emerging from the water. . . (McLaren 2010, 183, 185).

McClaren adds that “scripture tells us that the Ethiopian eunuch was accepted and baptized that day by Philip, but tradition tells us more—that this ‘sexually other’ person brought the gospel of the kingdom of God back to Ethiopia. Think of that: a nonheterosexual in missional leadership from the very beginning of the Jesus movement" (McLaren 2010, 186). This remarkable story illustrates the expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and vulnerably open spread of the gospel far beyond the boundaries established by its Jewish forebears (Carver 1916, 86).

The eunuch's sexual status often brings this text into contemporary conversations about the Christian scriptures and human sexuality in general, and non-heterosexuality specifically, because it supports the argument that traditional approaches espoused in the Hebrew Bible regarding such matters should be revisited and re-visioned. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch may be the biblical narrative that most closely addresses the challenges of gender classification and other issues confronting the transgender community and those with whom they interact. A holistic perspective on the story provides for a more exegetically sound understanding of it and a greater potential for making sound hermeneutical analysis of the narrative.

> In Isaiah, the eunuch and the foreigner were to find full acceptance in God's house, the temple. It is significant that in the Lukan narrative the promise of Isaiah, the promise of full inclusion among God's people of *foreigners* and *eunuchs*, finds its fulfillment *not* in Jerusalem and the temple, from which the eunuch is returning, but in his hearing and receiving of the gospel. Readers miss much of the punch of this story if they fail to observe that this man, as a foreigner and eunuch, is *excluded* from the fold of Israel. Thus, whatever sense readers make of this story, it is best not to downplay the Gentile (foreign) status of this character (Chance 2007, 136).

4.3.3 The Conversion of Cornelius and Peter (Acts 10:1-43)

A third major hospitality text is the story of Peter's unexpected meeting with Cornelius. This is the longest narrative in the book of Acts. John Elliott observes that in this narrative, "Luke relates how, in the context of domestic hospitality and controverted purity rules concerning food and social interaction," previous purity norms are rescinded, opening the door to a "divine warrant to a mission to the Gentiles" (Elliott 2008, 432). He adds that, "viewed sociologically, the narrative of Peter and Cornelius announces divine legitimation of the counter-conventional messianic mission to the Gentiles and its worldwide expansion. The purity demarcations of clean and unclean are dissolved," in respect to "places, persons, and food praxis," all essential parts of Israel's purity code (Elliott 2008, 434). Elliott declares that these ancient "regulations concerning unclean localities, people, and diet, is now . . . defunct," making "a comprehensive statement about the purity system in its entirety" (Elliott 2008, 434).

> It thereby expands on the stance attributed to Jesus concerning food in Mark 7, 1-23 (and) Matt 15, 1-20. The purity code which once demarcated Israel from Gentiles no longer obtains and hence no longer obstructs an all-inclusive mission of the Jesus followers to all peoples. In contrast to the system and its particularist framework, God, Luke insists, shows no partiality and sets no boundaries (Acts 10,34; 11,18). The community that is animated by the divine Spirit is a community open to all. As all foods are clean by God's fiat, so are all places and all persons (Elliott 2008, 434).

Cornelius was a centurion of the Italian cohort, a Roman soldier, and a Gentile, and a man of faith. His encounter with Peter the Jew, would forever change him and the missionary thrust of the gospel among Gentiles. As Robert W. Wall (1996, 162) notes, "The taxonomy of God's universal salvation reaches a watershed moment with the introduction of God-fearing Cornelius." It may be argued that this story is more about Peter's conversion than that of Cornelius. For the longest time Peter continued to refer to himself as a Jew, unable to fully grasp the changing dynamics within the faith tradition of his birth. Martin Mittelstadt (2014, 139) observes that "Luke may be less interested in the addition of Cornelius than (in) Peter's exclusivity." Embracing full inclusiveness was a serious challenge that Peter struggled mightily to overcome as he held onto his traditional Judaism. It took a lot of convincing and a profound revelation of the clearest magnitude to prompt Peter's resistant theological evolution.

Under ordinary conditions, Peter and Cornelius would never have had cause to meet, unless, of course, by necessity Cornelius would have been required to arrest Peter for being a follower of Jesus, a disciple accused of sedition and executed as an insurrectionist, a traitor to Rome. Their unlikely encounter represented two worlds colliding. Jews and Romans simply did not associate one with the other, no more than was necessary. In the story, Cornelius, who is in Caesarea, perceives a vision. Likewise, Peter, who was many miles away in Joppa, also simultaneously had a vision, and it was these two visions that brought them together. Johannes Munck's synopsis of the events describes the obstacles that stood in the way of their amazing encounter:

> Peter was invited to a house in Caesarea which belonged to a Gentile, and going there, he baptized all the Gentiles present. This, the first baptism of Gentiles mentioned in Acts . . . was performed only after many difficulties had been overcome. An angel appearing to Cornelius ordered him to send for Peter in Joppa. As the messengers were approaching Joppa, Peter had a vision which abolished the difference between what was clean and what was unclean. When the Spirit ordered him to go with the messengers, Peter went with them willingly and entered Cornelius' house. He said there in his sermon that the Gospel was intended for the children of Israel (vs. 36) and for the people (vs. 42), but that in every nation, he who feared God and dealt justly would be acceptable to him (vs. 35) and that everybody who believed in Christ would by virtue of his name receive forgiveness for his sins (vs. 43). Then the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles, and they spoke in tongues and Peter allowed them to be baptized. The angel's command to Cornelius, the revelation to Peter, the Spirit's command to him and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles in Cornelius' house—all were necessary for the baptism of the first Gentiles (Munck 1967, 95).

These were not small steps or minimal advances in any way, but rather they represented seismic shifts, major leaps of the highest order, that broke a host of cultural and contextual taboos. Centuries of Jewish tradition hung in the balance between a desire to remain faithful to the ancient heritage and to embrace the tenets of the new movement. The tension was palpable for traditionalists like Peter, the import of which weighed heavily on those who had chosen to follow Jesus, but desired to remain faithful to Torah, honoring the sacred covenant by keeping the law. For other believers in Jesus' message and mission, the transition seemed seamless and subtle, as his ministry in many ways reflected the familiar, what could be described as a reformed version of traditional Judaism. Jesus' presumptions and ideals continued to clearly reflect mainstream Jewish thought and life. It was not until after his death, reported resurrection and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, that a disconnect occurred, the radical nature of his teaching and preaching evoking the kind of seismic, cataclysmic shifts that are illustrated in the book of Acts.

The pull toward maintaining historic principles was tempting and strong. As has been advocated, only by the Spirit of God could these centuries of religious and societal tradition be altered. Peter's dramatic conversion was the catalyst that created this most unlikely convergence between the apostle and this Gentile and his extended family. It is a text layered with meaning, so striking, so moving in so many ways. For even the most jaded of interpreter, the most critical or even cynical and critical reader, something was clearly at work to change the hard fast, rock-solid mind of this apostle. Peter was considered the most outspoken and perhaps most stubborn and least flexible disciple of the original twelve. After all, Peter was not nicknamed the "Rock" for no reason! Commenting on the kind of metamorphosis being exhibited among the other apostles, including Paul, Jaroslav Pelikan (2005, 130) observes,

> Initially, the response of the apostles to such challenges and charges was a series of accommodations and improvisations. Because his pupil Timothy was the offspring of a mixed marriage between a Jewish mother and a Greek father, Paul made the concession of circumcising him. But no such concession was called for in the case of another pupil, the Gentile Titus . . . Even as these compromises were going on, however, the divine nullification and repeal of the Mosaic law was being promulgated in the most absolute of terms through the vision of Peter: "What *God* has cleansed [including reptiles and other ceremonially unclean foods forbidden in the law of Moses], *you* must not call common." The fundamental problem was, of course, that it was not Peter at all, but no one less than the Lord God of Israel speaking through Moses and the Mosaic law, who had "called" such foods "common"—and worse.

A new day of understanding had dawned that fully embraced the inclusion of Gentiles who were now embraced as children of God, now understood to be brothers and sisters of the chosen ones. It was a transition and transformation that brought Jesus' disciples and other followers closer in comprehension to his conception of the realm of God. This was a bellwether moment that reflected anything but a simple decision.

Perhaps the most striking and startling part of the narrative is the vision Peter experienced as he napped on a rooftop. The vivid imagery articulated by the biblical writer represented an absolute dietary nightmare for any God-fearing, Law-observing Jew. Obviously, the combination of prayer and hunger made for what would have appeared to be a nightmare, the content of which made for a most horrific prospect. Wall (1996, 163) explains that "The general role of visions in Acts is to clarify God's redemptive plan with regard to specific places and people." The profundity of this message to Peter could not have been made any clearer.

> In Peter's case a picnic blanket is envisaged, spread with various species of animals (vv. 11-12) without distinguishing clean from unclean. Characteristically, what he sees is accompanied by what he hears: the Lord's instruction for him to "get up, kill and eat" (v. 13) the animals without proper attention to their kosher preparation (cf. Leviticus 11). Peter's negative response—"By no means, Lord"—should be anticipated by his Jewish piety (v. 14). The subsequent repetition of this divine audition makes Peter's proper response clear: What was formerly "profane and unclean" is now clean and no longer profane . . . (Wall 1996, 163).

Three times, no doubt attempting to garner Peter's attention and clearly a reference to Peter's thrice denial of Jesus on the night of his betrayal and arrest, a sheet descended on the scene. Three times, this nauseatingly disgusting sheet, filled with a tableau of unclean morsels that would nauseate any faithful Jew, came down to torment the perplexed and puzzled Peter. To no one's surprise the apostle was completely mystified by its meaning. Peter's resistance was palpable and understandable, as the apostle held to his convictions, righteously refusing to eat anything considered taboo, or as he describes in various translations as, “common,” “profane,” or “unclean.” The term “common” is an interesting word choice here because it is the same word that was used elsewhere in the book of Acts to describe the communal gathering of the new faith community, employed in that instance as a positive term of endearment (Stagg 1955, 117). “And all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). Immediately following the three visions, the sheet was lifted back into heaven, no doubt a reminder that nothing sent from God can be considered pollution, unclean, or taboo. Thousands of years of tradition were at stake and were not going to immediately be jettisoned because of a less than tantalizing vision. The source of this not so tempting sight likely could easily have been from the devil rather than the Divine. Peter was evidently ravenous in his hunger. Was this a case of PTSD, (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)? Perhaps Peter appeared to be suffering from flashbacks! Life had been a blur, a whirlwind for the apostles whose lives had been demonstrably upset during recent days and weeks. Yet somehow Peter was able to pull himself together and discern the difference, testing the spirits, to fully discern exactly what was transpiring before him. Maybe the apostle remembered one or more of those episodes when Jesus encountered and engaged a Gentile, the rabbi growing with each encounter, or the way Jesus related to women, to lepers, to the lame, to tax collectors and the always general moniker labeling individuals as sinners, certainly covering every other category of person or group, and to any other individual acknowledged to be “unclean.” After all, Jesus on occasion had dared engage and even embrace tax collectors and others considered as outcasts or outsiders. He partied with the masses to the point he was labeled a glutton and a drunkard, a brand that stuck in the minds of his adversaries. Jesus was even called Beelzebub, the prince of demons, because of his behavior and the company he kept. Perhaps all these memories came rushing back to

Peter in a fleeting instant. Suddenly everything was made crystal clear, and a calming peace settled over the apostle in what momentarily had created absolute apoplexy.

The men sent by Cornelius suddenly appeared to the still-shaken apostle. Peter's first thought might have been that he was going to be arrested and needed an escape, but he was quickly convinced that surely this vision, this revelation, was all emanating from the Spirit of God. Even so, Peter still seemed hesitant, reluctant to answer this bizarre call in the affirmative. Peter nervously agreed to what was obviously a clandestine meeting, acquiescing to travel to Caesarea to meet this religious inquisitor who had sworn an allegiance to Caesar. Once Peter arrived, he proceeded to justify his presence at a gathering he still could not fully comprehend or embrace. He explained, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown to me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So, when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" (Acts 10:28-29). At this point, Peter still seemed unconvinced, his protestations belying the objections he claimed he did not have. Unlike Philip in the preceding story, Peter was highly skeptical, full of reservations, and seemed much more to be a hesitant, unwilling participant than an enthusiastic evangelist in this outreach, inclusive of those perceived to be far beyond the comfort zone of his own people. Anybody but "those" people! In some ways this narrative is reminiscent of Jonah's reluctance to preach to the Ninevites in God's hope for their repentance. No doubt, Peter was still trying to sort out his misgivings and make sense of what amounted to a radically counterintuitive revelation in a new missionary paradigm.

It is important to note that Peter still considered himself Jewish and referred to himself as a Jew, clearly indicating that the permanent schism between Judaism and Christianity had yet to take place. Peter was still operating out of a traditional religious paradigm that informed his decisions and shaped his personal bias, continuing to honor his heritage, bound by the historic structures of Jewish thought, custom, and practice. Reflecting on the story, Wall seems a bit harsh, coming down hard on Peter, careful to note that his conversion was not immediate and complete, nor a simple transaction, but only the result of what is described as a divine intervention, an awareness and an event that was able to reach the depths of the disciple's being.

> God's pastoral project is to bring us into an understanding of God's will so that we may better collaborate with God in the work of salvation. The conversion of Cornelius takes Peter by surprise but not because God decides at the last moment to save an uncircumcised Gentile. In fact, the universal embrace of divine love was promised to Abraham and prophesied by Scripture long before Cornelius was saved. Yet, for all his spiritual authority, Peter still did not "get it"; his religious parochialism prompted him to divide people into "clean" (repentant Jews) and "unclean" (uncircumcised Gentiles). God's redemptive purpose for Gentiles could not be realized unless that apostle changed his mind (Wall 1996, 171).

Wall (1996, 171) goes on to say,

> The biblical idea that God has chosen a particular people as object of special regard cultivates the dangerous suspicion that God did not therefore choose others. Those believers who think themselves among God's "elect" are often inclined on this theological basis to think that God has not chosen anyone else who disagrees with their beliefs or customs. We pin labels on our disagreeable opponents to disenfranchise them: they are "liberal" or "conservative" or "homosexual" or "Jewish" or "Lutheran" or "female" or "laity" or "black" or "divorced." Yet, what has become crystal clear to Peter is that to do so is not the prerogative of pious Israel or anyone else: It is God alone who judges the living and the dead (10:42). One of the most surprising features of Acts is the diversity of people God calls to be included among God's people—all of whom are symbolized by uncircumcised Cornelius.

On this ordinary day, an extraordinary thing happened at a home in Caesarea as God's hospitality was transparently revealed and freely made available to Gentiles, an event that would change the Church forever. "Luke's telling and retelling of Cornelius's conversion and the inauguration of the church's mission to the Gentiles (=nations) is shaped by an ancient conflict between the synagogue and church" (Wall 1996, 170). It would soon be acknowledged that a permanent separation was beginning to transpire between Jews and the "followers of the way" who would very soon come to be known as Christians. Unfortunately, the schism produced lingering animosity, a distrust that had continued for centuries, frequently characterized by hatred and prejudice and the horrific evil of anti-Semitism. In actuality, the two groups, growing from the same root, simply chose alternate paths on a different journey. If the ancient custom of hospitality has any merit in today's compartmentalized, fragmented, and still much too segregated world, it is the hope that these two great traditions will rediscover the value of a practice that at one time had the ability to bring together the likes of Peter and Cornelius.

4.3.4 The Sending of the Seventy: A Test Case (Luke 10:1-12)

Jesus' sending of the seventy missionaries (some sources claim seventy-two) provides a framework for understanding the way hospitality was practiced in Roman Judea. (Luke 10:1-12). For a similar narrative about the sending of the twelve, see Matthew 10:1-42, Mark 6:7-13, and Luke 9:1-6. Jesus outlines the parameters for these cold calls, what described as his emissaries' door-to-door visitation initiative, an evangelistic enterprise, an exercise described with an interesting set of rubrics, circumstances and situations which would require basic hospitality. Conventional commentary posits that the primary focus and purpose of the sending of this larger group of disciples is that it is a foreshadowing of the work of the early Church's evangelistic and missionary efforts. It is reflective of the ever-expanding mission and growth of the Christian faith already taking place at the time the four Gospels were being written.

> The commissioning of this larger group of followers, which is not recorded elsewhere in the Gospel records, conveys a sense of growth and movement. As Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, he is still preaching the kingdom of God, but now the kingdom is being preached not just by Jesus and the Twelve. In that sense,

> this commissioning foreshadows the mission of the early church and establishes the pattern for those who are sent out (Culpepper 1996, 20-21).

The text illustrates that Jesus' followers have been empowered with the same power and ability that was inherent in Jesus and that they, too, could perform mighty works. This is certainly the major focus of the inspiring testimonial of God's empowerment of those who were called to serve and witness.

Another noteworthy element in the text is Jesus' specific instructions to the disciples about how they are to conduct themselves and what they are not to carry on their journey. There was to be no hint of impropriety, any measure of a quid pro quo in these impromptu interactions.

> Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town (Luke 10:4-12).

In the text, Jesus accomplishes far more than merely teaching the disciples how to go about the task of carrying out the mission and ministry of the gospel. He reinforces in them the virtues of trust and dependence on Providence for their sustenance. He teaches them what they should expect, invoking the ancient custom and practice of hospitality as a paradigm for their impromptu visits. It is almost as if the disciples were a part of a test to those being visited. They are to conduct their assignment as aliens, as foreigners or strangers in the places they visit. The Didache, an early Christian document, comments,

> But act towards the apostles and prophets as the gospel decrees. Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as the Lord. But he should not remain more than a day. If he must, he may stay one more. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. When an apostle leaves he should take nothing except bread, until he arrives at his night's lodging. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet (Did 11:3-6) (Vinson 2008, 318).

Giving and receiving hospitality was essential to Jesus' understanding and implementation of God's realm being realized in the world. Those who refused to extend the required level of hospitality could expect a far worse fate than the residents of Sodom, one of the primary examples of ultimate inhospitality in the Hebrew Bible. The reference to the ancient city of Sodom, described in Genesis 19 as the sight of great destruction at the hand of God because of the failure of the men of the city to offer appropriate hospitality to Lot's guests, is specifically referenced in the synoptic Gospels (Luke 17:32). In each instance, the reference is used in the context of a failure to practice the appropriate and expected hospitality. This is certainly not coincidence, providing further insight into not only that ancient biblical story but the primacy of hospitality in ancient Near Eastern culture.

No doubt the experiences recounted by the disciples in the days that followed their missionary adventure crystallized for them the primacy of hospitality in Jesus' platform of mercy, peace, and gracious love for all persons. No doubt these lessons resonated within them the old, old story as told by their parents and reinforced by the religious leaders of their childhood in the light of the one they called rabbi and had come to know as their Lord and master. The destruction of the ancient city of Sodom and the turning of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt as she turned to face the carnage and destruction probably made more sense than ever to these willing but perhaps somewhat apprehensive followers.

4.3.5 The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)

One of the quintessential post-resurrection texts in the Gospels is known as *The Road to Emmaus*, a narrative that is unique to the Gospel of Luke. Not only is it an essential post-resurrection narrative, but, in many ways, it also constitutes the quintessential biblical hospitality text. "Emmaus was a little-noted town. Luke doesn't say why the two disciples were going there. They may have been going home, going there on business, or just going to get away from the terrible things they had witnessed in Jerusalem" (Culpepper 1996, 481-482). Culpepper (1996, 482) cites Frederick Buechner (1966, 85-86) who offers an interesting interpretation,

> Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends.

Buechner's sentiments echo the fatalistic musings of Qoheleth, the unnamed preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes who declares that, in the final analysis, all is vanity. Buechner's conjecture does, however, offer the reminder that hospitality begins being hospitable to oneself, self-care an important general and devotional practice for tending to the human spirit, a restorative quality attentive to mind, body, and soul, assuaging the ills that threaten the human creature emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Buechner's writings also recalls an American situation comedy (Sitcom) called Cheers. The setting was a local bar in Boston. Showing from September 30, 1982, until May 20, 1993, the very longevity of the show is indicative of the human desire to have safe places, spaces that feel like home, that are comfortable and familiar, hangouts where the beer is cold, the wine freely pours, the scotch is single malt, the cigars are finely aged, and the company is good. The theme song for Cheers had a refrain that echoes this longing for the human heart, “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name; and they’re always glad you came; you want to be where you can see our troubles are all same; you want to be where everybody knows your name.” If there was any doubt about the reality of this desperate human need for hospitality, intimacy and social interaction, the arrival of COVID-19, Novel Coronavirus, with its demand for strict social distancing, proved beyond question the veracity of this aspect of human living.

