

EPISTLE

The Student Christian Movement of Canada's Journal of Arts, Theory & Theology



2009 Issue
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From Greek: **epistolē**.

"An *epistle* is a writing directed or sent to a person or group of people, usually a letter and a very formal, often didactic and elegant one." (Wikipedia)

Epistle is published occasionally by the Student Christian Movement of Canada. It features the voices of students and youth on topics of relevance to the movement, in the areas of theology, arts, and theory.

SCM is a student/youth-led ecumenical solidarity movement passionate about social justice, spirituality and community.

Founded in 1921, the SCM is made up of students and youth active in liberating theology. We organize through autonomous local units across the country, general gatherings and programmes, and our global network, the World Student Christian Federation.

www.scmcanada.org

2009 Issue

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“This is the mark in every *epistle* of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.” (2 Thessalonians 3:17-18, NRSV)

Preface

Geoffrey Dice

"I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it... Greet one another with a kiss of love." (1 Peter 5:12,14)

It is a great honour to write the introduction for this special issue of *Epistle*, the occasional theological journal of the Student Christian Movement of Canada (SCM Canada). The theme for this issue has been drawn from a major campaign of SCM Canada over the last three years – that of Queer and Christian Without Contradiction – which has been made possible by the generous support of the Liberty Hill Foundation. It also coincides with SCM Canada's exciting 2009 national conference and queer youth gathering, *Shine! Radiating a Dream of Liberation and Inclusion*.

The issue of being queer and Christian without contradiction is

one that SCM Canada has wrestled with for a very long time. Our first discussions of queer rights began in the 1960s at The Inn of the Unmuzzled Ox, a campus coffeehouse run by the SCM in Toronto. Later in the 1990s, we began a push to resist homophobia in the churches. Now in the 2000s, we are exploring this issue in greater detail, continuing to proclaim a message of queer liberation while also challenging ourselves with the potential of new and exciting theologies.

This issue of *Epistle* continues SCM's important justice work in tackling this still controversial topic. In a dramatic format in her work, "Both Unyielding," Audray Kuehn explores issues of lesbianism and being a woman called to ministry. She tells a story of a personal and sometimes painful experience of leaving and returning to the church, and an inability to simply dismiss Christian identity despite being queer. I am very excited that this work will be premiered at the closing worship service of the Shine conference. In "Queering Theology: A Brief Exploration of Theology in the Context of Queer Young Adult Literature," Robert Bittner examines the struggle between institutional religion, personal spirituality, and queer identity that is present in young adult queer literature. In my own liturgical work, "In Celebration of Diversity," I attempt to explore fluidity and diversity, inspired by a reading of Julian of Norwich's proclamation of Christ as our mother. Gord Spence, in "Paul and Homosexuality: A study," tackles the many interpretations of the so-called "problematic passages" of the New Testament, thereby challenging their ability to be used as weapons against queer individuals. As well, as part of this issue, in a series of anonymous photographs, an artist explores the body, borders, and radical intersections of oppression. Finally, in "Why Church Still

Has A Role To Play in Society,” Tyler Gingrich argues for the validity and relevance of faith institutions in contemporary society.

There are far too many people to thank for the production of this journal: Bre Woligroski (editor), David Ball, Emily Carr, Arron Kardolus-Wilson, Sheryl Johnson, and all the people who contributed their time, effort, and works which made this a reality. May God bless you all on your journeys of justice and liberation.

It is my hope that this issue of *Epistle* will continue to be part of SCM Canada’s prophetic stance on queer justice. I pray that it will continue to inspire new theologies and explorations, and it will help struggling individuals to be fully and completely queer and Christian without contradiction.

In Christ the Liberator,

Geoffrey Dice
(National Co-Representative to the elected General Board)

Liturgy: In Celebration of Diversity

Geoffrey Dice

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" (St. Julian of Norwich, c. 1342 - c. 1416)

To Julian, for teaching me that all shall be well; and to Emily, for reminding me of this through song.