A challenge with understanding the Emmaus story is that numerous interpretive angles can be considered when exegeting this narrative. As Vinson (2008, 744) says about this text, “The Emmaus story brings together so many themes from Luke’s Gospel that one can think of it as a narration of Luke’s understanding of the resurrection of Jesus.” Careful attention will focus on the setting toward the end at the home of Cleopas and his unnamed companion, with specific focus on the interaction of Jesus and his hosts as they reclined at the kitchen table as they prepare to share a meal together. Once again, the meal is central in Luke’s narrative purposes, an indicator of the primacy of hospitality as it is revealed in specific Gospel settings. Culpepper (1996, 475) says about the text, “the story of the appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is arguably the most developed and the most beautiful of the appearance stories,” the plot mystically revolving “around the failure of the two disciples to recognize their fellow traveler.” A major part of the intrigue of this drama is that it follows a very familiar literary device in the Greco-Roman world, parallels that Luke’s audience would have recognized as a “recognition” scene in this dramatic reading, “where literary characters suddenly discover the true identity of someone else” (Vinson 2008, 744). Vinson cites “Homer’s *Odyssey*, with which Luke’s audience would surely have some familiarity,” the

Emmaus story having those characteristics, "several of these recognition moments, all intertwined" to add to the intrigue inherent throughout the narrative (Vinson 2008, 744). Culpepper (1996, 476) adds, "similarly, in Greco-Roman accounts appearances of supernatural beings occasionally involve travelers," and of course, wherever there is mention of travelers the theme of hospitality is usually in the literature somewhere. As Deirdre Good (2010, 204) offers the reminder that "In Luke's gospel, journeys characterize and shape ministry. . ." Vinson (2008, 745) adds that "the same sorts of plot devices appear in Greek drama, and Aristotle discussed them in his *Poetics*, writing that in his opinion, the best dramatic plots connected reversal ('a change to the opposite direction of events') and recognition ('a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or enmity, and involving matters which bear on prosperity or adversity')." In the Emmaus text anonymity abounds, with Cleopas "otherwise unknown, and the anonymous fellow traveler (his wife? a friend or neighbor?) is a complete blank," and neither of them has a clue who this unnamed traveler is who has joined them on the road (Vinson 2008, 746). "Jesus does not need to disguise his identity," but he goes unrecognized for the same reason that numerous characters are incognito in this literary genre (Vinson 2008, 747). Only the audience, the reader, is aware that it is Jesus!

There is one other unnamed entity of an anonymous presence lurking in the shadows of the text and is foreshadowed in these thick disciples' inability to recognize Jesus, their prohibition attributed to divine intervention or interference. As Culpepper (1996, 475-476) notes,

> Both the Greco-Roman literature and the OT contain stories of appearances to heroes, angels, or gods, sometimes incognito and sometimes to travelers. The tradition of entertaining "angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2) derives from the experience of Abraham in Genesis 18, when the Lord visited him at the oaks of Mamre in the form of three travelers. In Exodus 3 the Lord speaks to Moses from a burning bush, but at first Moses does not know who is speaking to him.

> The form is more developed in Judges, where the angel of the Lord appears to Gideon (Judges 6:11-24), commissions Gideon, and Gideon brings food, which is then consumed by fire. When Gideon realizes that he has seen an angel, he is afraid that he will die, but the angel reassures him. In Judges 13 the angel of the Lord appears to Manoah and announces the birth of Samson. Manoah and his wife offer to kill a kid and prepare a feast, but they are told to offer a sacrifice. When they do so, the angel ascends in the flame. . .

This interaction between human and divine, replete with a sacrificial offering, can be described as "divine hospitality," a reminder that hospitable actions among humans are always sourced in the activities of God, making hospitality a holy enterprise.

At this point in the storyline is the reminder of these numerous biblical examples of God appearing to numerous individuals in a variety of theophanies, each one unique and stunning in presentation. Vinson (2008, 747) cites the angel Rahael who "appears incognito in the book of Tobit" providing one example (Tobit 5:4). Scholars, therefore, are quick to point out the fact that the Lukan writer never reveals whether Jesus partook of the bread he broke. Contrasted with Luke 24:41-43 in which Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish, no doubt designed as another proof of resurrection reality, "we do not even learn whether he ate anything at table in Emmaus" (Fitzmyer 1979, 1557). Fully aware of these numerous divine appearances in the Hebrew Bible, the writer of the Book of Hebrews is careful to remind the reader of the importance of being kind to strangers lest they might be angels in disguise, incognito heavenly beings. The writer declares, "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares (Heb 13:1-2). The writer then transitions to an admonition about visiting those who are in prison and those who are ill, echoing the warnings expressed in Matthew's stark commentary on the fate of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46).

> The disciples press hospitality upon Jesus in a way that reminds one of the hospitality extended to angels in Gen 18:3; 19:2. In the logic of their urging, we

> ready get an echo from the feeding of the five thousand (9:10-17; see v 12), which is to be an important background for v 30. In Jewish custom, apart from special occasions, the main meal of the day seems to have been in late afternoon. In the ancient world, hospitality to strangers ranked high as a religious virtue, and there were various stories, Jewish and otherwise, about "entertaining angels [or gods] unawares" (Hebrews 13:2). In this case, the disciples will find their hospitality well rewarded! . . . Though the guest, Jesus plays host. As he breaks the bread, he is recognized. . . (Nolland 1993, 1208).

As is clearly the case in the Emmaus story, attending to the needs of aliens, foreigners, and strangers, travelers and sojourners illustrates the way that ancient Near Eastern hospitality, revealed throughout the biblical narrative, has become a primary paradigm in the Christian scriptures, a model for the way followers of Jesus are to engage their neighbor. And of course, the understanding of neighbor is fully identified in the teachings and actions of Jesus as he carried out his life's purpose, his divine calling in mission and ministry. Commenting on the Emmaus story, Leonard and Merriman cite Good (2010, 204) who observes, "A primary theme of the narrative is whether or not God's visit will be welcomed or rejected, and whether or not those who do welcome it, will themselves commit to a practice of radical hospitality – not just for Jesus, but for all who have welcomed him." Spoiler alert, these downtrodden disciples pass the test but not with flying colors, initially stumbling as they journey with their unknown and believed to be *new* companion! No doubt suffering the aftershocks of their experiences with the crucifixion, the disciples, perhaps understandably, were suffering a case of communal amnesia, forgetting everything they had learned from Jesus. Soon, it would all come back to them in an instant! It can certainly be affirmed, that at least in general terms regarding Emmaus, when the whole of the narrative is considered, this story reveals that the presence of God "is known in experiences that transcend the events of the resurrection appearances," the mystery of the Holy shown in myriad ways in the text (Good 2010, 476). As Eduard Schweizer (1975, 370) notes, "Once again we have the motif of Jesus' 'journeying,' which is met by the request to 'stay', probably at the home of the two disciples," this unexpected event described in "words that fit the situation but also point to a deeper truth, described in Revelation 3:20 as the 'coming in' of the exalted Christ to the believer to 'eat with' him." Schweitzer (1975, 370) adds that the phrase "with them" is repeated three times for emphasis, "the guest becoming the host. . ."

4.3.6 The Parable Called the "Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:30-37)

Jesus' parable often referred to as the "Good Samaritan," provides a paradigmatic description of Jesus' understanding of ancient hospitality. The title for this legendary tale is intriguing, since the word "good" never appears in the story. An ancient narrative steeped in covenantal wisdom, the story follows Jesus' standard parabolic formula; such storylines usually contain but are not limited to "an authority figure and two contrasting subordinates" (Blomberg 1990, 171). As the plot unfolds, the context for the parable is Jesus' response to a question posed by a lawyer who, having engaged Jesus in conversation about eternal life, asks him a primary question within the imperative of hospitality, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29b). Or as the *Daily Walk Bible* asks, "'Which neighbor?' It was a question rooted in Jewish law. The dual commandment from Luke 10:27 is a combination of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18; in Luke's gospel, this is understood to be the "double commandment of love" (Noẽl 1997). While the narrative suggests the lawyer was attempting to test Jesus, it was common practice for the learned to engage in this kind of theological dialogue. The lawyer's question really was, as Philip Esler (2000, 335) poses it, "whom are we Judeans obligated to treat as neighbor and whom not?" "Or, even more specifically, what is the outer limit of the people we must treat as neighbours? A common answer at this period was that 'neighbour' meant fellow Israelite . . . to the whole community of the sons of Israel" (Esler 2000, 335). Picket (2013, 41) says, "the first definition in the standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament is ‘to have a warm regard for and interest in another . . . especially, their enemies.” For Michael P. Knowles (2004, 168), “that clothing and its social implications are of prime importance to Luke is unmistakable.” The priest and the Levite, choose to pass “by on the other side” to avoid getting involved in the injured man’s plight (Luke 10:31-32). Even if they had come close enough to confirm the naked man’s circumcision, (Knowles 2004, 170) his heritage would remain uncertain, since Samaritans also underwent circumcision. The priest and the Levite fail to offer hospitality of any kind. Had they chosen to at least consider rendering aid, the lawyer might have argued on their behalf that they had met the legal requirement for Jews regarding relationships with unclean persons.

Parameters for hospitality toward neighbor constituted a point of contention that would continually confront Jesus’ followers. As the young Church grew and spread through its evangelistic missionary enterprises, the early “followers of the way” who became known as Christians at Antioch would continually encounter Gentiles as they traveled the Hellenistic world spreading the message of the fledgling faith. Vinson (2008, 338) notes that, as with their Jewish forebearers, the underlying question probably continued to be, “Who is *not* my neighbor?” or in other words, “where does neighbor end?” (Italics Vinson’s). He goes on to say,

> In Acts, each time the gospel reaches a new group—Hellenistic Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles who already worship God, and finally Gentile converts from Greco-Roman religions—the discomfort and debate among the Christian increases, “Who is my neighbor?” may presage “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:3). Luke is certain that Christians . . . can overcome the xenophobia common to most humans, but his narrative shows that the church struggled with it at every turn (Vinson, 2008, 338).

The question regarding qualification as "neighbor" was a primary concern that certainly created the potential for controversy, for the rules of engagement between Jews and non-Jews were carefully crafted and woven into the fabric of everyday life. From the Samaritans who observed and practiced a sectarian interpretation of ancient Judaism, to unclean lepers, to the Romans who occupied Jewish territories, the possibility, perhaps probability, of "pollution" constituted an issue that was a constant threat (See Douglas 1966). A faithful Jew simply could not be too careful.

> Like most societies, first-century Judaism was ordered by boundaries with specific rules regarding how Jews should treat Gentiles or Samaritans, how priests should relate to Israelites, how men should treat women, and so on. Because the boundaries allowed for certain groups to establish their positions, power, and privilege, maintaining the boundaries was vital to social order. It was a religious duty (Culpepper 1996, 229).

Into this dynamic the lawyer and Jesus engage in dialogue. Surely, not being a lawyer, Jesus would have been ill-equipped for such a debate, unprepared for such a conversation. On the other hand, the lawyer was comfortably in his element. As a presumed expert on such matters, surely, he would easily prevail. He got far more than he bargained. Plot twist!

Ole Davidsen (unpublished paper 2021, 3) remarks that "*The Parable of the Good Samaritan* has obtained rank as a fundamental Christian story with its overwhelming impact . . . however, its extension and impact are perhaps due to a universal message like the one we find in *the Golden Rule.* He cites K. E. Løgstrup (2023, cf. Davidsen 2021, unpublished paper, 3) who he says, "may be right when he says that in the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus puts the universal demand of love for one's neighbor, by which everyone is called, into words." Davidsen (unpublished paper, 11) discusses the "Double Love Command" inherent in the parable and associated with "a Jesuanic and Christian idea of the Law."

> The double love command has two axes, the relation to God and the relation to the neighbor, and even if we cannot separate them, we can discern one from the other. . . The ethical demand – as the demand for love of neighbor – summarizes the whole Law, its ethical and its ritual commandments. . . one gets the sense that the conversation (between Jesus and the lawyer) is construction because if the lawyer thinks ethnocentrically, he already knows the answer: The neighbor is the fellow countryman, the compatriot, i.e., people with the same ethnic, religious, and possibly social status: the neighbor as equal. . . Therefore, one should meet the demand with mutual ethics among equals. On the one axis, between members of the in-group (friends and acquaintances versus foreigners and foes), on the other axis, between members of the same rank (peers versus morally, religiously, and socially inferior persons) . . . the ethnocentric view tries to make the unconditioned demand for love of neighbor conditional. . . The particular understanding of neighbor selects the neighbor using this ethnic-religious status and role (litmus test), while the general notion builds the understanding of neighbor on the universal human, the other as fellow-human and fellow creature (Davidsen 2021, unpublished paper, 12-13).

Jesus brilliantly sets up the parable of the "Good Samaritan". He names the perceived villains in the story, the priest and the Levite, who both fail miserably this test of hospitality. "Why a priest and a Levite?" asks Michel Gourges (Gourges 1998, 710). "The explanation seems quite simple and, in some ways, completely natural if the social hierarchy of the day is considered. The appearance of a priest and a Levite could very well be an echo reflecting or revealing the way the different categories of the Jewish people were designated at the time" (Gourges 1998, 710). Of course, a Levite could be a priest as well. Both are set up for failure in the narrative, something that could very well befall the average Jew in the same predicament. Gourges adds that normally the third category, following the priest and the Levite, would have been "and all the people" or "children of Israel" (Gourges 1998, 710). Jesus then names the hero in the story, unexpectedly, surprisingly, even shockingly, and most ironically, a Samaritan, a cultural group despised and hated, considered half breeds and perceived as heretical reprobates, constituting an apostate adversary of the pure Jewish faith and faithful because they worshipped in the wrong place, on the wrong mountain, according to Israelite specifications.

As Gourges (1998, 710) notes, "By having first a priest and then a Levite come on stage, Luke's narrative is taking up only the first two categories from the traditional postexilic trilogy. One would then normally expect the appearance of a lay member of Israel as the third character. Thus, the surprise effect occurs when the tale substitutes a Samaritan" (Gourges 1998, 712). "The exact formulations may vary, but ancient Judaism and the OT use this tripartite division in order to give account of the composition of religious society in its diversity" (Gourges 1998, 710). Jesus does not name the victim, the man who was robbed, stripped, and beaten. He could be anyone, anywhere, at any time. He is everyone, all humanity, and his dire circumstances remind the reader that all persons, no matter their assumed import, are vulnerable, subject to the dangers and threats that come with living and being. Some acts are random, others are purposeful, but life is fragile, and the human creature is frail. Anyone can become a victim and sadly, everyone has the potential to be an accidental perpetrator based on their inaction, avoidance, or ignorance. The answer, therefore, is to be as good as can be as much as can be humanly possible. It means that sometimes "human doing" is more essential and important than "human being." In the final analysis, it means being neighbor!

As the representatives of institutional religion, the priest and the Levite represent good religion gone bad. They embody what happens when the weight of tradition and the abuse of authority overshadow the common good, with rank and rules more important than compassion and decency. "By storytelling conventions, the audience can expect that in a series of three, the third character will break the pattern created by the first two. Moreover, the expected sequence would be a priest, a Levite, and then an Israelite," creating an anticlerical edge (Gourges 1998, 710). But, as Culpepper (1996, 229) observes,

> Shattering all expectations, the third traveler is a Samaritan. The story does not pit an Israelite against a priest and a Levite. By making the hero of the story a

> Samaritan, Jesus challenged the long-standing enmity between Jews and Samaritans. The latter were regarded as unclean people, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of people from various regions in the fallen northern kingdom (2 Kgs 16:6, 24). By depicting a Samaritan as the hero . . . Jesus demolished all boundary expectations. Social position—race, religion, or region—count for nothing. The man in the ditch, from whose perspective the story is told, will not discriminate among potential helpers. Anyone who has compassion and stops to help is his neighbor.

The priest, of course, would have been expected to render aid. "These bandits fell on this bloke like a force of nature, leaving him naked, battered, and only a short ride from the cemetery. He is there without family or friends, in the wastelands between inhabited places; at the moment, he has no neighbors, only enemies, and it looks like he may die ungrieved and unburied" (Vinson 2008, 339). Yet, the priest did not even bother to see if the man was alive. There was simply no excuse for ignoring him. As Vinson (2008, 339) notes, ". . . in the actual practice of Judaism in Jesus' day it is likely that priests, like all Jews, believed that the Torah put saving life ahead of keeping any purity regulation." The point Luke is trying to make is that it could reasonably be assumed by Jesus' audience that either the priest or the Levite would have rendered aid in this situation. The priest and the Levite had a moral responsibility to participate in the man's recovery and failed miserably. The third traveler proves to be a neighbor extending hospitality. The Samaritan goes beyond requirement or expectation, paying the inn keeper two denarii (two days' wages) for the victim's lodging and care and ensuring that all his needs will be met—immediately and in the days to follow. As Culpepper (1996, 230) notes, "Like the first two, the Samaritan sees the man, but seeing him he has compassion for him. The detailed account of the Samaritan's care for the beaten man stands in sharp contrast to the sparsity of detail in the first part of the story." This responder preaches a profound sermon through his actions. "By his care for the beaten man, the Samaritan demonstrates that he is a faithful man" (Culpepper 1996, 230). Gourges (1998, 713) concludes, "Paradox of paradoxes, it is the

Samaritan who, by means of a reversal of roles, becomes the very model of neighborly love." At the conclusion of his parable, Jesus asks, "Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (Luke 10:36). Jesus creates a teachable moment by invoking the very question originally raised by the lawyer to trap Jesus. Jesus then proposes a situation "that, in effect, puts the lawyer in the ditch . . ." (Vinson 2008, 342). The answer is painfully obvious.

> The multiple choice question forces such a distasteful answer that the lawyer will not even use the word *Samaritan*. He says instead, "The one who showed him mercy," but ironically his circuitous answer provides an accurate description of a neighbor. Jesus has turned the issue from the boundaries of required neighborliness to the essential nature of neighborliness. Neighbors are defined actively, not passively. As an Arab proverb says, "To have a good neighbor you must be one" (Culpepper 1996, 230).

To call the Samaritan of this parable "good" diminishes the altruistic nature of this character. Rather than being merely "good" in his care and compassion, the Samaritan expresses the fullness of his empathy in his hospitable response. His actions reveal the best in human relationships.

4.3.7 The "Great Judgment" (Matthew 25:31-46)

The final words of Jesus' farewell discourse in the Gospel of Matthew constitute another text that poignantly stresses that being one's neighbor demands being hospitable (Matthew 25:31-46). Unique to Matthew and called the "Parable of the Great Judgment," the parable really is not a parable at all but is rather an apocalyptic drama (Boring 1996, 455). According to Eugene Boring (1996, 455), "Parables begin with familiar, this-worldly scenes, which then modulate into a new dimension of meaning. This scene, in contrast, begins with an other-worldly depiction of the parousia . . . and modulates into affirmations of the ultimate importance of ordinary, this-worldly deeds."

Two groups of people are characterized in detail in this parabolic narrative. They are the "haves" and the "have-nots" of society. As Tyler Brown (2017, 4) notes, "Matthew 25:31-46 relies heavily on parallelism, creating a contrast between those on Christ's right and left, the sheep and the goats," a verdict rendered toward each, "come" for the sheep and "depart" for the goats. It is reminiscent of the two kinds of sheep, the fat and the lean in Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek 34:11-24). "Both parties ask the same question: 'when did we see you hungry . . .? The judge replies that what they did for 'the least of these,' they did (or did not do) for him. Jesus, the eschatological Judge, dismisses both parties to either reward or punishment" (Brown 2017, 4). Metaphorically, Jesus portrays them as the sheep and the goats. On the last day the sheep will "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," and to the goats the king says, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels . . ." (Matthew 25:34b; 41b).

Eduard Schweizer (1975, 475-476) reminds his reader that "In the Old Testament, God is called 'King' in eschatological contexts," though in all probability he believes that this Matthean text is not derived from a Jewish source, but rather, most probably, "is from a Jewish Christian origin and referred to Christ from the very beginning." For Schweizer, the language in this text simply is not convincing enough to trace it to a Jewish origin. He does concede, however, that one ancient source, a Midrash commentary of Deuteronomy 15:9 contains a similar refrain, "My children, when you have given food to the poor, I account it as though you had given food to me" and acknowledges that in Judaism, "the messiah occasionally appears as King . . ." (Schweizer 1975, 475-476). Knowing Jesus' Jewish upbringing and considering Jesus' familiarity with and understanding of the religious tradition of his birth, these similarities seem far more than coincidental and thus the Gospel writer(s) invoked this common image.

There is substantial disagreement among scholars as to whether Jesus embraced this kingship idea in relation to himself or his ministry, despite what is inferred by the Gospel writers who composed these texts long after his death as they were heavily influenced by the emerging and evolving theology which was becoming the doctrinal standard in the early Church.

While the Gospel of Matthew ends in what is called the "Great Commission," the Great Judgment is not at all evangelistic, at least in terms of a belief-by-conversion or conversion-by-belief standard. In this text, belief is never mentioned, and is rendered irrelevant when juxtaposed against the priority of service to others, a pervasive theme that is paramount in and permeates the narrative. The dramatic tableau in the parable paints a picture emphasizing a poignant and powerful assertion, that the scenario presented in Luke's parable about the rich man and Lazarus will indeed come to pass and that there is no middle ground by which the recitation of any faith formula will satisfy the demand to be hospitable to the poor and needy. As Brown (2017, 10) expands on this thought,

> This passage has been used to teach a doctrine of justification that is distinct from the rest of the New Testament, Paul in particular. Ladd describes this position in writing "many will be saved by their good deeds. Those who out of human compassion, feed the hungry, cloth(e) the naked . . . are 'Christian unawares' . . . and even though they have never heard of Christ, they will inherit eternal life" (1) Numerous more liberal scholars take this position (2). Both parties agree that, "the last judgment will be a judgment according to evidence . . . not merely what we professed but what we practiced" (3). The question is whether those deeds will "merit an award from the court" or "provide an index of what is in the heart" (4).

Brown observes that "Jesus says that he measured service to himself by how the people served the 'least of these,' indicating therefore that "it is extremely important that we identify the 'least of these' (τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων)" (Brown 2017, 12). No creed, no confession, no covenantal statement can substitute for doing what is required on behalf of those whom Jesus called "the least of these" (Matt 25:45). As Boring notes, "Jesus has taught that self-giving care for others is the heart of the revealed will of God in the Torah and its hermeneutical key" (Boring 1996, 455). This is the consistent hermeneutic that formed and framed Jesus' life and work and boldly shaped his ministry and mission. He repeated this theme like a metronome, seeking to penetrate the thick walls of arrogance and ignorance and blatant prejudice that had stifled and suffocated to stagnation his beloved people. Somehow, the Judaism of his day desperately needed reformation to recover and restore the ancient custom and practice of hospitality. It was and is vital for the survival and the viability of a faith tradition that had lost its way and was threatened by the kind of irrelevance that would eventually overwhelm and dismantle other religious expressions that found their root in this region and time. In the early Church, hospitality would come to be the distinguishing characteristic that would set it apart from other competing brands of faith. The same kinds of biases toward outcasts and those whom Karris refers to as handicapped existed in the Hellenistic world as it did in Israel (Karris 1985, 62). In house churches, communities of faith practiced for a short period of time an authentic kind of communism that served to galvanize the young faith as an alternative religious experience based on love, grace, mercy, and mutual accountability and sustainability. Though this communal experience did not withstand the test of time because of the belief that the Parousia was at hand, it continues to serve as an exemplar model for "being" and "doing" church in the twenty-first century. While recovering *the* New Testament Church is an absolute impossibility, rediscovering the ancient custom and practice of the kind of hospitality woven throughout the Christian scriptures is possible. It is a clear reminder that this "inasmuch" text is used as a way of distinguishing between those who have performed hospitality and those who have not done so and have failed miserably. Perhaps that is why Matthew focuses on hell as a deterrent, a way to control people's behavior toward achieving a desired result, to perform up to the standards set by Jesus throughout the Gospels.

4.3.8 The Syrophoenician/Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30)

The stories of two women, one described as a Canaanite in Matthew and one of Syrophoenician descent in Mark, reveal the challenges that even Jesus faced when confronting the prejudices of his day. These two stories have been particularly troubling for commentators who need to defend Jesus' honor; both narratives seem to place Jesus in a negative light. In accordance with his heritage, Jesus believed he was sent first and foremost to his own people. When a Gentile approaches Jesus and begs him to heal her daughter, Jesus tersely responds, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27). Perhaps Jesus was testing the woman's faith because she was obviously Gentile, or perhaps he was making a joke at her expense. Either possibility makes Jesus seem callous and cruel. Jesus calling this woman a "dog," a woman likely struggling with low self-esteem and gender issues, a mother desperate to save her sick daughter, would have been no joking matter. Besides, what part of "You bitch!" would be funny?

In the Hebrew Bible, dogs are "regarded as 'the most despicable, insolent and miserable of creatures' . . . Comparison with a dog is insulting and dishonouring" (Achtemeier 1996, 244). In the New Testament, "Paul describes specific Jewish or Judaising opponents as 'dogs'" (Achtemeier 1996, 244). In Luke's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, dogs lick Lazarus' sores. Regarding the Syrophoenician woman, "It is debatable whether Jesus is adopting the Jewish habit of calling the person of a different faith κυών . . . The saying in Mt. 15:26; Mk 7:27 brings the claims of children and house dogs into comparison. The choice of κυνάριον shows that Jesus had in mind little dogs which could be tolerated in the house . . ." (Bromiley

1965, 1101-1104). The Didache, a Christian document from the early Church, speaking on the Eucharist, declares, "And let none eat or drink of your Eucharist, but they that have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this the Lord hath said: Give not that which is holy to the dogs." Jesus' Jewish background certainly put him in touch with the danger of using this kind of language (Bromiley 1965, 1101-1104). If this were even remotely a kind of sadistic humor made at any individual's expense, any amusement would have been far beneath the person Jesus and completely uncharacteristic of one whose nature was overwhelmingly caring and compassionate. In addition, nowhere else does Jesus use such a method of testing. Jesus freely gives when he is asked, even when it would seem counterintuitive and countercultural to an observant Jew. To test someone who was not expected to know local idioms or the common vernacular, especially a non-Jew, would have been particularly harsh.

Some scholars have considered the alternative possibility that Jesus was still growing and still learning as he evolved into his own person. Was Jesus' own theological awareness and social conscience experiencing an evolutionary process? Jesus' willingness to learn are illustrated by a story referred to as "The Woman at the Well," in which Jesus engages a Samaritan (Jn 4:5-30). In this Johannine narrative, this unnamed Samaritan woman shows that she is every bit the theological debater that Jesus is, sparring with him in a mutual dialogue of respect and discovery. In this chance encounter Jesus engages her as his equal, showing the beauty of authentic interfaith engagement and cross-cultural communication. Perhaps the young Jesus was becoming more individuated in his continuing process of discernment, maturing socially and theologically as he engaged others and becoming ever more aware of the needs of those once deemed aliens, strangers, and foreigners.

Consider the unlikely possibility of an individual, both female and gentile, serving as Jesus' rabbi. Perhaps she has a thing or two to teach him about inclusiveness and hospitality, so she invites him into her world of diversity and religious plurality. This marginalized woman offers Jesus the chance to expand his horizons. Her quick-witted response to Jesus' insult is, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Her words are reflective, responsive—not reactive—and precisely on point. Jesus' response seems hurtful, but her banter seems almost playful as a Canaanite, a Syrophoenician, and a woman, appears to convert a Jew! To make a play on a popular adage, you can indeed teach an old dog a new trick! Jesus certainly had his comeuppance in that bellwether moment.

From that day forward Jesus would be a changed man. He learned much about grace and even more about his vocation. Rather than showing weakness or exposing divine flaw (please allow him the dignity and integrity of his humanity) the episode reveals Jesus to be truly in touch with the Spirit of God unlike anyone before or after him. Jesus from this point forward fully and completely embodies what John Shelby Spong calls the "God-presence" (Spong 2001). God-presence is made manifest in complete openness and authentic human vulnerability. Jesus learned and grew from this experience, and it opened for him, and for billions of human creatures thereafter, the way to a God who is more loving, more gracious, and more merciful than had ever before been imagined. In this story, Jesus sees more completely that God's hospitality was and is meant for all persons, for all humanity, especially in matters of faith and practice. A word of grace for us is this that because Jesus lived, learned, and loved, all humanity can do likewise. God's broad and expansively welcoming love, grace, peace, and mercy was ultimately revealed in Jesus' radically hospitable welcome, as the rabbi helped transition ancient Near Eastern hospitality from an ancient custom honoring the law to a practice articulated in love of God and of neighbor.

4.3.9 Conclusion

In an article for *Review and Expositor* titled "Take Back the Bible," Phyllis Trible (2000, 427) sums up the pursuit for biblical wisdom, declaring, "the wondrous blending of past, present, and future witnesses to both the stability and adaptability of sacred scripture. The stability of the text authorizes its adaptability, the adaptability of the text stabilizes its authority . . . Such a dialectic compels communities of faith to continue engaging the text, in order to make it work for them in their time and to make it work for life" (Trible 2000, 427; see Sanders 1987).

> During the years since I first found myself at the boundary of feminism and faith, . . . many things have happened in our world, in the life of our nation, . . . and in our individual lives to exacerbate the problem for all who love the Bible, but do not love it uncritically . . . More than ever, this book now occupies a central role in the so-called cultural and political wars of our time. Take any issue tearing apart our nation or our churches and you will find the Bible being elicited to support . . . what a given group deems right or wrong. . . In these wars of words and deeds the Bible has become captive. . . But subversively, the Bible itself undercuts captivity to simplistic readings and naïve assumptions. Those of us who cannot join, who refuse to join, either the thumpers or the bashers are called upon to engage the text in more excellent ways—to free it and ourselves . . . (Trible 2000, 429).

Far too often these days, the Bible is being held hostage by those driven by personal agendas.

Acknowledging that the Bible is a compilation of numerous books in which two overarching and competing narratives present a conflicted portrait of God, as well as a seemingly inconsistent response on the part of the faithful. God is loving, just, merciful, but is also judgmental, retributive and vengeful. These polarities are revealed in *herem* texts from the Hebrew Bible that call for mass destruction, the annihilation or extermination, of peoples of other cultures, tribes and clans perceived to threaten ritual purity. Juxtaposed against such mandates are numerous narratives from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures that advocate for hospitality. Proper exegetical and hermeneutical approaches can lead to a holistic reading revealing a God of hospitable welcome and inclusion. In addition, a commonsense approach is helpful in exposing a God in love with all creation, including human beings. This is a positive way forward in building beloved faith communities and local missional churches that are vibrant and vital, relational and relevant, expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and openly vulnerable in the sharing of gospel of Jesus the Christ.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EMPIRICAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: A DESCRIPTIVE AND INTERPRETIVE NARRATIVE

5.1 DEFINING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In their comprehensive book called *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*, Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke introduce a subject they describe as "vast and exciting" (Braun & Clarke 2013a, 3; Braun & Clarke 2013b, 3). They define the process in this way.

> The most basic definition of qualitative research is that it uses words as data collected and analyzed in all sorts of ways. Quantitative research, in contrast, uses *numbers* as data and analyses them using statistical techniques. The term qualitative research is used to refer both to *techniques* (of data collection or data analysis) and to a wider framework for conducting research, or paradigm. Paradigm here refers to the beliefs, assumptions, values and practices shared by a research community, and it provides an overarching framework for research. Qualitative research, as we define it, is not just about data and techniques – it's about the application of qualitative techniques within a qualitative paradigm, which is quite different from a quantitative paradigm. It has been referred to as Big Q qualitative research, and contrasted with small q qualitative research, which is the use of specific qualitative data collection and techniques, not (necessarily) within a qualitative paradigm (Braun & Clarke 2013a, 3-4; PDF Braun & Clarke 2013b, 3-4; see Creswell 2009, Leavy 2017).

Braun and Clarke (2013b, 4) add that "a broad cluster of features and assumptions make up a non-positivist qualitative research paradigm. One fundamental aspect is that it tends *not* to assume there is only one correct version of reality or knowledge," thus allowing for "multiple versions of reality." They note that most qualitative researchers agree that those doing qualitative research "should not, even *must not*, consider knowledge outside of the context in which it was generated" (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 4). Braun and Clarke (2013b, 4) refer to "both the context of data *generation*, such as an interview setting, and . . . the broader sociocultural and political contexts of the research," that combine to provide a more accurate assessment in the research. Other elements of a qualitative paradigm include,

- The use of qualitative data, and the analysis of words which are not reducible to numbers.
- The use of more 'naturally' occurring data collection methods that more closely resemble real life (compared to other possibilities, such as experiments) – this develops from the idea that we cannot make sense of data in isolation from context.
- An interest in meanings rather than reports and measures of behaviour or internal cognitions.
- The use of inductive, theory-generating research.
- A rejection of the natural sciences as a model of research, including the rejection of the idea of the objective (unbiased) scientist.
- The recognition that researchers bring their subjectivity (their views, perspectives, frameworks for making sense of the world; their politics, their passions) into the research process. This is seen as a strength rather than a weakness (Braun & Clarke PDF 2013, 4-5).

In other words, "the qualitative paradigm is quite *different* from the quantitative one," which very well may be contrary to earlier assumptions about good research practices (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 5). *Qualitative* is a different model that refuses to rely on the "controlled, rigorous, reliable, validated, quantitative and experimental" because there are no verifiable numeric guidelines to frame conclusions (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 5). Braun and Clarke (2013b, 7-8) write about "a qualitative sensibility," which is "an orientation towards research – in terms of research questions, and analyzing data – that fits within the qualitative paradigm," requiring "skills or orientations for a qualitative sensibility" including,

- An interest in process and meaning, over and above cause and effect.
- A critical and questioning approach to life and knowledge – you don't take things at face value and simply accept the way they are, but ask questions about *why* they may be that way, whose interests are served by them, and *how* they could be different.

- The ability to reflect on, and step outside, your cultural membership, to become a cultural commentator – so you can see and question shared values and assumptions that make up being a member of a particular society. This involves identifying your own assumptions, and then putting them aside so that your research is not *automatically* shaped by these.
- The development of a double-consciousness or an analytic 'eye' or 'ear,' in order to listen intently and critically reflect on what is said, simultaneously. This helps produce much better – more complex, richer – data.
- Reflexivity – critical reflection on the research process and one's own role as researcher, including our various and multiple insider and outsider positions. We have insider status when we share some group identity with our participants – for example, a *male* researching *males* would be an insider; we have outsider status when we do not share group identity with our participants – for example, a *white* man researching *Asian* men would be an outsider.
- Good interactional skills – a warm/friendly manner that puts people at ease and helps establish 'rapport' and 'trust'.

Some of these may come naturally to the researcher, while others may cause one to struggle with specific instruments.

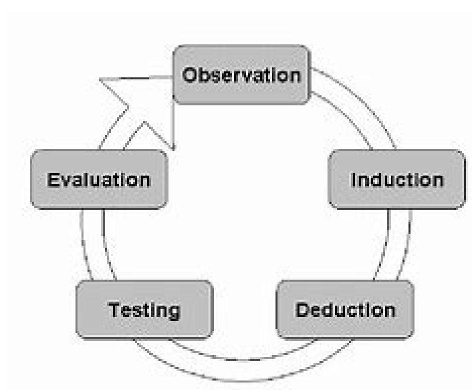
Braun and Clarke recommend two components to be added to the sensibility mix: first, "a basic grasp of some methods of data collection and analysis, which you develop to in-depth understanding"; and "a conceptual understanding of qualitative approaches" (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 8). They add,

> the skills you will develop in doing qualitative research don't just apply to this field: reading and engaging with information critically; learning to discern and distill out what is vital from a large body of information; active listening; writing and presenting interesting and compelling 'stories' . . . all these skills will see you in good stead in the 'real world,' as well as in qualitative research" (Braun and Clarke 2013b, 8).

The authors "love qualitative research! It is rewarding, rich, exciting, and challenging, capturing the complexity, mess and contradictions that characterize the real world, thus allowing the researcher to make sense of *patterns* of meaning," while recognizing the importance of "reflexivity and contextualization" (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 8). The writers provide a practical introduction to qualitative research and a pragmatic qualitative research process for beginners and experienced researchers alike. They hope to "demystify the process of qualitative research and enable successful empirical inquiries from a qualitative viewpoint, prioritizing "practice over theory . . . from design to data collection, analysis and reporting, without deeply engaging with theory" (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 9). They acknowledge, however, that theory is important "for developing a fuller and deeper understanding of qualitative . . . methods and what . . . we can and cannot generate from methods we use" (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 9). They explain "qualitative data analysis as having one of three forms or frameworks: searching for *patterns*, looking at *interactions*, or looking at *stories* (Braun & Clarke 2013b, 10). Finally, the authors note that when transcribing material gleaned from an interview process, the most helpful "transcripts are *thorough* and of high quality, while remembering that any copy is a mere representation" (Braun & Clarke 2013a, 162).

5.1.1 The Empirical Research Model

The model for this empirical qualitative research is based on A. D. de Groot's empirical cycle. A famous Dutch psychologist and chess expert, de Groot used the game of chess to conduct a variety of experiments through which he developed a cyclical model for empirical research.



Through implementation of the five consecutive facets of the de Groot model, one can achieve:

1. Observation: The observation of a phenomenon and inquiry concerning its causes.
2. Induction: The formulation of hypotheses – generalized explanations for the phenomenon.
3. Deduction: The formulation of experiments that will test the hypothesis (i.e., confirm them if true, refute them if false).
4. Testing: The procedures by which the hypotheses are tested, and data are collected.
5. Evaluation: The interpretation of the data and the formulation of a theory – an abductive argument that presents the results of the experiment as the most reasonable explanation for the phenomenon (Heitink 1999, 233).

5.1.2 The Research Setting

To address the research problem/question, twenty-two pastoral clergy from hospitably inclusive churches were interviewed during the summer of 2021 using six primary and eight secondary questions. This chapter summarizes the comments of the clergy respondents, each of whom was assigned a corresponding respondent number for anonymity. Each question was designed to gain deeper understanding of the purposeful development of ecclesial hospitality, both individual and corporate. Clergy were chosen at random from among churches that had completed a discernment process resulting in a congregational vote to become *Open and Affirming* (ONA) or *Welcoming and Affirming (WNA)*, within the Alliance of Baptists, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) [DOC], the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), or the United Church of Christ (UCC). *Atlas.ti,* the primary instrument used to analyze the results, noted nine questions that helped to identify themes relevant to the qualitative research. Questions *one, two, three, four, five, six, eight, nine, and fourteen* were found to indicate themes and subthemes within the responses. *NVivo* was then used to verify the *Atlas.ti* findings. Responses to the remaining five questions may provide additional insights into the link between progressive Christian theology and greater inclusivity.

5.1.3 The Interview/Survey Questions

Primary Questions:

1. What circumstances informed and impacted your evolution regarding the Bible and the Church in relation to the LGBTQQIA+ community?

2. In what ways do you think the congregation where you serve is hospitably welcoming and inclusive in relation to the LGBTQQIA+ community?

3. If these hospitable practices were not in place prior to your joining the church staff, what do you think facilitated this mindset?

4. What circumstances or learnings caused you to embrace a hospitably welcoming and inclusive perspective as a Christian congregation?

5. Would you offer up to five core issues that you believe would encourage and enable local missional congregations to embrace a hospitably welcoming and inclusive approach to persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation?

6. How would you summarize your ecclesiology and theology in connection to this discussion?

Secondary Questions:

7. What were the faith influences in your home when you were young?

8. In what ways did the influences of these developmental years impact the development of your theology?

9. How do you describe your theology to those who inquire and to members of your congregation?

10. When were you first exposed to progressive Christianity?

11. How has your understanding of the Bible evolved?

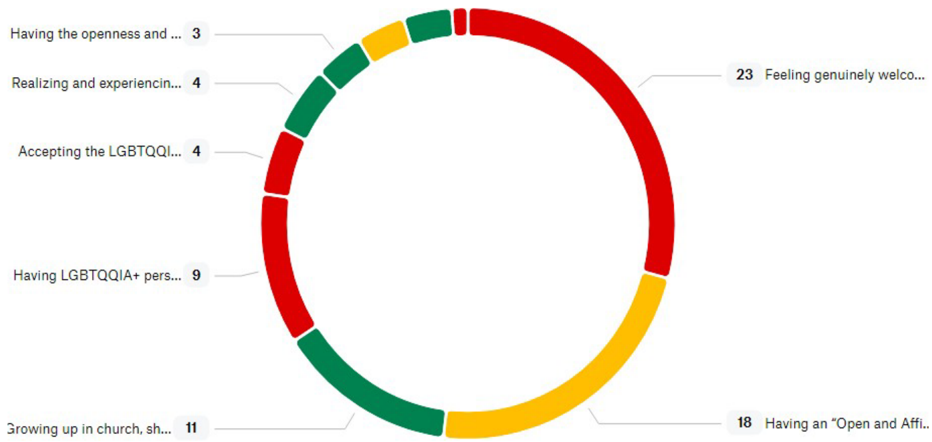
12. What individuals or groups (writers) stand out to you as major contributors to your understanding of progressive Christian theology?

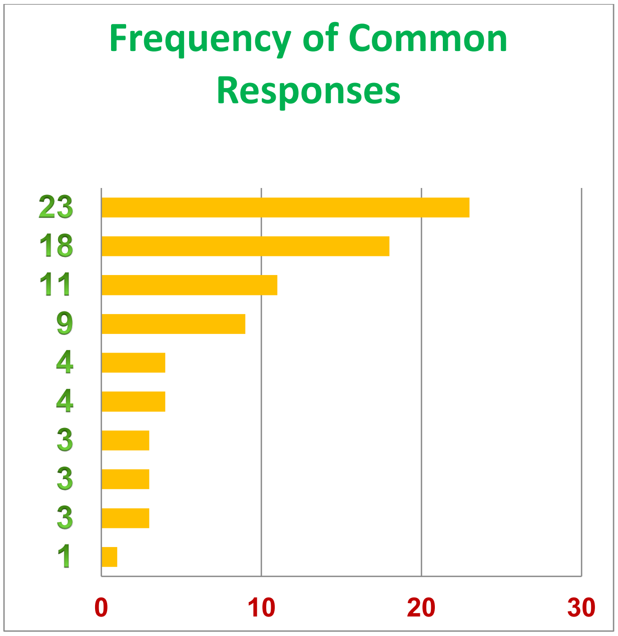
13. What faith formation curriculum do you employ in your congregation? Why do you use this specific curriculum?

14. How do you engage your congregation around this social justice issue as well as other concerns related to various people groups?

5.1.4 *The ATLAS.ti* Findings: Charts and Graphs

The three charts below reflect the ten most prominent commonalities among the responses.





23 Feeling genuinely welcomed by their faith community

18 Having an "Open and Affirming Journey" in place

11 Growing up in church, shaping a mindset of becoming welcoming and inclusive

9 Having LGBTQQIA+ persons

as board members

4 Accepting LGBTQQIA+ persons as part of congregational life

4 Realizing and experiencing the humanity of LGBTQQIA+individuals

3 Having the openness and willingness to listen to the struggling LGBTQQIA+ individuals

3 Needing time to prove oneself to the church community

3 Studying research, reports, and scriptures on stereotyping and marginalizing of LGBTQQIA+ persons

1 Admitting that they are still in the process of accepting and affirming of LGBTQQIA+ members

5.1.5 The *Atlas.*ti Findings: Manual Coding

Manual coding was then applied to identify thematic categories, themes and subthemes within the data. The results are as follows.

Thematic Category 1: Current state of congregations

Question One: What circumstances informed and impacted your evolution regarding the Bible and the Church in relation to the LGBTQQIA+ community?

Question Two: In what ways do you think the congregation where you serve is hospitably welcoming and inclusive in relation to the LGBTQQIA+ community?