Gathering:

FIRST GUIDE: We are gathered together as one community. We come following many paths from many places, yet we find ourselves together at this time. We open our hearts and our minds to hear the wisdom of the past and the wisdom that comes from within. We listen for the call to action that this wisdom brings.

SECOND GUIDE: In Christ Jesus, there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, female nor male, for all have been made one.¹

THIRD GUIDE: Neither death nor life, nor rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depths, nor anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus.²

FOURTH GUIDE: Christ our mother, our gracious mother, willed to become our mother in everything, the sovereign wisdom of all. Our God poured out himself in this earthly place and made himself entirely ready in our flesh in order to do the service and the office of motherhood in all things. The blessed love Christ works in us is shown in everything, especially in the noble, plenteous words: “I am what you love.”³

FIRST GUIDE: We offer these words as wisdom for the journey.

ALL: May we walk together in understanding.

Lorica of Christ Our Lover ⁴:

SECOND GUIDE: We arise today through the blessings of Creation:

the rays of the sun,
the radiance of the moon,
the splendor of fire,
the swiftness of the wind,
the depth of the sea,

the firmness of the earth.

THIRD GUIDE: We arise today through the power of God:
God's strength to uphold us,
God's word to speak to us,
God's wisdom to guide us,
God's hand to lead us,
God's way to lie before us,
God's shield to protect us,
From all that would do us harm,
From near and far,
Alone and with others.

FOURTH GUIDE: May Christ be our shield today
So that we may fulfill our mission
And bear fruit in abundance.

FIRST GUIDE: Christ be with us, Christ our lover
Christ within us, Christ our mother
Christ behind us, Christ our friend
Christ before us, Christ our sister
Christ beside us, Christ a stranger
Christ beneath us, Christ our companions
Christ above us, Christ our lover

SECOND GUIDE: Christ to comfort and restore us.
Christ in times of quiet, Christ in times of danger,
Christ in the hearts of all.

ALL: Amen.

Blessings of the waters:

THIRD GUIDE (Pouring out water): The waters of the earth are transformed and recreated, raining justice and liberation upon us. The waters are like joy quenching our thirst, love restoring our broken souls, and hope washing our bodies with healing. The waters are our life and the lifeblood of the earth.

FOURTH GUIDE: May this water remind us that we flow from place to place, from time to time.

FIRST GUIDE (Making a sign of blessing over the waters):
Bless these waters of healing, O Spirit,
Intangible as you are, fluid as our souls, our bodies, our
selves, and our love.

(Song: *We are Whole and We are Holy*.
Bless each other/oneself with water, saying):

Know that you are holy, and that you are a child of God.

Sending Forth:

SECOND GUIDE: You who gave birth to the whole
strange earth,
to all things unique and uncommon
to of each of us, different,
forming a community of diversity,
humanity in all its beautiful myriad forms and ways;
You who create and recreate and make all things new,
Bless us.

Let holiness spring up within us and pour down over us.

THIRD GUIDE: Let us go into the world
with the knowledge
that we carry within our spirits
the transforming dance of God..

ALL: Amen.

Notes

1. Galatians 3:28, paraphrased
2. Romans 8:39-39, paraphrased
3. Adapted from Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love, Chapter 60.
4. The Lorica of Christ Our Lover is based on St. Patrick's Breastplate/Lorica and attempts to examine several queer issues. First, it speaks to us from the perspective of Creation, the goodness of which can help unravel human forms of oppression. Second, it explicitly names Christ as our mother and sister, as well as lover, friend, stranger, and companion. While Gretta Vosper, John Shelby Spong, and others have challenged ideas of a personal deity and the concept of naming God as "mother" (especially in the case of abuse carried out by mothers, where this language can be very disempowering for those individuals who have experienced this abuse), I have used Christ as Incarnate God in naming hir as feminine in order to challenge our assumptions about the gender of the Divine. As well, this is intended to help us recognize Christ living at the core of all people. Still, this liturgy may not be appropriate for all people at all times. Third, by using protective language, it recognizes the violence experienced by queer individuals, and especially by trans* individuals and those who cannot conform to traditionally understood gender roles. There is a need for us to form communities which will stand up for the rights of those who are experiencing violence or other forms of oppression.