Theme 1: Accepting LGBTQQIA+ persons as part of the life of the congregation (i.e., singing, serving)

Respondent 2

Respondent number two notes, "I have been asked this question in some form over the past three years and my simple answer is simply, 'We are.' While the church does not have on its website that it is Open and Affirming, it is listed among churches that are safe spaces for the LGBTQQIA+ community. The church sees no need to proclaim that designation. The church has a history of not placing restrictions on persons in leadership, the inclusion of the LGBTQQIA+ community "almost a logical outgrowth of who the church has been for 150 years. The church had women deacons as far back as the 1960s, very uncommon for Southern Baptist Convention churches at the time. "Overall, I think the tenor and culture of the church is simply to welcome people wherever they are on the journey. I also have said, 'I am willing to pastor a church only if my brother can be welcomed and affirmed in that church.' I told that to the search committee and the church before I was called as pastor, and it was accepted.

Respondent 6

Respondent number six commented that "in high school and my early years I struggled to understand and come to terms with my own sexual orientation." She added that "traditional scriptural interpretations and community norms around dating, marriage and family were ingrained in me and generated spiritual dissonance between my sense of self and my faith." She noted that through the academic study of religion in college, she "gained tools to more rigorously question scripture and culture and to connect with more inclusive hermeneutical possibilities in both." She went through a multi-year "deconstruction and reconstruction" process, meeting with several LGBTQ affirming pastors and professors, drawing strength from out lesbians in her social circles. By the time she turned 22 she was "personally, spiritually and scripturally on firmly inclusive footing and free to explore what that might mean for my future in terms of faith, family and leadership."

Reading our statement of calling every Sunday as we begin worship:
(Rock Bridge Christian Church joyfully welcomes persons of every race, ethnicity, age, sexual and gender identity, economic status, ability and educational level into an intentionally inclusive faith community. We experience the liberating, reconciling love of Christ through creative opportunities to worship God, pursue peace and justice, and serve in Columbia and throughout the world.)

2. Name tags with pronouns.
3. Calling and supporting lesbian pastors (myself and my predecessor).
4. LGBTQ+ worship leaders, elders, musicians, guest speakers, board members, etc.
5. Participation in our community's Pride celebrations and a Pride-themed worship service.
6. Past sponsorships of drag shows and local LGBTQ non-profits.
7. Rainbow symbols in logo, paraments and other places around the church.
8. Participation in vigils and rallies in support of LGBTQ advocacy efforts.

At Rock Bridge Christian Church you will find:

A small but diverse congregation
Friendly, open-minded people
An open worship space that invites nature and God's presence
Worship and sermon providing historical perspective on the Bible and its application today
A variety of opportunities to volunteer in the community if you choose
Casual atmosphere–no need to dress up

"Our culture as a congregation fully integrates LGBTQ+ people into ministry, membership, the sacrament of marriage, the support of unmarried couples and non-traditional families. We do not express or uphold a norm for family or personal life or in our programming and worship.

There is a palpable queerness to who we are as a community."

Respondent 22
Respondent number twenty-two observes having staff approach the congregation and address the LGBTQ+ issue through preaching, education, and conversations, is what facilitated the new mindset. In addition, "an acknowledgment" that the church was already practicing welcome and inclusion, though the congregation was still not being upfront and open about its position.

Theme 2: Having LGBTQQIA+ persons as board members and leaders of the community

Respondent 1
The current chair of the board is a gay man. The church has had members of the ministerial staff who were gay. "The congregation is inclusive in every way."

Respondent 7
Respondent number seven opines, "Heritage (Baptist Church) is probably typical of most churches and reflective of the larger social make-up in the United States. Based on comments and conversations, about a third of the church is welcoming and affirming; most of the remaining would be welcoming and understanding, but not necessarily affirming (specifically when it comes to the term 'marriage' for same-sex couples). About ten percent would be neither affirming nor accepting. Oddly enough, however, some of those same people were part of a Sunday Bible study group that elected a class member to be their deacon — a class member who is openly gay! He was, however, the adult son of one of the class members and was well known and loved in the church and the class. At his ordination, no one thought twice about affirming his gifts to serve." Throughout its history the church has had other gay members, though not necessarily open or out about it. Same-sex couples visit on occasion and are warmly received, welcomed like every other guest regardless of "race, gender, education, economic status, etc." The church was founded with these core principles in mind, "Where people from all walks of life and denominational backgrounds made up the church family. It's been in their DNA from the get go."

Respondent 9
Respondent number nine notes that "in 2010 our congregation adopted a welcome statement that was very clear in defining its stance on the inclusion of persons of LGBTQIA+ orientation. The statement appears on every printed material produced by the church, including website and other materials. LGBTQIA+ persons serve in all leadership positions, including elder and deacon, committee chairs, outreach and mission, and as Sunday School teachers, every aspect of congregational life. There is no ceiling for any of these persons, no distinction, no restrictions. I perform weddings with the church's blessing. We have gained lots of new members because of the stand we have taken."

Respondent 10
Respondent number ten says that half of the Grace North Church congregation is LGB or T, including the pastor (recently retired). "So, we had queer people at all levels of service and

leadership. Being queer was not the 'other' at GNC—it was just normal. We let people know we were open and affirming, but it was not something we talked about much, because it just WAS! We had several trans people through the years, as well. It is unusual to have a congregation that was not primarily queer or primarily straight, but that is one of the things I love about GNC."

Respondent 12

Respondent number twelve succinctly states, "In every way!" He goes on to add that "we have signs outside which let LGBTQ+ and other marginalized people know we are a safe space where they will be seen and affirmed, not just welcomed, which most every church will at least pretend to do. We have LGBTQ+ people on staff and in leadership and have for many years. We teach and preach about the gender expansiveness of God. We use inclusive language including references to God on occasion as 'they, them.' We have all-gender bathrooms. Inclusive theology is central, inextricable from our DNA."

Respondent 16

Respondent number sixteen affirms that "we have welcomed LGBTQ+ believers as members, enlisted them as worship leaders, in general, treating them as we do all our other participants. Nothing says 'you belong' in a Baptist church like being out on a committee! Last summer a transgender woman began worshipping with us" prior to completing her transition. "She intentionally chose to come to church in her first public outing as her true self."

Respondent 17

Respondent number seventeen states that the congregation she serves has been "explicitly welcoming" of LGBTQ+ families and individuals since the late 1990s. In 2002, the church extended marriage equality to LGBTQ+ persons, and all boards, staff, and volunteer positions are completely open to everyone, and current leadership reflects that posture. The church has sponsored multiple study opportunities and a variety of speakers to address this issue, "including hosting Jeff Chu to speak about LGBTQ+ youth." The church is politically involved in the work for equality, "including actively opposing anti-equality measures and fighting the efforts to exclude transgender individuals in our state legislature. When marriage equality arrived in North Carolina, we opened our doors for as many weddings as possible."

Respondent 19

Respondent number nineteen declares, "our congregation affirmed a church covenant based on the Oakhurst (Baptist Church) covenant, affirming all people regardless of gender orientation, in 2012. We joined The Alliance of Baptists in 2015, and recently AWAB (Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists; an outgrowth of the American Baptist Churches, USA). We have LGBTQ+ members in places of leadership, including staff, committees, and deacons. We partner with local organizations to hold events that support the LGBTQ+ community.

Respondent 21

Respondent number twenty-one reveals that the congregation she serves "is Open and Affirming and currently has lay leaders who identify as LGBTQ+. However, we have a noticeable group of members who are more "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" than they are open and affirming. In fact, we probably have more in the DADT group than we did twenty-five years ago when the church adopted its Open and Affirming covenant. We have a history of marching in the Denver Pride Parade, claiming to be a progressive Christian community supporting the following covenant: *We the members of Parkview Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, declare ourselves to be an inclusive and affirming congregation, welcoming all persons unconditionally as full members of our fellowship. We do not wish to discriminate against any person, whatever his or her status in life (race, ethnic identity, age, gender, sexual orientation, economic circumstances, physical or mental ability or impairment, or theological perspective) might be.* But even this covenant language is not entirely inclusive. Although LGBTQ+ folks feel comfortable identifying as such, there is almost never any discussion of issues around gender or sexuality. In our worship practices, we are reluctant to let go of traditional language around the divine/human relationship, in both speech and music. We seem to feel that it is acceptable to use terminology that may be less than welcoming, or perhaps even offensive to some persons, as long as we offer a disclaimer prior to the action. It seems that we are comfortable with offending others, as long as we know that we are doing so and warn them in advance. We are currently shopping for a new Open and Affirming banner for the front of our building . . . But sometimes I wonder what folks expect to experience inside when they walk under the big Open and Affirming banner as they enter the building. I can imagine that they are confused by who we are versus who we claim to be.

Theme 3: Making LGBTQQIA+ persons feel genuinely welcomed by their faith community

Respondent 3

Respondent number three opines, "The issue of whether someone is LGBTQ+ or not, is not an issue within our faith community. People are accepted as they are. Same sex couples are welcomed as are heterosexual couples. All are greeted warmly as they enter our church doors, whether for worship or any activity or event. The presence of members who are part of the LGBTQ+ community is also a determinant as a welcoming factor.

Respondent 5

Respondent number five affirms that "my congregation went through the process to become Open and Affirming in 1987. We publicize our welcome of LGBTQ people. A rainbow flag is displayed in the church sign. About fifty percent of our congregation belongs to the LGBTQ community, and that alone communicates our message of welcome. We celebrate anniversaries of LGBTQ couples and offer wedding services to LGBTQ people.

Respondent 8

Respondent number eight observes, "the church that I serve made a public commitment and announcement five years ago that they would be open and affirming towards the LGBTQ+ community. Also, their former pastor was same-gender loving, the interim pastor they chose was same-gender loving, and then of course, I am same-gender loving. On top of all that, they treat me and my wife . . . as equal partners in the family of Christ and the local church. They go out of their way to make sure . . . and I know that we are loved and appreciate for who we are and who God has called us to be."

Respondent 20

Respondent number twenty states that the church she serves "has grown in the art of welcoming over the past few years" and is "learning to accept everyone as they are and appreciate everyone's gifts.

Subtheme 3A: Having affirmation programs and sessions dedicated to different groups and individuals

Respondent 4

Respondent number four notes, "every Sunday, at some point in the service, we give voice to our embrace and welcome of all. It isn't a creed, exactly, but it comes close. We have titled it 'An Affirmation of Welcome and Inclusion' and we say, 'We affirm the presence of the Living Christ who invites us, and people of all spiritual paths, ages, mental and physical abilities, races, economic levels, sexual orientations, and gender identities into this community of love and healing; and who is present with us as we live our lives in this community. We dedicate ourselves to living out our faith as fully as we can as we share our lives with all we meet along our journey."

Respondent 6

Participation in our community's Pride celebrations and a Pride-themed worship Service.
Past sponsorships of drag shows and local LGBTQ non-profits. Participation in vigils and rallies in support of LGBTQ advocacy efforts.

Respondent 11

Respondent number eleven acknowledges that "we only voted – as of February 2020 – to become an Open and Affirming congregation." Several LGBTQ+ persons, along with the parents of a lesbian daughter, had joined the church several years prior to the vote "and their presence . . . opened the door for more people to call us their spiritual home." The church continues to look for new ways to be a visible presence among Philadelphia's LGBTQ+ community, though they are located in a low income, heavily white and white-supremacist neighborhood, complete with the flying of the Confederate Flag, (a symbol of hate and racism masquerading as honoring heritage.) The church is known as the "liberal" church in the area, and thus there is a certain amount of worry about repercussions if the church becomes too visible or demonstrative. Thus, their "welcome is a bit low key. For example, we do have our Open and Affirming statement on our website, and I do preach a welcoming message on LGBTQ+ issues, but we do not fly a rainbow flag at this point."

Respondent 12

Respondent number twelve succinctly states, "In every way!" He goes on to add that "we have signs outside which let LGBTQ and other marginalized people know we are a safe space where they will be seen and affirmed, not just welcomed, which most every church will at least pretend to do. We have LGBTQ+ people of staff and in leadership and have for many years. We teach and preach about the gender expansiveness of God. We use inclusive language including references to God on occasion as 'they, them.' We have all-gender bathrooms. Inclusive theology is central, inextricable from our DNA."

Respondent 13
Respondent number thirteen notes that "we are a small church of 164 members, and we are 99.5% LGBTQ+. I often tell others that what makes us different is that when you go to an "open and affirming" church, usually you see things from a cis-gendered heterosexual traditional family-structured point of view, which is a point of privilege in our society, and they go out of their way to include LGBTQ+ people. We present things through an LGBTQ+ point of view (lens), as an oppressed group of people, and go out of our way to include cis-gendered heteronormative and traditional family units."

Respondent 14
Respondent number fourteen says that the church where he serves as pastor became an Open and Affirming congregation in 2010. This decision was made after "a process that involved a year- long study of discernment requiring us to examine the issues surrounding LGBTQQIA persons. At the end of the study, our church voted nearly unanimously and passed a resolution affirming all LGBTQQIA persons into the full life and ministry of the congregation. We also proudly fly the LGBTQQIA flag at the church, on all communications, and on all social media. We want them to know they are welcome in our congregation."

Respondent 15
We have a relationship with the Raleigh LGBT Center and are on their list of affirming churches. We displayed a banner for Pride Month. Our church is a half mile from one of the most conservative Baptist seminaries, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. We sponsored the ordination of a gay man from our church two years ago."

Respondent 17
Respondent number seventeen states that the congregation she serves has been "explicitly welcoming" of LGBTQ+ families and individuals since the late 1990s. In 2002, the church extended marriage equality to LGBTQ+ persons, and all boards, staff, and volunteer positions are completely open to everyone, and current leadership reflects that posture. The church has sponsored multiple study opportunities and a variety of speakers to address this issue, "including hosting Jeff Chu to speak about LGBTQ+ youth." The church is politically involved in the work for equality, "including actively opposing anti-equality measures and fighting the efforts to exclude transgender individuals in our state legislature. When marriage equality arrived in North Carolina, we opened our doors for as many weddings as possible.

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Subtheme 3B: Displaying rainbow flags and symbols around the church

Respondent 12
Respondent number twelve succinctly states, “In every way!” He goes on to add that “we have signs outside which let LGBTQ+ and other marginalized people know we are a safe space where they will be seen and affirmed, not just welcomed, which most every church will at least pretend to do. We have LGBTQ+ people of staff and in leadership and have for many years. We teach and preach about the gender expansiveness of God. We use inclusive language including references to God on occasion as ‘they, them.’ We have all-gender bathrooms. Inclusive theology is central, inextricable from our DNA.

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Respondent 15
Respondent number fifteen notes that it was “quite evident that the congregation was open and affirming, though they had not formally made a study, had open discussion, and come to that decision on a formal basis. We now have formally taken steps to make it clear that we are an open and affirming church, a safe place for the LGBTQ community to come worship and be part of a church family. The process of becoming a Disciples Open and Affirming Church was a church wide discussion over a period of months. In that discussion and decision-making process everyone was on board and gave a warm welcome to all. We use inclusive language and images of our website, our newsletter, our Facebook page, and from the pulpit. We have a relationship with the Raleigh LGBT Center and are on their list of affirming churches. We displayed a banner for Pride Month. . . We sponsored the ordination of a gay man from our church two years ago.”

Respondent 18
Respondent number eighteen says that the church incorporates the LGBTQ flag, bisexual flag, and the inclusive gay pride flag outside the door each week during worship. They observe a PRIDE Sunday every year. They use inclusive language in worship and speak daily, emphasizing LGBT pride.

Theme 4: Admitting that they are still in the process of accepting and affirming LGBTQ+ members

Respondent 22
Respondent number twenty-two says, “as of now, and with us still evolving, I would say that we are very open in theology, language, and willingness. We have a few LGBTQ+ members who have always had roles in leadership,” so in that regard, nothing has changed. “We have

not been asked to perform or hold a wedding in the church or to vote to welcome any openly gay couples/families" as of this time. "That is coming we hope! The youth and young people are already there as they have had more personal experience with the community. Some of our youth have come out to me as LGBTQ, a few to their parents, but none openly to the congregation, YET!" It is a dream that will come true one day.

Thematic Category 2: Experiences that led to becoming holistic and inclusive

Question One: What circumstances informed and impacted your evolution regarding the Bible and the Church in relation to the LGBTQQIA+ community?

Question Three: If these hospitable practices were not in place prior to your joining the church staff, what do you think facilitated this mindset?

Question Six: How would you summarize your ecclesiology and theology in connection to this discussion?

Question Eight: In what ways did the influences of these developmental years impact the development of your theology?

Question Nine: How do you describe your theology to those who inquire and to members of your congregation?

Theme 1: Having an "open and affirming journey" in place, developing realizations from experiences in the seminary, school, community and church

Respondent 1
"This attitude and these practices were firmly in place when I accepted the call to serve the church seven years ago. What we refer to as our Open and Affirming journey began twenty years ago."

Respondent 3
"These practices were all in place prior to my being on staff and I think they have been ingrained into the church community." "When my wife and I began our pastorate here in Belfast, Maine over sixteen years ago, the church had not approved the *Open and Affirming* designation of the United Church of Christ. There had been an attempt some years prior, but it did not make headway. There were many in the congregation upon our arrival who were open and inclusive but there were others who did not see homosexuality as an acceptable or God-given way to be." At the same time, we had a "lesbian couple who were members, but they did not talk about or share that information with anyone, though people knew." Some members were aware, and with our encouragement began to raise the issue of becoming an *Open and Affirming* congregation and thus began that process. "What really made a difference was the presence of a new couple, two women, who joined our membership and were very open about their relationship. . ." They loved the people and came to be loved and trusted by the entire congregation. It was a personal relationship that people had with them and then with other

LGBTQ+ individuals in the community, that really moved the entirety of the congregation forward in becoming accepting and open and inclusive.

Respondent 6
"When I was called as pastor five plus years ago, the groundwork (foundation) was solidly in place." I have increased the number of activities related to the issue: organizing Pridefest participation, adding pronouns to nametags, updating the church's statement of calling to include "gender identity." "But none of these changes has generated any controversy or pushback, a sign of how grounded in inclusion/welcome the congregation has been for many, many years." Any changes that move the congregation toward a wider, more intentional welcome are received as the logical progression or outgrowth of who the congregation wants to be as a church.

Respondent 7
"As noted above" (question two), hospitality "was part of their founding principles. In fact, when Heritage (Baptist Church) first formed they reached out to Oakhurst (Baptist Church) for help with framing their church covenant statement. Three of the four opening 'we believe' statements emphasize inclusivity and openness:
We believe that God demonstrates and reveals through Jesus Christ that love is the basis for all relationships.
We believe that Christ's love calls us into relationship with God and with one another, forming Christ's Church.
We believe that God gives Heritage Baptist Church a vision of a fellowship that accepts all who confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, recognizes all modes of Christian baptism, and of a fellowship that is committed to loving God and all people.

Respondent 8
"While their former pastor was a married same-gender loving person, St. James, the church where I serve, is a church that is big on social justice and equality. Therefore, I believe they are a group of people who genuinely believe that God loves everyone and thus they have followed the example of Christ."

Respondent 9
"Two hundred and five years old, Central Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky is a historic church within the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. Denominational pillar Barton Stone once preached in its pulpit. As early as 1954 the elders designed and adopted a welcome statement that specifically declared, 'all persons of *all* races are welcome.' Central Christian is a downtown church committed to social justice, a thinking congregation with an intellectual love for God. Part of this dynamic is attributed to the fact that Lexington Theological Seminary and Transylvania University are located close to the church campus. The table is open without reservation! All are welcome!" This pronouncement is always mentioned whenever the supper is celebrated.

Respondent 10
"Well, when I began as Associate Pastor back in 1994, the average age of the congregation was eighty and I was the only queer person there!" I think that simply loving people as they

are, where they are, led the congregation to build up a very diverse community through the years. "We did not do anything special or different. We just loved people and we did not ask them to change or leave parts of themselves behind.

Respondent 13
Respondent number thirteen states, "I do not think this question applies due to who we are." The reason for this response is that this church was founded as a congregation primarily by and for the LGBTQQIA+ community.

Respondent 18
Respondent number eighteen referred to question one which reveals that processes around Open and Affirming initiatives were in place in the church's that helped shape her understanding, instilling in her the ideal to be inclusive and loving of all people.

Respondent 21
Respondent number twenty-one notes, "our hospitable practices were in place long before my arrival, facilitated by an earlier generation of church members who were more liberal theologically. The generation currently leading the church where I serve is clearly more moderate in theology and less likely to stir up something by their actions. The tendencies toward Open and Affirming positions prevalent in this part of the city are probably due in large part to the 'hippie-esque' liberal social and political climate in the Denver Metro area."

Subtheme 1: Following the values of the scripture and church, advocating hospitality and diversity

Respondent 3
Respondent number three opines, "it is my understanding that God makes no distinctions between persons. As Paul states in Galatians 3:28, "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This egalitarian principle is also "seen in the example of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 and supported by Isaiah 56:1-8." In the story of Philip and the eunuch, "baptism was not withheld and thus" there was total acceptance into the fellowship of the faith community and in the eyes of God, despite the eunuch being "both a foreigner and had undergone mutilation of his sexual parts," factors that would have prohibited his full engagement as a practicing Jew. "In summary, God calls all people to their various ministries and does not restrict any from the call to faithful church leadership or participation."