Paul & Homosexuality: A study

Gord Spence

“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers - none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NRSV)

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (Romans 1:26-27, NRSV)

In my continuing studies of Christian practise and theology, one particular subject has nearly always been a point of contention when conversing with other Christians: sexuality. In particular, sexual orientation, and the status of homosexuals when regarded by the church (within or without church walls). Christians who are not queer-affirming often appeal to the scriptures to support their view that being homosexual, or at the very least performing homosexual acts, is a sin, which is detested by God (Leviticus 18:22 NLT). The letters of Paul - particularly 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and Romans 1:26-27 are often referenced to support this view. In this paper, I will explore the contextual meaning of these verses from a number of perspectives and shed light on how they might be interpreted by Christians today.

I Corinthians 6:9-11

The verses in this section appear in a chapter where Paul is chastising the community in Corinth for going to their civil authorities to settle disputes between assembly members.¹ He then spells out exactly who will not “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9 King James Version) in a “vice list”. In the final section of the chapter, Paul attempts to explain to the Corinthian assembly that the body is sacred, and that sex is not merely “skin on skin” rather, that God is the owner of our bodies and spirits, thus we should “let people see God in and through [our bodies]” (1 Corinthians 6:16-20 TM).

The vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 outlines a group of misdeeds by which members of the assembly might be “unjust” to one another.² “Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers

... nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 NIV). Two other unjust acts are also mentioned in this list, but their translation has been varied and disputed. These two words are translations of the Greek words μαλακοὶ (“malakoi”), and ἀρσενοκοῖται³ / ἀρσενοκοίτης⁴ (“arsenokoitai” / “arsenokoites”).⁵

A number of different translations are used to address these two issues of injustice in the Corinthian assembly. In reading the variety of translations, one might, perhaps, be led to believe that translations “condemning modern homosexuality have been driven more by ideological interests in marginalizing gay and lesbian people than by general strictures of historical criticism.”⁶ When reading the variety of translations put forward, one can see that some translators are somewhat biased in their choice of translation.

Even commentaries differ in their assessment of the translations; Ciampa and Rosner in their commentary on 1 Corinthians say quite definitively that

[the] two terms malakoi and arsenokoitai refer to homosexual behavior [sic] (of one form or another). Rather than being read as referring to ‘male prostitutes and homosexual offenders,’ they are better understood as the passive and active partners in any homosexual act.⁷

This is a very solid interpretation, which is articulated as an issue for which there is no debate. However, if we look to the other side, Holly E. Hearon puts forward that

... [if] malakoi is understood as decadence and arsenokoitai as pimping, then the entire list of vices can be seen to revolve specifically around behaviours that in-

volve excess and exploitation, behaviours that ultimately place one's own interests at odds with God's covenant and relationship with humankind.⁸

Another more conservative commentary included in *The Interpreters Bible* (an admittedly dated source) goes so far as to add in some editorializing which would be shocking by today's standards, even among more conservative groups:

For the two nouns translated in the KJV as effeminate and abusers of themselves with mankind, the RSV uses simply homosexuals. This vice is condemned by the apostle in Rom. 1:27. ... If some church members had been guilty of practices like these, Paul had certainly drawn his net through the dregs of the city.⁹

Finally, we can contrast this opinion with that of David Lull:

...does the term 'homosexual' fit Paul's intellectual and cultural context, and does it translate one or both of the terms ...? In Paul's context, the terms could refer to males who engage in same-sex sexual acts... If *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* both have to do with sexual offenders, it is better to say the latter term (at least) applies to males who pursue unrestrained sexual desires by having intercourse with males.¹⁰

It is the interpretation from Lull that I find most convincing of all, because he explicitly acknowledges the influence of Paul's culture, and also notes later in the page that sexual "orientation" was a concept that only "arose in Western intellectual culture in the nineteenth century."¹¹ This would definitely explain why the KJV (translated well before the nineteenth century) translates ἀρσενοκοῖται without using the term 'homosexual'. Also, Lull's definition of μαλακοὶ and ἀρσενοκοῖται as being an issue of "un-

restrained sexual desire” helps these two words to better fit in with the theme of “unjust” deeds that some of the Corinthians has been partaking in, which were making it difficult for the community to function healthily, and apart from the Gentile community of Corinth.