Respondent 5
Respondent number five declares that his ecclesiology mirrors the covenantal theology of the United Church of Christ. Parishioners in the local church, covenant to join in a journey together, "led by God, a journey in which everyone has equal dignity and an equal voice. The local church" in turn "is in covenant with settings of the wider church," guided by a "non-hierarchical ecclesiology" consisting of "no top-down decisions" forced on or "made for local congregations in terms of doctrine and practice. "My theology is a progressive Christian theology that focuses on following the way of Jesus, rather than having correct doctrines about

Jesus. It is a theology that recognizes many paths to God," including those "beyond the Christian path, though I believe that I am called by God to be a follower of Jesus. Scripture is the inspired Word of God, but it requires inspired people to interpret its truths" truths that "are deeper than literal meanings." Salvation means living from our connection to God, here and now, a connection that is eternal" and is not merely focused on getting to heaven and avoiding hell.

Respondent 6
Respondent number six believes that "God is with us and beyond us, reflected in scripture but not contained by identity (doctrine?), creed, or singular interpretation. Churches are called to be places of joyful welcome and the table is God's table," (it belongs to God), and "so all are welcome there too.

Respondent 8
Respondent number eight declares that "theologically, I know and practice the radical and wide welcome of all people" in the same way that Jesus did. I know that scriptures must be "studied closely and with intention to truly understand that God's love is for" anyone "who has ever lived and who will live. Therefore, this discussion" regarding welcome and inclusion, "connects me in several deep and effective ways."

Respondent 9
Respondent number nine affirms that "first, I firmly believe that we are all created in the image of God," but that affirmation is my starting point. "God made us just as we are, and we are precious in God's sight. Second, one verse of scripture that further informs this issue" (of who we are as images of the Divine creation), is that "God was in Christ reconciling God to the world (II Corinthians 5:19). Christ's arms are outstretched to embrace the whole world, everybody included! The sobering question is a fitting response, 'what part of 'all' do you not understand?' . . . my ecclesiology and theology are centered in radical hospitality. Third, it is my mission to reach people who have been stung by the 'Bs.' Many people have vowed to never set foot inside a church again because they have felt unwelcome. They have been 'burned, bruised, badgered, bored, betrayed, battered,' all victims of the 'Bs. Churches must heal those painful stings! Congregations must offer a safe invitation."

Respondent 11
Respondent number eleven: I see LGBTQ+ persons as among the 'other sheep' whom Jesus, the Good Shepherd, welcomes to be part of the one flock (John 10)," and whom Jesus defends against the wolves that would tear them apart. I see inclusion as being a thread that runs not only through scripture, tearing down the 'dividing wall of hostility'" separating "Jew and Gentile as Paul described in Ephesians two, but" is also manifest throughout "church history to the present day." Some see inclusion as a relaxing of standards and a concession (accommodation) to the world's sin," but on "the contrary, I see the Church's journey of welcome and the abandonment of past illusory purity codes and crusades as a journey toward greater faithfulness.

Respondent 16
Respondent number sixteen says, "my ecclesiology has been shaped by baptist traditions of

local church autonomy and congregational polity. The New Testament portrays the Church in a variety of ways: body of Christ; household of faith; living stones; called-out ones, among others. Each local expression of the body will follow the Spirit's leadership in finding its own way of 'being and doing church.' Churches should offer the grace, love, and welcome of Christ as the body of Christ in its local context. When the gay man asked me 'would my family be welcome in your church,' I could not imagine any other answer than 'yes.' I see myself as Christocentric in my theology, holding a high view of scripture, and seeking to live and lead in the spirit of Christ. It took some time for me to affirm a 'doctrine of man' that would permit me to say to another young, gay man, 'God made you as you are,' and an understanding of a 'doctrine of God' that would permit me to say, 'and God loves you as you are.'"

Respondent 17

Respondent number seventeen states, "I have become convinced that one of the central images/tenets for those who follow Jesus is the open table where everyone has an equal place and there is enough for all. The God who commands us to 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,' makes clear to us that the heart of it all is love." Love, not as "the sentimental variety, but the kind of love that demands risks and intentional work."

Theme 2: Needing time to prove oneself to the church community

Respondent 11

"The congregation was not at all welcoming when I" came as pastor. "The church's lay leader found out (via opening mail addressed to me from the United Church of Christ Pension Boards) that I had designated my same-gender partner as my beneficiary. . ." This person "reacted very badly." My ministry at the church nearly ended right then, necessitating the need for Conference staff to come and intervene. "This leader and I were in a cautious sort of 'détente'" for months and years afterward. From that very difficult place, I think my own inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in sermons, including references and narratives regarding the issue, at least on a sporadic basis, "helped make LGBTQ+ perspectives 'non-scary.' I did not treat LGBTQ+ issues as a drum to beat constantly, but as one subset of people among others whom Jesus loves and to whom the gospel can be a word of hope. My strategy was to 'make haste slowly.'" These efforts "did not bring the congregation to a place of affirmation, but it mitigated and neutralized much of the negativity that had been present." In addition, "I think just doing the work of a pastor – preaching, leading worship, pastoral visits, activity in the community," all combined gave me credibility, leading to affirmations like, "'Pastor Dave is a good pastor, and he is gay-affirming!'" "Several LGBTQ+ persons, along with the parents of a lesbian daughter, joined the congregation over a period of a few years and their presence pushed the" church's "mindset to a place of affirmation." One of these newer members spearheaded the Open and Affirming process. We are a very small congregation. Pre-COVID, we might have had two dozen in attendance at a service, "and so the process" toward Open and Affirming "was very informal. A key moment happened in a congregational meeting" as we dealt with the subject, "when our oldest active member, in her early 90s, spoke of the pain she experienced when her children were excluded from the church's welcome (and building) in the 1950s because her husband was Roman Catholic, and her children were being raised and confirmed Roman Catholic." Her choosing to speak in this setting "was really a gift!" Her "story gave permission for our longtime members to consider welcoming LGBTQ+ persons. In addition, our congregation, because of or location, attracts" numerous "homeless/indigent/mentally ill/addicted persons, some of whom act out in worship. Our congregation has struggled" with some success to welcome these homeless persons . . ." Compared to that effort, welcoming LGBTQ+ persons seemed almost tame."

Respondent 19
Respondent number nineteen recalls that when I arrived at the church, "there were some members who were supportive and some still uncomfortable with being gender inclusive. My husband and I were co-pastors for the first three years. We preached about openness and inclusion, held Bible studies, and talked with members individually to gradually change the congregational mindset."

Respondent 20
Respondent number twenty remembers that in 2014 she had a "sabbatical study under the umbrella of 'evangelism' that focused specifically on how to be more welcoming. It was a yearlong process that included studies on LGBT issues, race, gender, and socio-economic status. One objective was seeking official designation as an Open and Affirming congregation, which was granted on August 17, 2019.

Thematic Category 3: Practices leading to the ability to overcome bias and discriminatory issues

Question Four: What circumstances or learnings caused you to embrace a hospitably welcoming and inclusive perspective as a Christian congregation?

Question Five: Would you offer up to five core issues that you believe would encourage and enable local missional congregations to embrace a hospitably welcoming and inclusive approach to persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation?

Theme 1: Growing up in church, shaping the mindset of becoming welcoming and inclusive

Respondent 3
Respondent number three was first made aware of the LGBTQ+ community at seminary. "The open nature of the staff and student body there confirmed my own openness and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals that I met and came to befriend." He adds that "friendship and conversation" with LGBTQ+ people aided his awareness of "the need for an inclusive approach to relationships with others and Christ's call to love our neighbor."

Respondent 6
Respondent number six commented that "in high school and my early years I struggled to understand and come to terms with my own sexual orientation." She added that "traditional scriptural interpretations and community norms around dating, marriage and family were ingrained in me and generated spiritual dissonance between my sense of self and my faith." She noted that through the academic study of religion in college, she "gained tools to more rigorously question scripture and culture and to connect with more inclusive hermeneutical

possibilities in both." She went through a multi-year "deconstruction and reconstruction" process, meeting with several LGBTQ affirming pastors and professors, drawing strength from out lesbians in her social circles. By the time she turned 22 she was "personally, spiritually and scripturally on firmly inclusive footing and free to explore what that might mean for my future in terms of faith, family and leadership."

Respondent 7

Respondent number seven joined Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia upon his arrival in Atlanta to serve as a journalist for a Baptist denominational agency. "It was the first time I had any kind of personal interaction with LGBTQ+ people." Listening to their stories, another recurring theme in this survey process, this individual heard of their great pain and exclusion from family and church. On one assignment, he stopped in the Castro District of San Francisco, California, staying with a pastor he had covered on an unrelated issue the previous year. This was at the time when Charles Stanley, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, made his infamous 1984 remark about AIDS being "God's punishment on homosexuals." "My pastor/friend invited me to a meeting that evening at the church — what turned out to be a support group for members of the community who had been affected by these words in particular and the church in general. About 20 people gathered, mostly men but also a few women. One by one they told their stories of pain and rejection. At least two of the men told of working on church staffs. One worked as an associate and had confided in the senior minister he was wrestling with an attraction toward other men. The pastor listened sympathetically, and then proceeded to "out" him in front of the deacons that week and was immediately fired . . . Toward the end of the sharing, I made a comment that I was surprised they had come to this meeting at a Baptist church of all places. And then I asked, 'After what you've described, why would you ever cross the threshold of any church building ever again?' And one of the men looked at me in surprise and said, 'Because we love God.' The experience forever changed me. It would still take more years for me to work through a way of expressing and practicing a more inclusive way of living and ministering, but the journey began there."

Respondent 9

Respondent number nine recalls that "at sixty-two years old I have had time to look back and reflect on my experience with this subject," encountering LGBTQQIA+ issues as a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, a very progressive institution. He notes that "in the mid-1980s a seminary student at Eden Theological Seminary came out to me as a lesbian, further forcing me to engage the discussion." He remembers one bellwether, informative moment that occurred in 1991 when "the candidate for General Minister and President of the denomination (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ) openly expressed his support of the inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons in the life of the church, leading to a volatile time of debate in Disciples congregations, including my own." This clergy person proactively ministered to several men dying of AIDS at the height of the epidemic, having the privilege "of officiating at the baptisms and funerals of many of these individuals who were typically shunned by congregations."

Respondent 10

Respondent number ten states, "Probably the realization of my own queerness!" Raised a Southern Baptist, this individual experienced a crisis of faith when he recognized his own bisexuality, not acceptable in Southern Baptist life. He had seen the impact being nonheterosexual had on the lives of other LGBTQQIA+ persons, acknowledging "the self-loathing and shunning was so destructive." He remembers thinking, "this cruelty has nothing to do with the God of Jesus—it can't!" He adds, "this was long before I had read any queer theology. I just instinctively knew that what I had been taught was wrong."

Respondent 11

Respondent number eleven declares unequivocally, "I am a Christian, and I am a gay man!" He then added, "It took a lot of soul-searching to be able to put those two affirmations in the same sentence." He is sixty years old and thus can remember the times when LGBTQQIA+ persons were considered criminal, mentally ill, abominations, "particularly during the early years of the AIDS epidemic." (Pope Benedict once called homosexuality "deviant.") The church of his childhood avoided conversations about LGBTQQIA+ issues, recalling that one pastor, a part of the United Church of Christ, mentioned gay people once, "and it was an anti-gay rant in a sermon following the UCC's ordination of Rev. Bill Johnson as the denomination's first openly gay clergy. College had a profound impact on this person, raising awareness to a wider faith perspective and consideration of becoming a pastor. At this time, he put his homosexuality "on a shelf," as he was deeply conflicted about becoming a pastor, still assuming that "being gay seemed to be a deal breaker." A gay Roman Catholic friend introduced him to a "quietly welcoming" United Church of Christ congregation in Philadelphia. He also attended services at a Metropolitan Community Church (a denomination created to cater to the wider LGBTQQIA+ community) on Sunday evenings during the 90s, all of which continued to influence him significantly. The UCC church eventually became Open and Affirming, and he and his partner, now husband, had a commitment ceremony there in 1999, the first ever held at the church. A lesbian friend nudged him to take lay ministry classes and eventually he attended a Lutheran Seminary, graduating in 2014 and now serving his current congregation, the only church he has served (from 2008-2014 as a licensed pastor, and from 2014 forward as an ordained pastor).

Respondent 12

Respondent number twelve (intentionally selected) reflects that "mostly it was my own friendships and conversations with gay friends along with a college course in human sexuality" that influenced. He confesses that "before college I accepted and towed the party line that although same sex attraction was a real thing, it was not what God intended for human relationships and reproduction. The college course and listening to LGBTQ people share their stories rapidly challenged and broadened that view."

Respondent 14

Respondent number fourteen succinctly declares, "Well, me mainly. I came out as a gay man in my late 20s, while attending seminary," a "personal confrontation" that "led me on a journey of self-acceptance and affirmation. I met with people who challenged my understanding of the Bible and my faith tradition. I went through much soul searching." He adds, "As I began to understand my relation to God as a gay man, I started sharing this with other LGBTQQIA persons, who were turned away from church. I walked alongside them as they questioned and wrestled with the issues. And together, we were strengthened and inspired."

Respondent 16

Respondent number sixteen offered what he called a "short version of a lifelong journey!" He tells his story: "I grew-up in a Southern Baptist environment with the clear understanding that homosexuality was a sinful perversion of God's design for people. In college I encountered some gay persons – surprisingly not the deviants that I had been warned about. At this point I understood homosexuality to be a lifestyle choice not consistent with a Christian lifestyle. This position was challenged as I began to encounter people with a sincere faith in Christ who were homosexual. I couldn't completely reconcile this with what I understood the Bible to say about homosexuality but decided that I could not and would not participate in gay-bashing or condemnation from the pulpit. (I had read David Gushee's columns in *Associated Baptist Press*, later published in book form as *Changing Our Mind*, and decided that after reading chapter eight I would get off the bus!) That all changed when a gay partner couple with three adopted sons asked, 'would our family be welcome in your church.' This honest question drove me into a summer of reading, praying, talking with others, ultimately bringing me to a point of believing that if God had created 3-5% of humanity to be LGBTQ+ then we should celebrate them as children of God created in the image of God and welcome them and their gifts into our church." we have welcomed LGBTQ+ believers as members, enlisted them as worship leaders, in general, treating them as we do all our other participants. Nothing says 'you belong' in a Baptist church like being out on a committee! Last summer a transgender woman began worshipping with us" prior to completing her transition. "She intentionally chose to come to church in her first public outing as her true self."

Respondent 17

Respondent number seventeen says that she "first encountered LGBTQ+ issues in high school in the '70s." A family member had had a bad experience with a person who was gay and so she "decided" that "all gay people were bad." It is at this point, however, that God began to work on her heart, and she began her transformation, meeting gay students in seminary with whom she engaged one-on-one conversations "around inclusivity, the Bible, and the church, and began expanding my reading." About eight years later she began her pastorate at Congregational United Church of Christ, and they hired a gay Choir Director/Organist, and she then became aware of several gay members in the church. She listened to "their fears of being outed in the community, in schools where they taught, or with family. This fear disturbed me, and felt wrong, not in keeping with the gospel. So, I initiated a period of study and reflection for all of us in the church, myself included."

Respondent 22

Respondent number twenty-two says, "for me personally, this has been a journey over many years. In college, I remember feeling very strongly against LGBTQ+ persons as the church in which I had been raised was against it (they have since changed as well). This teaching was never something I questioned. When I attended seminary, I met LGBTQ+ individuals who were there to pursue a calling to ministry. As a woman having long felt called by God to ministry and yet being told by others that I was wrong or misheard, and knowing deeply that I had not, I began to see and question that there could be other ways regarding LGBTQ+ persons. This issue was not one that I felt the need to confront head on or address professionally at the first church where I served, as I was still formulating my own thinking, but then years later the topic came up again. I attended a retreat for youth ministers and went to a workshop focusing on LGBTQ+ youth. There, I received information for churches about growing in this area and particularly about youth and the issues with which they struggled. After mentioning the retreat to our pastor and sharing the information with him, he led the 'charge' and we agreed to hold conversations with all ages about this topic. I did not feel qualified to teach or answer questions about LGBTQ+ issues and so I reached out to professionals" in our area who were experienced with this issue. "We had two sex therapists/counselors came and speak to our youth—one at the middle school level and one at the high school level. They provided excellent information, a chance to answer questions, and a way to help students think through this topic. (I, of course, obtained signed parent permission beforehand, shared the information with them, these talks occurring after the adult conversations). In addition, I researched resources on Bible lessons regarding these questions. I found particularly helpful, a DVD called *Fish out of Water*, though it unfortunately was deemed inappropriate for students). Several books served as resources as well. Sadly, the conversations the pastor led did not go as well, as he did not handle the situation appropriately or openly. Some LGBTQ+ church members were asked to share personal testimonies and were essentially 'outed' with very little time to prepare. Several families left the church because they did not feel the discussions were actually 'open' and that a decision had already been made. The pastor subsequently retired after facing some personal issues and creating division in the church. The 'Welcoming Task Force' he was supposed to have created never happened and with his retirement and the onset of COVID, the conversation ceased. Months later, after a COVID break, the new deacon chair and interim ministers decided to form a 'Welcoming Task Force' team and asked for deacon volunteers to serve. A small group consisting of four deacons created a 'Welcoming and Affirming Statement', that after a few revisions was approved by the deacons. It then went before the church for a vote and passed with only two negative votes. This statement has now been adopted and we are currently discerning areas where we need to address our language (i.e., wedding policies, etc.) to make everything a part of our welcoming process. Respondent number twenty-two affirms that "I was privileged to see early" in my life "a church that was open to change and could admit when a new plan needed to be made."

Theme 2: Realizing and experiencing the humanity of LGBTQQIA+ individuals

Respondent 4

Respondent number four states, "we, who have LGBTQ+ family and friends, see their humanity. As human beings, it is ours to validate their dignity and worth."

Respondent 8

Respondent number eight responds, "because I was shamed, shunned and disgraced by the church simply because of who I loved, I knew how it felt to be excluded and excommunicated from the church. When God called me to ministry and later called me to plant a church, I vowed to be sure to be as welcoming, inclusive, and affirming as I could. I wanted all people especially the LGBTQ+ community, to know that they matter to God, that God loves them, simply because God created them. I created a mantra that I intended to remain a part of the ministry I created. The mantra simply says: 'God did not create you to hate you!' This simply means that God created us all, God knew what was being created, and there is no way a loving God who created all of creation would create anyone or anything only to hate or disown it. It makes no sense for God to hate what God created. Seminary was also a huge learning experience for me as it pertains to God and the LGBTQ+ people, or 'homosexuality' to be exact. I learned a lot about being hospitably welcoming and inclusive by studying the (so-called) 'Clobber Scriptures.'" These are texts "used to clobber, manipulate, shame, shun, and dismantle the LGBTQ+ community." Therefore, many years ago I embraced the just and equal treatment, welcome and hospitality of ALL God's people.

Respondent 9
Respondent number nine remembers that "as an undergraduate at Indiana University I joined a fraternity made up of individuals who did not seem to fit into the mainstream of fraternal life. "We were different from other 'frats,' even called the 'boat people' by other fraternities because we had a significant population of Asian members. We came to wear this remark as a badge of honor, proud of who we were as a community. In some ways" these circumstances "modeled for me church! We acknowledged and celebrated our differentness." (All these dynamics) "I now understand in hindsight as part of my personal and spiritual formation."

Respondent 11
Respondent number eleven declares, "my own experience as a gay man, the hostile messages I heard from so many churches, and the sense of welcome and refreshment I felt from the occasional LGBTQ+-affirming church, led me to choose a path of inclusion, not only for LGBTQ+ persons, but for other marginalized groups . . . I lived through the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Among the friends I knew from those days, few are still living. Many died of AIDS and several by suicide. Other acquaintances were gay-bashed – not fatally, but severely enough that they lived with physical limitations thereafter. This is the bitter fruit of conservative, non-inclusive theology.

Theme 3: Having the openness and willingness to listen to the struggling LGBTQQIA+ individuals

Respondent 3
1. Acceptance of all people as beloved of God. All are children of God.
2. Emphasize the central role and importance of love as primary in all human relationships and in all aspects of human relationships, including sexuality.
3. Celebrate the uniqueness and diversity of all humanity as part of God's good creation.

Respondent 7
Respondent number seven affirms, "it shaped me that the starting point for my work is that of a pastor, a shepherd, a guide. I have learned in my thirty-two years as a pastor that people carry heavy burdens and need someone to walk with them and shoulder that load, not add to it. Just as the church that welcomed me as a lost and searching teen, I seek to be a safe person and provide a safe place for people to find help and healing, hope and a sense of home."

Respondent 16
Respondent number sixteen states, "when those first gay participants (couple with three adopted sons) asked me" questions about their welcome and inclusion, my response was, 'let's continue in worship and when you are ready,'" we will "'involve you and the boys in Sunday School . . . Membership will require church action and so let me have some time to do some

homework.' Our bylaws stated nothing about excluding LGBTQ+ people as members, though I thought it best that the church make some decisions before the couple sought membership. I realized it was 'all or nothing!' We could not settle for a halfway 'you can worship with us but not be a member of us.'"

Theme 4: Studying information research, reports, and scriptures on stereotyping and marginalizing of LGBTQQIA+ individuals

Respondent 8
1. I would encourage the people who use the Genesis scriptures about Sodom and Gomorrah as a means of shaming, excluding, and at times defrocking members of the LGBTQ+ community, to read Ezekiel 16:49-50, a text often ignored from the pulpit because it explicitly provides the real reason why these two cities were destroyed.
2. I would invite all congregations to do their research about the rapidly rising percentage of LGBTQ+ people, with particular attention focused on the large numbers of LGBTQ+ youth who have committed suicide because of their lack of acceptance, support and welcoming spirits within their homes, communities, and churches.