Romans 1:26-27

Romans 1:26-27 appears after the opening passages of the letter to the Romans, where Paul greets and gives thanks for the Romans. He brags about all the good things that he has been hearing about them. Also, he explains that the delay in getting to Rome to see them is not because of something they’ve done, but rather is due to various external issues which prevent his coming (Romans 1:1-17, TM).

By 1:18, Paul warns the Romans that the Gentiles who worship idols and images will suffer the wrath of God, which is a reference back to Jeremiah 2:11.¹² The worship of idols led the Pagan Gentiles to sexual immorality, “degrading ... their bodies with one another” (Romans 1:24, NIV). Finally, Romans 1:25-27 reads,

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion (Romans 1:25-27, NIV).

Unlike our discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, this section is a fairly straightforward translation, giving little “wobble-room” for interpreting Paul’s opinion of same-sex sexual relations. Being a Pharisaic Jew, who by his own admission followed the [Old Testament] scriptures to the letter, we can safely assume that he would have known of the prohibitions for men not to “lie with a man as one lies with a woman” (Galatians 1:14, NIV; Leviticus 18:22, NIV). This was a cultural norm for him as well, and in his phrasing in 26-27, we see that he thought that “homosexuality was a matter of choice. ... He associated the choice with insatiable lusts”.¹³ In this instance we see the difference between the distinctions made in ancient and modern understandings of sexuality: “sexual orientation, over which one has apparently no choice, and sexual behaviour, over which one does.”¹⁴ As discussed in the first part of this paper, homosexuality was a term that was not defined or even created at Paul’s point in history, and thus he assumed that any sexual behaviour must be spurred by a conscious decision.

Much scholarly debate in this section centres upon the defining of “natural” and “unnatural” in the verses in question. A relatively conservative or traditional interpretation from Grant R. Osborne’s commentary on Romans hinges on what Paul means by natural.

The entire tone of this passage is Jewish [Romans 1:26-31], and in verse 27 Paul condemns homosexual practices entirely, evidencing a strong Jewish tone. Natural here refers not to what is natural in the culture but to God’s created order. The Old Testament contains many condemnations of homosexual practices..., and these are continued in intertestamental writings ... and the New Testament ... In short, Paul is writing as a Jewish Christian and is in complete agreement with the tradi-

tion of which he is a part.¹⁵

Osborne insists that Paul's understanding of what is natural is laid out in the Old Testament writings. This argument might be convincing if it were not for Paul's later "deconstruction" of acts that are against nature.

... Eugene Rogers and Elizabeth Stuart emphasize, in 11:24 Paul deconstructs his rhetoric about sexual acts 'against nature', affirming that God himself acted in 'excess of nature' by grafting unclean Gentile branches into the pure olive tree (Israel). Such divine action that transcends 'nature' obviously was to be celebrated ..., not condemned.¹⁶

Hanks shows here that Paul does not necessarily mean to communicate that when things go against what is supposedly "natural," it is automatically a negative happening.