Respondent 13
Respondent number thirteen offers a preamble, before answering the question, noting, "as a queer person this is difficult for me to answer. Pardon my generalization, but I feel like this whole study is for straight churches that went through an *Open and Affirming* process. We did that, though we are for the most part all LGBTQ+ and always have been. We have a lovely story about how the *Open and Affirming Coalition* (ironically) rejected our first *Open and Affirming* statement. They were, and God only knows why, telling us how to describe ourselves. Awkward! They no doubt meant well but came across as odd and disconnected. And so, for what it is worth:

1. Churches are killing people. Look at the numbers of young people who are running away from the Church. Look at the numbers of LGBTQ+ who have committed suicide and been negatively affected by sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, and ask yourself, "Are you alright with this?" Is this acceptable because your congregation would be preaching love and acceptance and inclusion, and in so doing, save a life.
2. Look at the issues surrounding trans youth and sports. Does anyone really desire to enforce conservative laws that hurt children? Does anyone really want to be the bathroom police? How do these laws help children? These laws seem designed to support erroneous stereotypes of trans individuals that inevitably lead to senseless deaths.
3. Look at the greatest commandment and another like it and ask, can we do better? Does Jesus kick queer folk to the curb? Do you believe that queer folk go to hell? If so, why? I mean really, why?
4. Deeply study the Bible, paying careful attention to literal interpretations of scripture that I (and many others) would argue do not exist. Be open to metaphorical interpretations of texts where we admit what we do not know, understanding the ways that symbol and meaning change from one eon to the next.
5. Study the fluid and evolving understandings of orientation, gender, and identity, and then ask: "Is there a need for us to do better? Are we falling behind the times?"

Respondent 15
1. Read the Bible through the lens of historical and theological understanding. This approach demands taking a thorough delving into the biblical narrative.
2. Make friendships with gay and lesbian individuals and couples.
3. Study science and discover the gay species that exist in nature.
4. Look inward and discuss your fears about homosexuality.

Thematic Category 4: Effective Practices to Engage with the Congregation in Light of Social Justice Issues:

Question Eight: In what ways did the influences of these developmental years impact the development of your theology?

Question Fourteen: How do you engage your congregation around this social justice issue as well as other concerns related to various people groups?

Theme 1: Working closely and engaging with the community to address social justice issues

Respondent 3
Respondent number three notes that he and his wife, who is the co-pastor of the church "seek to engage the congregation through our preaching, by involvement in local community or state action groups, demonstrations and vigils, through book studies and discussion groups, and by hosting guest speakers and forums. Our church also hosts peace and inclusivity themed choral concerts and specials events" such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebrations, vigils for peace, or to address current events or concerns, etc.

Respondent 4
Respondent number four declares that the church seeks "to collaboratively work with community organizations that promote justice for the LGBTQ+ community." As "this congregation has been *Open and Affirming* for nearly thirty years" the church has moved beyond the need to introduce the ideas regarding this matter.

Respondent 5
Respondent number five notes that he engages "them through "Love Your Neighbor" vigils on our street with signs including these: Love Your Homeless Neighbor, Love Your Undocumented Neighbor, Love Your Muslim Neighbor, Love Your Transgender Neighbor, Love Your Refugee Neighbor. I also engage them in sermons, book studies, Bible studies, and racial healing work."

Respondent 6
Respondent number six says that the church has "a Social Justice and Hospitality Team [committee] that leads the way for our congregation to serve and advocate in the community. Several of our leaders, including myself, are also involved in a local chapter of a faith-based

organizing group called Missouri Faith Voices, and are active in housing justice and immigration justice efforts locally. My preaching often includes social justice themed examples, ideas from liberation theologies and critical theory that expands horizons and unsettles norms. I encourage people to integrate their beliefs and actions. We also have people who are plugged into the activist community and bring invitations to march, speak at City Council, etc."

Respondent 7
Respondent number seven notes that he has "done some teaching on LGBTQ+ issues" and has "led some studies on texts usually used in condemning ways" to help folks discover other meanings, or at least place the passages within the larger context of when they were formed. My preaching approach tends to be more subtle versus head-on (confrontational). I use stories to illustrate ways of practicing faith rather than making pronouncements. Stories help folks engage an issue more personally rather than assaulting them with a 'point.'"

Respondent 11
Respondent number eleven states that "we are quite a small congregation and so we do not have the bandwidth to actively engage on a broad range of issues. Aside from the recent accent on LGBTQ+ inclusion I would say that our primary outreach has been around hunger and homelessness, and that engagement has expanded during my time as pastor. We cannot go very broad, but we can go deeply in working with individuals. That being said, my sermons have responded to the George Floyd uprisings, immigration policy, school funding, debt cancellation/Jubilee, among various other social justice issues." While "my sermons are certainly one driver, it is often the response of members out of their lived experiences that create the energy for engagement."

Respondent 14
Respondent number fourteen notes that the church has a social justice ministry. "Every year we pick three topics to pursue and provide focus groups, Zoom classes, meetings, guest speakers, and opportunities to get involved in whatever issue" we are addressing. "I also include social justice considerations in my sermons, Bible studies, and interactions with members when we are socializing."

Respondent 15
Respondent number fifteen observes that "one unique way is that we talk to one another. We have discussion groups. We do mission and service projects. We participate in food programs and are a Green Chalice Church. We are an open and affirming congregation. We engage one another within our church community as well as outside the walls of the church."

Respondent 17
Respondent number seventeen says that the church tries "to engage folks through study, creating safe space for honest conversations with an emphasis on story-sharing," making "sure we are hearing stories we might not otherwise hear." Stories from immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ+ persons, those living in poverty, people of color, and those living with disabilities. "We keep working at centering the stories of others and recognizing how much work the Christian church must do to overcome white hetero privilege. We avoid big debates and votes,

working for consensus instead, and we keep the focus on substantive action, not simply studying issues repeatedly, but getting personally involved in cultivating transformation."

Respondent 19

Respondent number nineteen states that the church engages "multiple book studies on social justice issues and we preach a theology of justice. The mission work we support is through the Mayan Intercultural Seminary in Chiapas, Mexico. They advocate for indigenous rights, creation care, and gender equality. Our members participate in local protests and efforts to end mass incarceration and racial inequality."

Respondent 20

Respondent number twenty relates that the church's 'Welcoming Process' is an ongoing effort to help our congregation embrace social justice issues. We also engage in efforts through financial support and volunteerism, to address poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity in our community." The church encourages "participation in rallies and other campaigns" dedicated to "various racial and other justice-related issues."

Theme 2: Preaching sermons to introduce new ideas and encourage to think differently

Respondent 2

Respondent number two responds that he engages "them in a number of ways. First, sermons are a great way to introduce ideas and ask people to think differently. Recently I preached a sermon where I compared the Bible and Critical Race Theory [CRT]. The line that I used is that for many of us the Bible is just like CRT, we have not read it but we already know what it says and means. That quip sparked a conversation later in the week with a church member where we talked about CRT being about systemic issues and not individuals. It was an eye-opening moment for both of us. Second, I teach Bible studies and I do not do topical studies . . . We read through a book of the Bible together and talk about it. In these settings, I try and facilitate conversation rather than strictly teach. Third, I work with committees, small groups, and individuals on social justice issues. My experience has been that Christians want to help other people when they understand the issues or situations. I see my role as a facilitator and try to make people aware of things that are happening locally, statewide, nationally, and globally. I also have the privilege of being a part of a congregation and staff of really gifted people who also bring things to my attention as well."

Respondent 3

Respondent number three denotes that "clearly, God was seen as the great equalizer, one who lifted up the weak, the poor, the marginalized, whose love was for everyone and who gave strength and empowered those who the 'world' seemed to leave behind. God was supposed to be about justice and fairness," raising "questions about why there is evil in the world and why did the good seem to suffer so much? Why was there so much hatred between people and why did love seem so powerless? Though I had many questions, I was still naïve," believing "in the ultimate goodness within humanity.

Respondent 4

Respondent number four says, "I think the social justice component of both the Disciples'

(Christian Church, Disciples of Christ) congregation and the Catholic high school were quite impactful. Interestingly, the pro-life teachings of the Catholic faith and high school were not relegated (limited) to in utero life." Their "teaching included celebration of every life."

Respondent 8
Respondent number eight encourages the congregation to revisit John 3:16 "which teaches us just who God loves and exactly" for whom Jesus died and with whom the Holy Spirit dwells today. "I teach in every sermon that we are all loved by God and how we are all called by our Creator to love, accept, and affirm one another just as Christ did. Learning to love and forgive is the best act of social justice as it pertains to the church. Learning to truly love all people negates the unjust social scenes as well as any other issues that might arise concerning various groups of people. Therefore, instead of teaching and/or preaching about a certain social justice topic, I cover the basics of being socially just and fair to all people, just as Christ did." Doing so "leaves no room for failure to address certain groups or to attempt to tackle every social justice issue."

Respondent 10
Respondent number ten observes that "in high school I began to realize that there was something deeply wrong with the theology of my church. I began to see a discrepancy between the God that Jesus preached and the God my church espoused." The two images of God "just were not the same god and I began to suspect that the god preached by my church was evil. I then discovered Gnosticism and it hit me like a brick between the eyes: here was a system in which the god everyone was supposed to worship was not the real god at all but merely an evil pretender to the throne who wanted to keep us in perpetual ignorance and slavery." Indeed, "there was another God out beyond the god of religion, the true God, who calls us to health and wholeness." It was this true God about whom Jesus came to tell us, coming to "open our eyes to the lies of the false god and introduce us to the real God!

Respondent 14
Respondent number fourteen opines, "I would say they helped in any way they would help any other child or teenager understand God." (It was my seminary experience) "that greatly influenced my theology," and subsequently "preaching it every Sunday that a systematic theology began to develop within me." In addition, "my own devotions and quiet times" melded my emotional journey onto "the theology and helped me solidify what I believe."

Respondent 21
Respondent number twenty-one preaches that "I learned to take the Bible literally and seriously as though my life depended on it. I memorized scripture and learned to use what I memorized for use in proof-texting. I would often take biblical language at face value without considering the context in which it was originally introduced." The respondent tells an interesting story, "The year I turned twelve, which was 1972 by the way, I was the South Carolina Lowcountry Regional Sword Drill Champion. Let me explain what that means! The sword drill is a competition for Christian youth intended to sharpen their Bible skills. Sword drills are challenging and fun. I enjoyed winning them! The event begins with a call to come to attention and draw swords (Bibles), followed by responding to the 'charge' call by locating the requested passage as quickly as possible, stepping forward and correctly reading it aloud, earning points.

Sharpening my Bible skills in this way helped me become a better student and eventually a better teacher and preacher. Even now, I can still recite all the books of the Bible in order and find most of them quickly and efficiently. It was not until many years later that I began to realize that, while exercises like these benefited me in some ways, they also did some damaging things to me. You see, sword drills revolved around the image of the Bible as a weapon, sword imagery found in the epistle to the Hebrews. 'Attention, draw swords, charge': these are all a part of military terminology. These contests are designed to help fundamentalist Christian youth sharpen their skills in using the Bible as a weapon. Sword drills were my initiation into God's army and an understanding and application of the Bible as weaponry, an open invitation to use biblical texts in the fight against sin, Satan, and non-believing or liberal adversaries."

Theme 3: Always embedding social justice throughout the church

Respondent 2

Respondent number two responds that he engages "them in a number of ways. First, sermons are a great way to introduce ideas and ask people to think differently. Recently I preached a sermon where I compared the Bible and Critical Race Theory [CRT]. The line that I used is that for many of us the Bible is just like CRT, we have not read it but we already know what it says and means. That quip sparked a conversation later in the week with a church member where we talked about CRT being about systemic issues and not individuals. It was an eye-opening moment for both of us. Second, I teach Bible studies and I do not do topical studies . . . We read through a book of the Bible together and talk about it. In these settings, I try and facilitate conversation rather than strictly teach. Third, I work with committees, small groups, and individuals on social justice issues. My experience has been that Christians want to help other people when they understand the issues or situations. I see my role as a facilitator and try to make people aware of things that are happening locally, statewide, nationally, and globally. I also have the privilege of being a part of a congregation and staff of really gifted people who also bring things to my attention as well."

Respondent 9

Respondent number nine cites the church's welcome statement as vital, regarding the statement "as a secondary scripture, taking its verbiage that seriously." The statement "forms our identity as a congregation, clearly stating who we say we are and who we are as a church. Our weekly communion at the Table calls us back to these words every time we celebrate the Supper. Preaching from the lectionary and our teaching ministry further enhances our understanding and practice of these core congregational values. Whenever, however, and wherever the opportunity presents itself to reinforce these principles, we seize those sacred moments." Here is the Central Christian Church Welcome Statement: *A warm welcome to everyone! At Central Congregational Church [Disciples of Christ], we believe God's love is expansive and unconditional and that through Jesus Christ, God has called us to love one another as God loves us. We welcome believers who have doubts or do not believe. At Central, we honor other holy histories and traditions as we celebrate the worth, dignity and gifts of every person as a child of God. We welcome all persons into membership who seek to follow Jesus Christ regardless of previous religious affiliation, mode of baptism, gender, race, ethnic background, age, sexual orientation, economic circumstance, family configuration or ability.*

--the Elders of Central Christian Church, 2010

Respondent 14
Respondent number fourteen notes that the church has a social justice ministry. "Every year we pick three topics to pursue and provide focus groups, Zoom classes, meetings, guest speakers, and opportunities to get involved in whatever issue" we are addressing. "I also include social justice considerations in my sermons, Bible studies, and interactions with members when we are socializing."

Respondent 16
Respondent number sixteen recalls "I started with people/names/faces/families to make it personal, no longer an issue, and sought to help others see points of commonality. God's welcome and invitation is offered to all; 'if grace is not for all of us then it is not for any of us.' In a recent sermon on 'community' I reminded our congregation of the progression we had been through in welcoming ethnic minorities, affirming the gifts and service of women, and now welcoming LGBTQ+ believers as members, challenging them to be ready to welcome whoever the next 'outsider' group might be."

Theme 4: No social justice practices in place

Respondent 22
Respondent number twenty-two admits that 'honestly, this is an issue where we are growing and need more guidance. We are having conversations" with the idea that having an accepting and affirming statement is not enough with the need to go farther. "With us being in a time of transition, plus the pandemic, these conversations are challenging to say the least. We look forward to a new chapter with a new leader who can help us take this hospitality and conversation a step further."

Theme 5: Admitting the need to transition and take concrete actions on social justice issues

Respondent 10
Respondent number ten admits that the congregation was "never a big social justice church. In my experience congregations are often either 'mysticism' churches or 'justice' churches. We are definitely a 'mysticism' church. I agree that a well-rounded faith, along with a well-rounded faith community, needs to hold both in balance. But people usually gravitate toward one or the other with an effort to reach out to the other. Everyone at Grace North Church is very pro-social justice and most" of the congregation has done "some kind of justice work or social service on our own." However, people simply do not have the bandwidth to do something together. "Every time I have suggested it, I get a lot of pushback and so we emphasize individual involvement instead," a proposal of which everyone agreed."

5.1.6 The *Atlas.ti* Findings: Data Tables

Table 1: Breakdown of the Thematic Categories

Thematic Category	Number of Major Themes	Number of Minor Themes	Number of Subthemes	Total
TC1. Current State of Congregations	1	3	2	6
TC2. Experiences that led to becoming holistic and inclusive	1	1	1	3
TC3. Practices leading to the ability to overcome bias and discriminatory issues	1	3	0	4
TC4. Effective practices to engage with the congregation about social justice issues	1	4	1	6
Total	**4**	**11**	**4**	**19**

Table 2: Breakdown of Thematic Category 1

Themes	Subthemes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Making LGBTQQIA+ persons feel genuinely welcomed by their faith community	Having affirmation programs and sessions dedicated to different groups and individuals	17	77%
	Displaying rainbow flags and symbols around the church		
Having LGBTQQIA+ persons as board members and leaders of the community		9	41%
Accepting LGBTQQIA+ persons as part of the life of the congregation (i.e., singing, serving, etc.)		3	14%

Admitting that they are still in the process of accepting and affirming LGBTQ+ members	1	5%

Table 3: Breakdown of Thematic Category 2

Themes	Subthemes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Having an "Open and Affirming Journey" in place	Following the values of the church, advocating hospitality and diversity	18	82%
Needing time to prove oneself to the church community		3	14%

Table 4: Breakdown Thematic Category 3

Themes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Growing up in church, shaping the mindset of becoming welcoming and inclusive	11	50%
Realizing and experiencing the humanity of LGBTQQIA+ individuals	4	18%
Having the openness and willingness to listen to the struggling LGBTQQIA+ individuals	3	14%
Studying informative research, reports, and scriptures on stereotyping and marginalizing of LGBTQQIA+ individuals	3	14%

Table 5: Breakdown of Thematic Category 4

Themes	Subthemes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Working closely and engaging with the community to address social justice issues	Performing collaborative and interactive activities such as book studies, discussions, forums, concerts	12	55%
Preaching sermons to introduce new ideas and encourage to think differently		7	32%
Always Embedding of social justice throughout the church		4	18%
No social justice practices in place		1	5%
Admitting the need to transition and take concrete actions on social justice issues		1	5%

5.1.7 Assessment of the Empirical Qualitative Research Process

In conclusion, it is prudent to review the empirical qualitative research process through the lens of de Groot's cyclical research model. The desire to perform qualitative research stems from *observation* of and curiosity about a specific practice, in this case, that of hospitably welcoming and including LGBTQQIA+ persons into the full life and fellowship of the local church. Employing *induction*, this researcher formulated a primary hypothesis that the desire to extend what is sometimes described as radical hospitality to LGBTQQIA+ persons is grounded in a new way of approaching exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures, particularly regarding the theme of biblical hospitality. A secondary hypothesis also seemed relevant to the study, suggesting that the new way of exegeting scripture, that tends to create a broader hermeneutic encouraging clergy to openly accept and affirm members of the LGBTQQIA+ community in their churches, seems to be consistent with progressive Christian theology. Using *deduction,* eight primary and six secondary interview questions were developed for the purpose of proving or disproving these two hypotheses.

The results of the interviews developed around these survey questions have been professionally analyzed through the *Atlas.ti* computer software and was further supported by the *NVivo* program. The final chapter of this research project focuses on the evaluations of the research data accumulated as well as considering implications of the research findings for future ministries in local missional churches as they engage the dynamics associated with postmodernity.

CHAPTER SIX

TOWARD A WELCOMING FUTURE: A REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

6.1 FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

This chapter offers reflective evaluations and interpretive insights based on comments from the twenty-two survey respondents, twenty of whom were randomly selected through a lottery system. The comments and suggestions offered by the clergy respondents are primarily evaluated according to Osmer's four tasks of practical theological interpretation. A reminder of the research question for this project is also in order as additional guidance for the reflective work of this chapter. The research question is *"how can congregations that exhibit prejudice toward LGBTQQIA+ persons overcome bias and discriminatory practices and become missionally holistic, hospitably welcoming, and inclusive?* This chapter employs Osmer's fourth task, considering "the pragmatic task," offering suggestions for ways to "build up" local missional churches by enabling and empowering to become fully hospitably welcoming and inclusive. This task calls for "determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the 'talk back' emerging when they are enacted. *How might we respond?*" (Osmer 2008, 4).

Osmer (2008, 176) describes three forms of leadership that are "commonly distinguished in leadership theories." These include task competence, the ability to perform specific tasks in an organization; transactional leadership which involves trade-offs in the system, addressing competing agendas and navigating political dynamics; and transforming leadership. While all three forms are necessary, transformation leadership is primary, at the core of enabling any reformative processes within a local missional church.

> *Transforming* leadership involves "deep change," to borrow Robert Quinn's (1996) apt phrase. It is leading an organization through a process in which its identity, mission, culture, and operating procedures are fundamentally altered. In a congregation this may involve changes in its worship, fellowship, outreach, and openness to new members who are different. It involves projecting a vision of what the congregation might become and mobilizing followers who are committed to this vision . . . Leading deep change is costly and risky . . . But today, especially in mainline congregations, it is transforming leadership that is most needed, leadership that can guide a congregation through a process of deep change (Osmer 2008, 177-178).

Osmer (2008 178) adds that ". . . deep change is messy.

> It usually is not a linear process unfolding along the lines of a rational plan. As the organization moves through a period in which old patterns no longer work and new ones have not yet emerged, it often feels chaotic. Such times are filled with conflict, failures, and dissatisfaction, as well as new vitality and experimentation. During such periods, transformational leaders must remain committed to their internal vision, even as they empower others to reshape their vision . . . These assumptions are woven so deeply into the current life of an organization that to bring them up is to risk a negative reaction by others or to appear crazy and stupid . . . Change initiatives are likely to remain on the margins of a congregation unless leaders convince others of the need to change and empower them to shape this process (Osmer 2008, 178, 19198).

Osmer's theory regarding transformational leadership is commensurate with the kind of reformation advocated in this research. To achieve a hospitable welcoming and inclusive mindset, inviting LGBTQQIA+ persons into every aspect of a local missional church's corporate life is a goal that demands intentionality and a risky response that can be described as radical. The responses articulated in this chapter proves Osmer's theory correct, that transformational leadership is at the core of creating the kind of reformation necessary that would foster an acceptance and affirmation of individuals who have historically been considered different by traditional societal norms. Their commitment to this cause reveals their ability to challenge the status quo and to create the substantive change necessary to create a transparently hospitable ecclesial environment.

Many resources are available that address issues related to the Bible and nonheterosexuality, as well as to the Church and the LGBTQQIA+ community. Substantive arguments continue to be offered by sincere Christians from various theological and ecclesiological perspectives. Conversation will no doubt continue as the Church and local missional churches work to remain relevant within continuing cultural shifts partly driven by greater societal diversity through migration and subsequent multiculturalism. For church leaders who would like to encourage dialogue in their congregations and communities. There is a plethora of excellent denominational and independent Christian resources now available. These materials are specifically designed to help missional churches become more hospitably inclusive and more aware of related cultural and theological issues. These include: UCC Open and Affirming Coalition, office@openandaffirming.org; progressivechristianity.org; Unitarian Universalist Association, *Our Whole Lives: Lifespan Sexuality Education* (children – adults); UCC/UUA, *Sexuality and Our Faith*, socialjustice@uua.org/ucc.org; Affirm United/S'affirmer ensemble, United Church of Canada, www.ause.ca; Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, American Baptists, Alliance of Baptists, and others, www.awab.org; Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests, Brethren Mennonite Church, Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, www.bmclgbt.org; The Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance, Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, www.disciplesallianceq.org; Integrity, Integrity USA, Episcopal Church USA, www.integrityusa.org; More Light Presbyterians, Presbyterian Church (USA), www.mlp.org; Reconciling Works: Lutherans for Full Participation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, www.ReconcilingWorks.org; Room for All, Reformed Church in America, www.roomforall.com; and Welcoming Communities Network, Community of Christ, Welcoming CommunityNetwork.org. Aside from the numerous denominational resources dedicated to creating hospitably welcoming and inclusive ecclesial environments, these organizations are also committed to enhancing ecclesial and theological renewal in local missional churches, specifically from a progressive perspective (see Convergence, convergenceus.org; and progressivechristianity.org; see Trimble 2019).

6.1.1 The Importance of Formative Spiritual Environment

My personal reflections are as easy to share as they are difficult because I am deeply enmeshed in a subject that I have been studying for more than thirty years. For decades, I have actively advocated for local missional churches to become more accepting, more open and affirming of the LGBTQQIA+ community. I recognize that I write from within this bias to offer a summary of my thoughts about my research and the dissertation it has spawned.

As I engaged the survey responses of those clergypersons nurtured in theologically open and hospitably inclusive congregational environments, I could not help but compare and contrast my upbringing in very conservative social and ecclesial settings. I was reared in Home Park, an "intown" neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia (USA). During my childhood and teenage years Home Park was a community of lower and middle-class residents who tended to struggle financially and intellectually to engage the rapidly changing culture of a large southern city in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. When I chose to attend and then join a church in my Home Park neighborhood the options were limited. There were only conservative Southern Baptists, a United Methodist, and a Churches of Christ congregation, all of which were steeped in traditional, conservative, or fundamentalist theology and ecclesiology. I chose to join a Southern Baptist congregation and quickly learned that for my new faith community taking the Bible seriously meant taking it literally. The literal accuracy of scripture was assumed, allowing no challenges to be permitted. In the years to come, the Southern Baptist

Convention would proclaim the Bible to be "inerrant and infallible," both a catchphrase and a theological position that would widen divisions among Southern Baptist clergy, churches, and educational institutions. The Southern Baptist Convention controversy, called the Southern Baptist "Holy War", dominated my seminary years during the 1980s and had a huge impact on my career and my life personally and professionally.

Most of the clergy respondents acknowledged that the ecclesial environment in which they were reared played a pivotal role in their faith formation and spirituality as well as in the development of their personal theologies. This kind of communal nurture shaped the formulation of their nurturing and hospitably welcoming and inclusive mindsets, including their understandings of what it means to be part of a "faith community." That same formative spiritual environment, by extension, influences the formative spiritual environments of the churches they now serve.

The majority of survey respondents were reared in churches that reflected the uniqueness of their diverse and progressive social environments. These respondents had never experienced a traditional, conservative, or fundamentalist church of any kind. As a result, they could not begin to imagine life in a judgmental or guilt-driven spiritual environment. These clergy could not recall a time when they understood the Bible or local missional churches as anything other than affirming of all persons. Only after attaining a certain level of formal theological education did these clergy persons discover that conservative sectarian churches existed. This was not a matter of naivete but of exposure, and for some, the resulting revelation was both unexpected and unsettling. Respondent number ten shared that, having been raised a Southern Baptist, he "experienced a crisis of faith when he recognized his own bisexuality. . . the self-loathing and shunning was so destructive." He recalled thinking that any faith that encourages cruelty has nothing to do with God or Jesus. He then added, "this was long before I had read any queer theology. I just instinctively knew that what I had been taught was wrong."

Some respondents reared in larger and more diverse congregations learned from a young age that it was appropriate to observe, to ask questions, and to thoughtfully confront doctrine and dogma in moments when faith and action seemed to contradict one another. These clergy grew up accepting critical thinking as an asset rather than a cause for concern. For these respondents it was difficult to accept that there are churches where the disciplines of natural and social sciences are never brought into theological discussions. In contrast, two survey respondents stated that they eventually became pastors of *Open and Affirming* churches precisely because they were raised in conservative or fundamentalist churches. In these ecclesial environments they were never permitted, much less encouraged, to consider whether or not doctrine or dogma was divinely inspired. In the congregations in which they were raised, they experienced the Bible used as a weapon against persons of color, persons lacking a penis, and persons daring to question the pronouncements of clergy or lay leaders. Both of these respondents indicated that it was such experiences that set them on their jouneys to find better ways to "be the church" in the world and that progressive Christianity helped them find pathways forward in faith and in ministry. Respondent number eleven shares that "my own experience as a gay man, the hostile messages I heard from so many churches, and the sense of welcome and refreshment I felt from the occasional LGBTQ+-affirming church, led me to choose a path of inclusion, not only for LGBTQ+ persons, but for other marginalized groups." Respondent number six, who identifies as lesbian, commented that she "struggled to understand and come to terms with . . . traditional scriptural interpretations and community norms," so much so that they created spiritual dissonance between her faith and her understanding of herself as beloved of God. Through her university studies in religion, she "gained tools to . . . question scripture and culture and to connect with more inclusive hermeneutical possibilities . . ." so that she found herself on "firmly inclusive footing and free to explore what that might mean for my future in terms of faith, family and leadership."

6.1.2 The Importance of Intentionality

Becoming more open to and affirming of persons or people groups never happens by accident, particularly when issues of tradition or faith are at stake. Leaving behind old ideas enmeshed in traditional language along with unquestioned practices requires intentionality. This kind of reformational transformation will be successful only if entered into with clear goals, tasks, logistics, and timelines that have been publicized and established among congregants. In addition, strategic planning that includes careful pacing of each step of the discerment process toward welcoming and including the LGBTQQIA+ community is critical. The experience of this researcher has been that rushing through such a process too quickly or without proper advance planning leads to failure, if not disaster. Those who are already on board with churches that have become officially *Open and Affirming* would like to believe that everyone else in the congregation is equally ready to "get on with the program." The majority of clergy respondents, however, warned against rushing the process because change that is affected too hurriedly seldom lasts. This is a process that must be allowed to evolve organically within the congregational system. Respondent number twenty-two says, "as of now, . . . we are very open in theology, language, and willingness. We have a few LGBTQ+ members" but "have not been asked to perform or hold a wedding in the church or to vote to welcome any openly gay couples/families. . . The youth and young people are already there as they have had more personal experience with the community. Some of our youth have come out to me as LGBTQ, a few to their parents, but none openly to the congregation, YET!" Leaders must consider that a hasty decision to begin conversations about inclusivity may cause parishioners to question an affirming choice at a later time, if the process seems forced or manipulated. In may appear that a congregation is ready to move rapidly to welcome those of LGBTQQIA+ orientation, but this may be due to the fact that those who favor such change are often the most vocal persons in the conversation, at least when the discernment process is in its initial phase. Some congregants will desire to hurry along the process, perhaps skipping steps that have been carefully outlined as a part of a strategic plan, but several survey respondents warned against the temptation of moving too quickly. Congregational buy-in is necessary to achieve this level of change and for this kind of reform to have lasting value. In many churches a significant number of congregants will most likely require more time and information before they can get on board with full inclusivity. Respondent number three shared that, "When my wife and I began our pastorate, the church had not approved the Open and Affirming designation of the United Church of Christ. There had been an attempt some years prior, but it did not make headway. There were many in the congregation . . . who were open and inclusive but there were others who did not see homosexuality as an acceptable or God-given way to be. . . we had a lesbian couple who were members, but they did not . . . share that information with anyone. . . Some members were aware, and with our encouragement began to raise the issue of becoming an Open and Affirming congregation and thus began that process. . . What really made a difference was the presence of a new couple, two women, who joined our membership and were very open about their relationship. . . They loved the people and came to be loved and trusted by the entire congregation. It was a personal relationship that people had with them and then with other LGBTQ+ individuals in the community, that really moved the entirety of the congregation forward in becoming accepting and open and inclusive."

Local missional churches intent on holding conversations related to LGBTQQIA+ issues must plan for what is *most likely* to happen and what is *least likely* to happen because this type of discernment process will definitely involve some of each and at unexpected times. Lasting change happens in congregations only after long and arduous emotion-driven conversations that can bring out the best and the worst in congregants. In these kinds of conversations, individuals who have long felt the need to keep their stories secret may choose to share the pain, shame, humiliation, and loneliness they have experienced; for other participants, this information may be entirely new and somewhat shocking. Preparing participants for such sessions is the responsibility of church leaders who must be aware of the potential impact. Several clergy respondents spoke of how their willingness to share stories about living and loving as a person of LGBTQQIA+ orientation helped congregants become more open toward nonheterosexuals. Respondent number fourteen shared, "I came out as a gay man in my late 20's, while attending seminary, a 'personal confrontation' that led me on a journey of self-acceptance and affirmation. I met with people who challenged my understanding of the Bible and my faith tradition. I went through much soul searching. . . As I began to understand my relation to God as a gay man, I started sharing this with other LGBTQQIA persons, who were turned away from church. I walked alongside them as they questioned and wrestled with the issues. . ." Today, this clergy person companions his congregation in much the same ways. Respondent number eleven related: "I see LGBTQ+ persons as among the 'other sheep' whom Jesus, the Good Shepherd, welcomes to be part of the one flock (John 10), and whom Jesus defends against the wolves that would tear them apart. I see inclusion as being a thread that runs not only through scripture, tearing down the 'dividing wall of hostility' separating Jew and Gentile as Paul described in Ephesians two, but is also manifest throughout church history to the present day. Some see inclusion as a relaxing of standards and a concession (accommodation) to the world's sin, but on the contrary, I see the Church's journey of welcome . . . as a journey toward greater faithfulness."

Respondent number seven shared that the church he serves "is probably typical of most churches and reflective of the larger social make-up in the United States. . . About a third of the church is welcoming and affirming; most of the remaining would be welcoming and understanding, but not necessarily affirming (specifically when it comes to the term 'marriage' for same-sex couples). About ten percent would be neither affirming nor accepting. . ." In congregations such as this, where discussions about welcoming the LGBTQQIA+ community are planned to begin, education about what constitutes safe space is necesssary for the congregation, and should include preparation of both the physical space and the emotional space. Survey respondents indicated that the physical environment to be used must offer congregants the privacy, comfort, and safety that will enable them to give dialogue their undivided attention. If the area is too hot or too cold, if seating is uncomfortable, if egress is difficult, or if appropriate assistance is lacking for those dealing with physical, mental, or emotional challenges, dialogue will be adversely affected. Preparation of the emotional space may involve establishing behavioral covenants and confidentiality agreements, as well as an orientation to the process for all participants. The same group dynamics active in congregations when they gather for worship or other activities will invariably influence the discernment conversations. Therefore, education about how emotions may affect interpersonal communications can be helpful. Respondent number seventeen relates that she helps her congregation "engage folks through study, creating safe space for honest conversations with an emphasis on story-sharing," making "sure we are hearing stories we might not otherwise hear. . . Stories from immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ+ persons, those living in poverty, people of color, and those living with disabilities. . . We keep working at centering the stories of others and recognizing how much work the Christian church must do to overcome white hetero privilege. We avoid big debates and votes, working for consensus instead, and we keep the focus on substantive action, not simply studying issues repeatedly, but getting personally involved in cultivating transformation." Many LGBTQQIA+ persons are literally walking wounded souls as the result of interactions with persons claiming to be Christians. Some will bring their psychological traumas from rejection or abuse by family or community into the conversation and may also manifest symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Churches must be intentional to avoid reinforcing negative images that may trigger "fight or flight" responses. Respondent number seven affirms, "it shaped me that the starting point for my work is that of a pastor, a shepherd, a guide. I have learned in my thirty-two years as a pastor that people carry heavy burdens and need someone to walk with them and shoulder that load, not add to it. Just as the church that welcomed me as a lost and searching teen, I seek to be a safe person and provide a safe place for people to find help and healing, hope and a sense of home." It can be helpful for church leaders to work with congregations in studying and discussing written materials from LGBTQQIA+ individuals through which they relate their thoughts and feelings about their emotional pain. Some LGBTQQIA+ writers intentionally dig deeply into their psyches to help churches prepare for emotional exchanges they may experience in dialogue with members of the LGBTQQIA+ community.

At least one clergy respondent shared about pastoring a church that was formed specifically as a place of welcome and affirmation for LGBTQQIA+ individuals. Respondent number thirteen noted that "we are a small church of 164 members, and we are 99.5% LGBTQ+." Such congregations do not need to vote on becoming an "open and affirming" church, as they do not begin their journey "seeing things from a cis-gendered heterosexual traditional family structured point of view, which is a point of privilege in our society. . . We present things through an LGBTQ+ point of view (lens), as an oppressed group of people, and go out of our way to include cis-gendered heteronormative and traditional family units." Respondent number ten shared that, once becoming overtly welcoming of LGBTQQIA+ individuals, her congregation "did not do anything special or different. We just loved people and we did not ask them to change or leave parts of themselves behind."

6.1.3 The Importance of a Clear Identity

Most survey respondents indicated that their churches currently welcome the LGBTQQIA+ community and do so publically through the use of statements of faith, worship liturgies, signs, symbols, flags, and other forms of affirmation on their property and in their advertising. Respondent number four noted that, "every Sunday . . . we give voice to our embrace and welcome of all . . . and we say 'We affirm the presence of the Living Christ who invites us, and people of all spiritual paths, ages, mental and physical abilities, races, economic levels, sexual orientations, and gender identities into this community of love and healing; and who is present with us as we live our lives in this community. We dedicate ourselves to living out our faith as fully as we can as we share our lives with all we meet along our journey." If churches have the capability to engage the community through social media, they tend to identify themselves clearly as welcoming of LGBTQQIA+ individuals. In short, the welcome they extend is seldom kept a secret. Respondent number twelve succinctly states, "we have signs outside which let LGBTQ+ and other marginalized people know we are a safe space where they will be seen and affirmed, not just welcomed, which most every church will at least pretend to do. We have LGBTQ+ people on staff and in leadership and have for many years. We teach and preach about the gender expansiveness of God. We use inclusive language including references to God on occasion as 'they, them.'"

One clergy respondent relates that she serves a church that prefers not to designate any one people group for welcome, desiring to emphasize their welcome of all persons. In the United States, there are churches that prefer to advertise inclusiveness in this way, but problems may arise when their welcome becomes ambiguous. Some churches inclusive of LGBTQQIA+ individuals prefer not to draw attention to this inclusivity because of dwindling church attendance, a lack of financial resources, or the need to maintain relationships with individuals inside or outside the congregation who may not be supportive. Respondent number eleven commented that the congregation he serves must get creative in order to welcome Philadelphia's LGBTQ+ community. The church is in "a low income, heavily white and white-supremacist neighborhood, complete with the flying of the Confederate Flag, (a symbol of hate and racism masquerading as honoring heritage.)" Church leaders worry "about repercussions if the church becomes too visible or demonstrative," preferring to have "our Open and Affirming statement on our website, but . . . not fly a rainbow flag at this point."
Unfortunately, these churches fail to recognize that they are not actually remaining neutral, but instead are becoming obsolete and irrelevant as they remain silent on contemporary issues confronting the Church and the world. This position is a cause for concern. Common sense suggests that the more a congregation makes its hospitably welcoming and inclusive environment public, the more likely it is to cultivate welcoming and inclusive parishioners and future clergy. Common sense also suggests that churches failing to affirm LGBTQQIA+

persons are likely to cultivate Christians that are also challenged to do so. Public support for marginalized people groups may never become reality among congregations that continue to insulate and isolate themselves from persons and ideas they fear because they do not understand.

Along with the lack of a clear identity, a lack of awareness regarding the diversity within the LGBTQQIA+ community can adversely affect relationships between congregants and members of that community. Heterosexual persons are inclined to engage nonheterosexual persons as a homogenious people group, but each LGBTQQIA+ individual is unique. Members of the LGBTQQIA+ community represent a variety of social, political, and religious perspectives, as do all persons. It should be noted, however, that LGBTQQIA+ persons may need for those from outside their community to learn new vocabulary and concepts in order to navigate dialogue. Predominantly straight white congregations may also assume that nonheterosexuals will prefer hospitably welcoming and inclusive faith communities that reflect a more progressive milieu. However, it has been the experience of this researcher that some nonheterosexuals, upon entering adulthood, will search for the type of church they attended as children, hoping to find welcome within a family of faith like the one that rejected them long ago. Only after the attempt to rewrite this aspect of personal history fails will these individuals begin searching for a more progressive faith community to embrace them.

Some survey respondents shared that they would welcome ministry calls only from churches that have at least begun conversations about publically welcoming the LGBTQQIA+ community. These clergy prefer to serve churches where nonheterosexual individuals are "extravagantly welcomed" into church membership as well as into every aspect of the local congregation's corporate life. Churches that extravagantly welcome all persons may also interview and call pastoral candidates who are LGBTQQIA+ individuals for any and every ecclesial position, including Senior Minister. Respondent number one shared that he was direct with the search committee and congregation that interviewed him for the position of Senior Minister, telling them, “I am willing to pastor a church only if my brother (who identifies as LGBT+) can be welcomed and affirmed in that church.” The community accepted the respondent’s position and called him as their Senior Minister. Other clergy respondents stated that they prefer a church culture of transparency in which the rubrics of a local church’s hospitable positions, policies, and practices are clearly articulated in its constitution and bylaws. They recommended that ministerial candidates seeking open and affirming ministry environments seek out a church’s governing documents to get a sense of its true commitment to inclusivity, because some congregations claim to be inclusive in every way but continue to welcome persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation only into membership, and not into the full fellowship of the church. For example, certain congregations within the United Church of Christ (UCC) identify with the “Faithful and Welcoming” movement. In “Faithful and Welcoming” churches, LGBTQQIA+ individuals who participate may continue to be indefinitely barred from serving in certain leadership roles. This barrier creates an unfortunate dynamic that reinforces a hierarchy among membrs much like that condemned by the writer of the book of James (2:1-10). Conditional inclusion may actually be more harmful than outright rejection since limitations on particiption are often not shared until after an individual has become invested in relationships within the congregation. This tepid practice allows churches to continue to benignly discriminate against LGBTQQIA+ individuals, often leaving them feeling betrayed. Survey respondents stated that they consider a congregation’s willingness to empower LGBTQQIA+ persons to participate as members and as leaders to be the best indicator that the congregation has genuinely become hospitably welcoming and inclusive. In addition, respondents shared that, in their experience, churches that have had or currently have nonheterosexual persons on staff seem to have an easier time embracing the LGBTQQIA+ community. This factor may be because ministers who are part of that community often have a clearer understanding of, and a more effective approach to, an *Open and Affirming* discussion. This may also be true in part because they have already found a way through the maze of relevant biblical, theological, social, and cultural issues along their paths to personal and professional self-understanding, and thus are better equipped to help others do the same. Respondent number sixteen shared, "when those first gay participants (couple with three adopted sons) asked me questions about their welcome and inclusion, my response was, 'let's continue in worship and when you are ready, we will involve you and the boys in Sunday School . . . Membership will require church action and so let me have some time to do some homework.' Our bylaws stated nothing about excluding LGBTQ+ people as members, though I thought it best that the church make some decisions before the couple sought membership. I realized it was 'all or nothing!' We could not settle for a halfway 'you can worship with us but not be a member of us.'"

A number of clergy respondents noted that for their congregations, becoming *Open and Affirming* of LGBTQQIA+ persons was a logical progression of a pre-existing social justice emphasis. Churches already publicly advocating for justice issues on behalf of other people groups will struggle less to recognize and embrace the needs of nonheterosexuals. Comments from these clergy revealed that becoming hospitably welcoming and inclusive of the LGBTQQIA+ community at every level is supported by a commitment to social justice as an already active area of the ministry of a local missional congregation. Respondent number two shared how he engages the congregation around the interconnectedness of all social justice issues. “Recently I preached a sermon where I compared the Bible and Critical Race Theory [CRT]. The line that I used is that for many of us the Bible is just like CRT, we have not read it but we already know what it says and means. That quip sparked a conversation later in the week with a church member where we talked about CRT being about systemic issues and not individuals. It was an eye-opening moment for both of us. I also teach Bible studies and I do not do topical studies . . . We read through a book of the Bible together and talk about it. In these settings, I try and facilitate conversation rather than strictly teach. In addition, I work with committees, small groups, and individuals on social justice issues. My experience has been that Christians want to help other people when they understand the issues or situations.”