A prime argument against all things unnatural being negative, is Paul's assertions with regard to "natural" lengths of hair for the sexes. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, "Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" (1 Corinthians 11:14-15, NIV). The Greek word used for "nature" in this verse is φύσις ("phusis", or "physis"), which indeed is of the same root as the word used in Romans 1:26, φυσικὴν ("phusiken", or "physiken") (Romans 1:26; Corinthians 11:14-15).¹⁷ Paul argues that it is natural for men to have their hair trimmed short (an unnatural action by today's definition), and yet it is unnatural for a woman to do the same thing. Through this example, we can see that Paul's definition of natural is one that is culturally conditioned as opposed to one which is hard and fast.¹⁸

Conclusions

While it is difficult to determine exactly what Paul meant in his writings to the Corinthians with regards to the definitions of ἀρσενοκοίτης and μαλακοί, we can observe that different commentators have opposing interpretations which appear to be fuelled by ideological standpoints rather than an honest effort to understand the letter. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the motivations of the authors unless we cynically assume that their results were presupposed when they began interpretation of the verses.

The same issue plagues the interpretation of the verses in Romans 1. Particularly in the commentary by Thomas Hanks, there are almost a dozen interpretations from various scholars on the implications, faults, and puzzles of Paul's railing against the Pagan-Gentile sexual proclivities.¹⁹ None of these interpretations line up entirely with one another, but rather cast doubt upon the traditional interpretations of the verses.

While I doubt that the debate will ever entirely be settled for Christendom, I believe that I would support Dale B. Martin, when he quotes Augustine - one of the foremost fathers of Christian theology: "Whoever, therefore thinks that he understand the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbour does not understand it at all (Christian Doctrine 1.35.40)." ²⁰ Indeed, if we do not take the path of interpretation which leads us to increase the love between people, we are ignoring the call of Christ himself for us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40).

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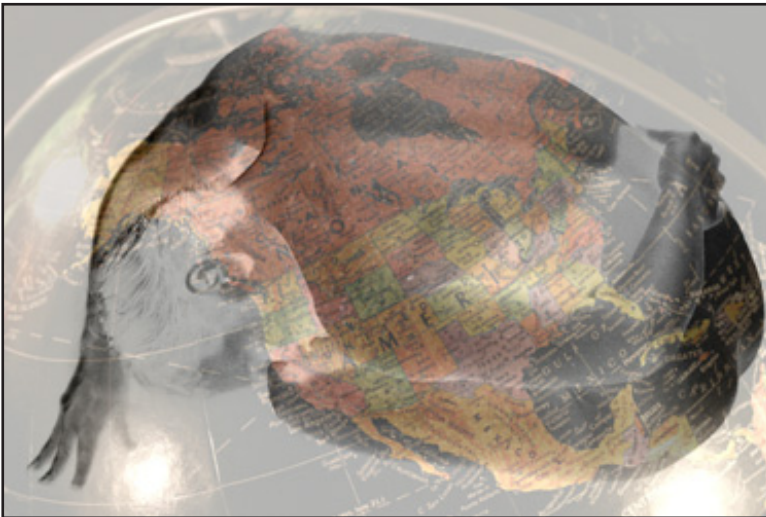
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Notes

1. Lull, 49
2. Lull, 50.
3. Nominative plural, as written in the original Greek. (Trenchard, 16).
4. Singular base form of the version in the original Greek.
5. Hearon, 613.
6. Martin, 117.
7. Ciampa, 713.
8. Hearon, 614.
9. Craig 72.
10. Lull, 52
11. Ibid.
12. Seifrid, 611.
13. Seow, 25.
14. Wink, 35.
15. Osborne, 53.
16. Hanks, 588.
17. *Greek New Testament* pp. 521, 592; Trenchard, 120.
18. Seow, 25.
19. Hanks, 582-605.
20. Martin, 130.

Breaker of Chains

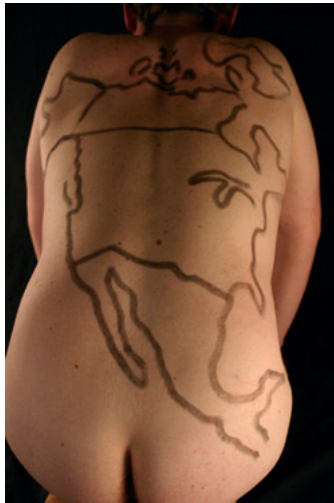
Poetry/Concept: Anonymous. Photos: Kate Wedemire



i desire / but cannot erase
the borders that
restrain our
movement.

easy to defy
the lines
defined
from behind
pale skin blue
eyes gated
boulevards pass-
port counter
smiles
denials

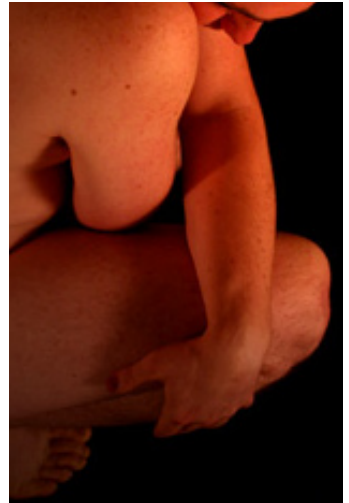
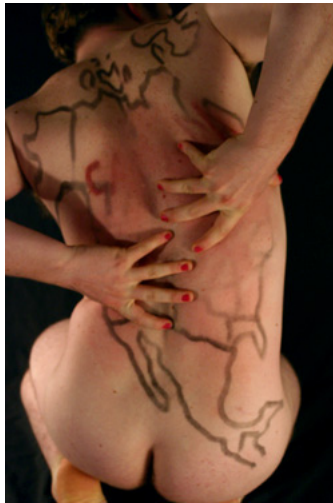
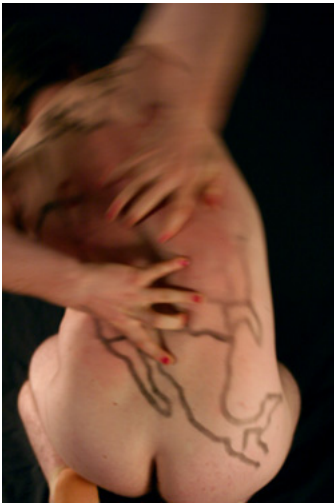
still our bodies, still,
counter these
borders
gendered / raced / classed / sexed
so we, fumbling,
resist, our
movements
militant,
monitored
across
lines proclaimed



more tightly
than gospel
across
these bodies.
and yours, alien-
ated, restrained,
subdued, but
untamed by
babylon's
desire police,
these chains:
genocide.

i desire / but cannot restrain
the borders that
erase our
movement.

o resurrection lord
breaker of such chains,
come.



Both Unyielding

Audray Kuehn

(Stage is dark.)

OFFSTAGE VOICE:

A Canaanite woman came to Jesus, crying out “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly!”

Jesus answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

“Yes, Lord,” she said. “But even the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

Lights raised. A church pew is shown.

A woman is sitting. After a longish pause, with some fidgeting:

WOMAN:

I find this pew to be very uncomfortable.

(another pause. As she speaks, she runs her hand up and down the wood)

I find it to be very stiff. Very . . . unyielding. Hard. Its design – its very purpose is to form your spine into a very precise and very conformed way of being. If you are in this place, you must sit this way. You must sit and look like this – the way everyone else does. Your vertebrae must be positioned just so. Your body must yield to the demands of this bench. This pew is the very definition of discomfort.

(pause)

So why is it, you ask, that I still choose to sit here?

This is where I grew up. Here. In this church. Sitting here on this bench. This is where I learned about myself. Learned about God. Was taught stories about King David. Noah. Samson. Jesus. It is here that I felt I belonged. It is here that I grew in faith. I discovered a deep love for God, and for my community.

I was eager to learn. I loved these stories, I loved these teachers. I couldn't get enough. I took it all in, with an insatiable hunger, always wanting more. Church was beautiful. It was a part of me.

And I felt part of it. And the day came when I spoke freely of my heart's desire to serve – I wanted to give of myself to this place. To my God.

And I was told – bluntly, abruptly - that girls were not allowed near the altar. That it is a holy and sanctified place where my female body and the gifts attached to it were unwelcome.

I was shocked. I was floored. I did not foresee this problem.