6.1.4 The Importance of Interpersonal Connections

What does it mean to be fully integrated into a congregational system as an LGBTQQIA+ person, for those joining a church for the first time, or returning to church with all the baggage and nervous energy, fear and anxiety, accumulated from years of neglect, abuse, and outright rejection? What can churches do to make these beautiful people, who may still be struggling to feel comfortable in their own skin, also feel comfortable within the walls of local missional churches? These individuals may be hurting, their pain still raw and unresolved. They may enter sacred relationships still suspicious of others due to the traumatic and painful events they have endured. Under such circumstances, how can congregations prove themselves worthy of trust? The answer to this question may be found in a more progressive hermeneutic around the divine-human relationship. All humans reflect the image of God. It is, therefore, important to recognize and ensure the intrinsic rights of every person (Kassler & Hinderaker 2022). An affirming and nurturing ecclesial environment can improve the wellbeing of

LGBTQQIA+ persons who often struggle to find such supportive environments. Respondent number twelve confessed that "before college I accepted and towed the party line that, although same sex attraction was a real thing, it was not what God intended for human relationships," a traditional belief held by many. . ." A college course on human sexuality and listening to LGBTQ people share their stories challenged and eventually broadened his perspective. Since many of the LGBTQQIA+ community continue to be stigmatized, these persons may not just *feel* socially isolated but may *be* socially isolated, to the point that they experience more limited access to social services, guidance, or assistance than do other people groups. Churches can work collaboratively with social services to ensure justice for LGBTQQIA+ persons in areas of need where discrimination continues, such as housing and healthcare. *Open and Affirming* churches frequently partner with local or regional nonprofit organizations, some specifically developed for the LGBTQQIA+ community to ensure emergency assistance of various kinds for LGBTQQIA+ individuals and their families.

Survey respondents urged churches to create safe environments where questions can be asked and curiosities raised. Respondent number eight declared "theologically, I know and practice the radical and wide welcome of all people" in the same way that Jesus did. I know that scriptures must be studied closely and with intention in order to truly understand that God's love is for anyone." Respondents related that many of their straight congregants had never before met a person they knew to be of LGBTQQIA+ orientation and were surprised to learn that they shared much in common. They have similar likes and dislikes, and struggle with the same issues and life challenges. Sexuality is about biology, not theology, and only individuals committed to prescientific biblical biases and prejudice seem to continue to hold to contrary opinions. Respondent number three shared, "it is my understanding that God makes no distinctions between persons. As Paul states in Galatians 3:28, “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. This egalitarian principle is also seen in the example of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 and supported by Isaiah 56:1-8. In the story of Philip and the eunuch, baptism was not withheld and thus there was total acceptance into the fellowship of the faith community and in the eyes of God, despite the eunuch being both a foreigner and had undergone mutilation of his sexual parts, factors that would have prohibited his full engagement as a practicing Jew. In summary, God calls all people to their various ministries and does not restrict any from the call to faithful church leadership or participation.”

Persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation continue to reach out to congregations for a variety of reasons. Some become full and active members of local missional churches as they seek covenantal relationships. Ground rules must all be the same, creating a level playing field, regulations used to attain appropriate information as a guide for initiating and instituting any new member orientation process. A significant percentage of churches around the world continue to abhor nonheterosexual loving acts as deviant or sinful.

Churches seeking reformational transformation can enhance the hospitable welcome and inclusion of LGBTQQIA+ persons if they have well-qualified leadership. Poor leadership still affects churches throughout the United States. McCormick (2018) stipulated that some churches continue to use the color of skin to determine acceptability into church fellowship. In like manner, church leadership should never use factors such as gender and sexual orientation to determine acceptability as members of churches, including the selection of those deemed worthy of the pulpit. One way to increase the number of LGBTQQIA+ persons in local churches is by electing them to senior church leadership positions. Kassler and Hinderaker (2022) stated that having LGBTQQIA+ leaders in local churches would attract more LGBTQQIA+ individuals into the Church and bring about a sense of equality and belonging. Religious beliefs, as they have for centuries, clearly have the innate ability to affect a congregation's position on LGBTQQIA+ persons. Many churches have voted to welcome LGBTQQIA+ individuals into every aspect of congregational life including leadership positions due to the beliefs that all humans are equal before God, crafted in the divine image, as is certainly indicated in the Bible.

6.1.5 The Importance of Education

Although the Jesus of our canonical Gospels generally remained silent on matters of sexuality, he consistently and unequivocally advocated for justice for the last and least within the human community. The gospel litany of disenfranchised and marginalized peoples is long and diverse, and includes Gentiles, Samaritans, Canaanites, Syrophoenicians, women, and those with physical and mental challenges. Is there any doubt Jesus would have made a place for LGBTQQIA+ individuals who have been relegated to the fringes by societal stereotyping? His teachings exhibit an expansive understanding of the ancient *Shema Israel* (Deut 6:4) and of the Leviticus 19 references regarding engagement and treatment of neighbor, thereby reinforcing his theological position that in God's realm, the Golden Rule applies equally to everyone. Respondent number nineteen recalls, "when I arrived at the church, there were some members who were supportive and some still uncomfortable with being gender inclusive. My husband and I were co-pastors for the first three years. We preached about openness and inclusion, held Bible studies, and talked with members individually to gradually change the congregational mindset."

The apostle Paul, whose influence on matters of ecclesiology and theology continues to be significant, clearly struggled with the parameters of normative human sexuality. Some commentators have suggested that Paul may in fact have struggled with his own sexual identity. Whatever the nature of Paul's personal issues, the former Pharisee clearly and consistently worked to cultivate local missional churches that welcomed Gentiles from various parts of the world. He went out of his way to visit Greece and other cultural enclaves on his Hellenistic missionary journeys. In addition, he demanded an open communion table and a transparent welcome for all followers of Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul preached that among persons of faith, love must remain paramount. Respondent number sixteen shared that, "the New Testament portrays the Church in a variety of ways: body of Christ; household of faith; living stones; called-out ones, among others. Each local expression of the body will follow the Spirit's leadership in finding its own way of 'being and doing church.' Churches should offer the grace, love, and welcome of Christ as the body of Christ in its local context."

Church history offers abundant evidence of what happens when the Bible is used incorrectly or misused intentionally. If biblical texts presumed to prohibit various sexual behaviors are exegeted honestly and forthrightly, new meanings emerge from these ancient words. Respondent number sixteen offered, "I grew up in a Southern Baptist environment with the clear understanding that homosexuality was a sinful perversion of God's design for people. In college I encountered some gay persons – surprisingly not the deviants that I had been warned about. At this point I understood homosexuality to be a lifestyle choice not consistent with a Christian lifestyle**.** This position was challenged as I began to encounter people with a sincere faith in Christ who were homosexual. I couldn't completely reconcile this with what I understood the Bible to say about homosexuality but decided that I could not and would not participate in gay-bashing or condemnation from the pulpit. That all changed when a gay partner couple with three adopted sons asked, 'would our family be welcome in your church.' This honest question drove me into a summer of reading, praying, talking with others, ultimately bringing me to a point of believing that if God had created 3-5% of humanity to be LGBTQ+ then we should celebrate them as children of God . . . and welcome them and their gifts into our church." New and better tools for biblical interpretation will always be needed to help clergy and scholars develop hermeneutics to find spiritually aand culturally relevant understandings of the clobber texts in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures. Respondent number eight shared the following recommendations. "1) I would encourage the people who use the Genesis scriptures about Sodom and Gomorrah as a means of shaming, excluding, and at times defrocking members of the LGBTQ+ community, to read Ezekiel 16:49-50, a text often ignored from the pulpit because it explicitly provides the real reason why these two cities were destroyed. 2) I would invite all congregations to do their research about the rapidly rising percentage of LGBTQ+ people, with particular attention focused on the large numbers of LGBTQ+ youth who have committed suicide because of their lack of acceptance, support and welcoming spirits within their homes, communities, and churches." She then shares her view that a theology that hurts people cannot come out of God's love. Respondent number ten commented, "in high school I began to realize that there was something deeply wrong with the theology of my church. I began to see a discrepancy between the God that Jesus preached and the God my church espoused. The two images of God just were not the same god and I began to suspect that the god preached by my church was evil. I then discovered Gnosticism and it hit me like a brick between the eyes: here was a system in which the god everyone was supposed to worship was not the real god at all but merely an evil pretender . . .

who wanted to keep us in ignorance and slavery. Indeed, there was another God out beyond the god of religion, the true God who calls us to health and wholeness. It was this true God about whom Jesus came to tell us, coming to open our eyes to the lies of the false god and introduce us to the real God!" In addition, church leaders and congregations must be more diligent to engage the multitude of positive texts revealing the role of ancient Near Eastern hospitality in framing the biblical narrative. Stories of God's love, grace, mercy, and peace, as well as stories that reflects humans welcoming, affirming, and supporting one another, far outnumber the texts appearing to forbid nonheterosexual behaviors. Respondent number eight encouraged congregations "to revisit John 3:16 which teaches us just who God loves and exactly for whom Jesus died and with whom the Holy Spirit dwells today. I teach in every sermon that we are all loved by God and how we are all called by our Creator to love, accept, and affirm one another just as Christ did. . . I cover the basics of being socially just and fair to all people, just as Christ did."

Churches must embrace biblical literacy by taking the Bible seriously but not literally. Congregations must discover and develop integrated studies within and in addition to their biblical curriculum, cultivating intellectually curious, critically thinking individuals, equipped and empowered to engage in cross-contextual, and cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary converstions regarding the LGBTQQIA+ community. The Church and the Bible must continue the larger interdisciplinary conversation that will serve to educate and inform congregants more fully on the variety of relevant issues and concerns confronting faithful Christians and challenging local missional churches in this twenty-first century postmodern global village. Parishioners are encouraged to examine and hopefully jettison viewpoints long staunchly held as true, while finding new and creative ways to embrace new and revelatory discoveries as they emerge, never fearful in and of the process and where it might lead. These should be exciting days of discovery rather than days fraught with fear and anxiety, the very charged emotions that have led to so much distrust and vitriol against the LGBTQQIA+ community.

For most clergy respondents, the understanding of complete and unqualified welcome and inclusion is based in a more expansive and open approach to biblical and subsequent theological dialogue, discourse, and debate. The clergy participants welcomed modern biblical scholarship as a necessary tool that must be employed in the curricula and the didactic programs of the congregation. These clergy understood that this level of intensive and intentional exegetical study is a basic element required to unlock a broader understanding of the biblical narrative. Discovering textual nuance, subtleties, and variants that are oft hidden within a given text can lead to better and deeper understandings of the role of context and cultural milieu played in framing and forming the canon of scripture.

Survey respondents recognized the need for clergy candidates to complete coursework and earn appropriate degrees from reputable interdisciplinary seminaries, divinity schools, or schools of theology. Discipline-integrated institutions that embrace a broad approach to exegetical and hermeneutical studies as well as cross-cultural conversations about societal concerns allow for more holistic learning. These institutions place a heavy emphasis on historical-critical methodologies and the role of context and culture, while incorporating the best tools of modern biblical scholarship. Students who graduate from Bible colleges and similar sectarian religious schools usually follow an insular curriculum and are rarely equipped for these complex conversations. This tendency is problematic because, not only is there a lack of integrity that comes through transparency, but in the failure to provide a holistic curriculum, these schools do a significant disservice to their constituents. There continues to be a desperate need in local missional congregations for honest and objective inquiry, Bible study can be devotional and scholarly if its theme is love. The Bible continues to appropriately form and frame the starting point for every congregational consideration regarding any subject matter or contemporary issue. The hope for the Church and the churches is for rank and file laity, led by courageous clergy, to engage the biblical narrative with the best methods of modern and postmodern biblical scholarship. Congregations must with honesty and transparency exegetically engage the presumably prohibitive "clobber texts," or "texts of terror," used for centuries to "prove" that nonheterosexuality is deviant or sinful. Stereotyping the use of highly-charged words like "sodomy" and "sodomite" must end because of their narraow definition and the fact they have become labels and are thus damaging biases negatively affecting the human psyche, in many ways slanderous of individuals and groups. The false narrative and incorrect definition of this term is both a reminder of the historic prejudice against persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation and an egregious misinterpretation of a familiar Bible story. Churches desiring to achieve greater inclusivity will want to create or adopt a faith formation curriculum for all ages that emphasizes an expansive view of the divine-human relationship. Although none of the survey respondents specifically addressed the need for welcoming and inclusive educational materials and opportunities for children and youth, it became clear during the interviews that several of them understood the need to begin teaching inclusive language and concepts early to help develop an understanding of and language for expressing God's unconditional love for all. Inclusive language is the foundation for cultivating conversation around the notion that God wants justice and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for all humanity. God's love is for everyone as should human love be one for another. Leaders of educational ministries for children and youth can begin this work by emphasizing that human beings are interconnected with all creation. Just as there is variety among plants and animals, there is variety among humans. This way of thinking can be a foundation from which children and youth can continue to develop the awareness that every person they meet will understand self and the world uniquely. Those who mature within such communities are likely to seek additional and more formal education as they continue to mature in their faith perspectives with the understanding that education offers greater opportunities for the future than does indoctrination. Respondents in this category expressed greater confidence in their abilities to engage in controversial topics in ways that strengthened a sense of community among congregants. The impetus is squarely placed upon individual clergy and laity who might consider expanding their ministries and missional outlook. The hope is that there will be parish ministers continuing to willingly engage the Bible with a new and alternative hermeneutic, rather than holding on for dear life to beliefs and practices that no longer meet people where they are in life. As the decision is made to employ interpretative initiatives, the potential will grow for what Nel (2015, 26-27, 205) describes as "reformation" in the ongoing process of "building up" local missional churches.

6.1.6 Suggestions for Future Study

The hope of this researcher is that additional intensive studies from a practical theological perspective regarding inclusivity, specifically related to human sexuality and the Church, will develop out of the research I have conducted for more than a decade. There are still many questions to be asked and answered in the still unfolding story of relationships between local missional churches and the LGBTQQIA+ community. Exploration must continue into the relationship between progressive Christianity, as both a contemporary movement and as a theological position, and twenty-first century clergy and congregants.

Clearly, progressivism in general, and progressive Christianity in particular, has helped to cultivate critically minded and intellectually curious local missional congregations. At present there is a sparsity of research currently available on other ways that progressive Christianity might influence local missional churches. In addition, it would be helpful to explore how exposure to a more progressive biblical hermeneutic might influence children and youth toward becoming more welcoming and affirming of person different from themselves at an earlier age, and not only in church but in other aspects of their social lives.

There are several other areas of study related to this research that would yield helpful information for local missional churches. For example, it would be interesting to experiment with and write about how progressive Christian views regarding the LGBTQQIA+ community might be received in cultures outside the United States, Africa being a continent challenged by and struggling with the acceptance of the LGBTQQIA+ community, as well as how the issue continues to challenge individuals and groups within certain geographical regions within the United States.

There is a growing sense of urgency within the Church in the United States to mold new charismatic clergy advocates for the LGBTQQIA+ community and other disenfranchised people groups because the first wave of such thoughtful church reformers doing social justice ministries is retiring from the work. A new group of young progressives must take up the mantle as the Church continues its journey of discovery and moves ever deeper into this postmodern age. Missional churches must not remain static. Exploring the prior experiences of the LGBTQQIA+ community is essential because predominantly heterosexual Christian faith communities tend to make stereotypical generalizations, assuming LGBTQQIA+ individuals are predisposed to be liberal or progressive ecclesiologically, theologically, politically, or socially. This categorization is based on naïve positions often taken by poorly led ill-informed churches that have or have not chosen to embark on a process toward hospitable welcome and inclusion. Congregants must do their homework if they are contemplating these kinds of conversations, this level of debate and dialogue. Little has been written about this dynamic and therein indeed is a book waiting to be written. Studies would be helpful to address ways that local missional churches become safe spaces for debate and dialogue, not only at a congregational level, but as a center for community conversation. There also needs to be education focused on the vernacular of the LGBTQQIA+ community, persons of nonheterosexual orientation speaking their unique language. There is still much to discover, much to learn, and it is the hope that this work will inspire more and greater research leading to better insight, knowledge, and understanding.

6.1.7 Conclusion

The engagement by clergy respondents to the fifth interview question offered much relevant information regarding Osmer's pragmatic task. Respondents were asked to recommend actions that other churches could take to help them transition toward becoming more open to and affirming of the LGBTQQIA+ community. Their responses addressed a variety of concerns, from how to modify the context and culture of a congregation toward greater receptivity to new ideas, creating and sustaining a hospitably welcoming and inclusive identity or ethos, and ways they have successfully influenced their communities to become better at communicating, to recommendations for actions plans detailing the specific steps a local missional church can take to make the parish more inviting and attractive to diverse individuals.

For many of these clergy participants their entry point for engaging congregational conversations centered around the need for the local church to develop and nurture an inclusive theology of hospitable welcome, affirming that God loves all people with no exceptions. Learning to think theologically is imperative in developing a holistic understanding of God that transcends cultural and tribal barriers and limitations. Local churches must find ways to engage persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation, getting to know them as human beings and not as "the other," as "strangers" or as one respondent said, "a people group needing to be fixed." Accomplishing such goals invariably requires the sharing and receiving of stories so that straight individuals may get to know nonheterosexual individuals on a personal level and find ways to relate to their life experiences. Every person has a unique story, and that story should be heard and valued as a way of showing respect for the individual and for the story that is woven into the fabric of community and society. This cross-conversation or cross-pollination is made easier through cultivating curiosity about and building relationships with people who are different from any perceived norm. Clergy respondents were especially supportive of the influence that nonheterosexual family members and friends within the congregation can have on creating interest in and building momentum around any discernment process the church might be engaging. Bringing these people into a safe space for conversations can open doors for the congregation to experience and explore what is often described as *radical* hospitality. Respondents indicated that another way to approach dialogue successfully is to reference previously adopted missions and ministries toward those who live on the fringes, those deemed to be the disenfranchised, dispossessed, and marginalized. As one respondent asked, "Who are the outsiders in our day?" The answer surely includes the nonheterosexual community.

Developing a culture of hospitable welcome and inclusion is easier for churches already advocating for social justice among those who are relegated to societal sidelines.

Respondents cited better researched study materials in biblical history and exegesis as the single most important step churches can take toward developing a new and better hermeneutic for approaching sacred texts. Serious and critical analysis of the Bible was by far the most common element that the various respondents recommended in their action plans to be incorporated into any meaningful and successful discernment process. Engaging the Bible with every available academic tool is imperative in cultivating congregational identity and encouraging change within local missional churches seeking to engage the changes in societal mores reflected in the wider population. This empathetic and sympathetic shift is occurring even within evangelical Christianity with younger church leaders and clergy embracing a more open and less strident concern about human sexuality as relevant to church participation or as an impediment to membership (Neumann 2022; West 2021, citing a leading evangelical coming out as gay; see *Charismanews* 2017, citing Jen Hatmaker, Jim Wallis, Matthew Vines, Rob Bell, Trey Pearson, Julie Rodgers, Rachel Held Evans, and Vicky Beeching as evangelicals who have declared their affirmation). Anthropology, biology, and sociology, in concert with genetics and discoveries about the ways the human brain functions, have been shown to support the notion that nonheterosexuality is normative within a certain percentage of the population of numerous species. Nonheterosexuality is no longer considered a matter of choice but a matter of self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-acceptance. The Church universal that once convicted scientists of various sorts for heresy is slowly and surely moving toward the realization that faith and science are not mutually exclusive but are rather partners in the study and affirmation of all persons everywhere. It continues to be important for clergy and congregations to be intentional with regard to economic, gender, and racial equity with regard to service on church boards and committees. The same intentionality must now be focussed on persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation.

All the clergy respondents made the observation that the process toward welcoming and including the LGBTQQIA+ community and all other disenfranchised people groups will never really end. This is just one part of a larger ecclesial evolutionary process that hopefully will continue as long as there are congregations choosing to continue the conversation. New members will continue to arrive, gay and straight, and education about the ways in which people are all the same will need to remain an emphasis of new member orientation classes.

All twenty-two clergy respondents shared that it has taken much dedication to their own continuing education and a passion for all people to reach and maintain the level of conviction needed to successfully lead church to see the world in new and healthier ways. At this point in their faith journeys and their careers they no longer had any doubts that they are called to lead congregation that are extending complete acceptance and affirmation to LGBTQQIA+ individuals. The Church universal, apostolic and catholic, along with local missional churches must leave nostalgia behind and encourage reformational processes to continue for the sake of the mission and ministry of local congregations. Otherwise, faith communities that claim to follow the teachings of Jesus are destined to become irrelevant and obsolete. Partnerships should be established between congregations that have already achieved consensus and proclaimed themselves hospitably welcoming and inclusive, and churches considering engaging in this specific reformational process to welcome persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. Churches cannot relive their pasts, recalling their glory days from an era long ago. Looking back wistfully and waxing nostalgically about "the way things used to be done" or "the way we have always done it" renders churches unable to engage the twenty-first century postmodern world. Despite the inherent challenges parishes must focus on their futures as individual churches as well as the Church as an institution. It is time for progressive, postmodern, followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the person of history, to stand up and be counted, even if this means creating controversy.

Every nuance associated with the progressive Christian movement brings hope to a Christian theology and missional system long entrenched in intractability. Progressive Christianity provides ways to engage the Bible, culture, and the population of the world that is now a global, multicultural, village, that are important, relevant, and missional in nature. Progressive Christianity offers a language entrenched in love rather than dogma. As one of the survey respondents astutely noted, "The miracle of scripture is that it invariably offers a relevant word to the needs of the particular moment in time in which we engage it." A slogan of the United Church of Christ (UCC) reads, "never put a period where God has placed a comma." Another UCC slogan declares, "God is still speaking." The faithful need to listen and act.

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