(pause)

Yet even the dogs under the table eat of the master's crumbs.

Time passed. I grew. And learned more of the same. My gifts in leadership, speaking, teaching, were overlooked and disregarded while my hands were filled with casserole dishes, washcloths, and brooms. I struggled. These tools, though vital and life-giving, did not fit my hands in the same way that this pew does not fit my body. I was pushed and pressed into roles which I did not fit.

I struggled. I did my best. I tried to follow these teachings. I wanted to help, not to cause problems. All of my life I have struggled to fit here. How I longed for my body to take the form of this twisted seat. I have pushed and tried to bend my body to the will of these hard grains; to the relentless demands of its ridiculous and torturous curvatures.

But I was never successful.

My spirit and my personhood could not be ignored. I am a woman. A gifted woman. With a heart for people and with hands molded for leadership. My spirit – my body – was created to worship. And to serve. And to grow, and to flourish, and to be encouraged, and to expand into God and my own unique ways of being together.

I was created for this purpose. I was made to give.

What was I to do?

(pause)

And the time came where I questioned the wisdom and the theology of keeping those who looked like me away from the altar. I spoke of my desire to pursue ordination. And I was silenced. Told to listen to Paul, listen to Jesus' words, and shut up. To sit in this pew. To be another person. To ask forgiveness for my desires and to follow the true path of quiet submission which God had laid out for me.

I repented. With all of my heart. I feared the wrath of God. I feared being tricked by Satan. I feared causing God sorrow – any kind of pain. I feared my own desire for sinful living. I shed tears of guilt and shame. I cried out for forgiveness.

Yet even the dogs under table get to eat . . .

(she gets up and slowly walks around, but is always touching the pew in some way)

I continued to grow. And the more I grew – the more familiar I became with my personhood and my gifts, the more estranged I felt from my community. So much of who I am is unwelcome by my church. I am a woman. I am a leader. I am a prophet. I am a lover of women. I hold the gifts and the calling of an ordained minister. My pursuit of God brought me to a beautiful place where I realized myself a strong, gifted, anointed queer woman whose heart and desire lay in serving in a place which would not accept my talents. In which I could only gain approval by looking and acting like they wanted me to look and act – by ignoring my personhood and my God-given talents in trade for their idea of who I am to be.

I tried mightily to fit here. I contorted my body to try and fit this place. I tried to fit into these merciless grooves – this wood and structure which lacked compassion, flexibility, and an open spirit. It is surprisingly unyielding. And so am I. As much as I tried, I ached when I sat here – my body groaned.

I do not fit here. That is glaringly obvious.

So sometimes I walk away. And I come back. And I walk away, and come back. I never go far. Because as painful as this pew is, much of it is comforting and life-giving to myself and to others. It holds my very heart within its grains. As much as it brings me pain, it also brings me joy. And purpose, and life.

And so, with one hand always hovering near, I have learned to dance.

A beautiful dance of liberation. Of freedom for all who don't fit in this place. Of love and of affirming empowerment and commissioning. I learned of a Christian God who loves and calls for diversity and of all ways of being.

I am a woman. And that is God's desire.

I am a minister. And that is God's desire.

I am a lesbian. And that is God's desire.

And I have a place here in this church.

I have devoured the crumbs from under this table. And I am still hungry – with a righteous and insatiable hunger which will not be satisfied until myself and this pew mould together into something which fits us both. I will love this seat and this church into new ways of being for both of us. We will make each other uncomfortable until we have both learned how we best fit together.

(sits)

So I choose to sit here, In this place of discomfort, oppression, love and hope. And it is within this struggle where grace and love and me and you and the church can blossom.

And this is my purpose.

OFFSTAGE VOICE:

“Yes, Lord,” she said. “But even the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from the master's table.”

Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed that very hour.

Queering Theology: A brief exploration of theology in the context of queer young adult literature

Robert Bittner

“But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 1:7-8)

Literature for young adults is a literature of change; it conforms to the experiences of young adults in specific time periods and shifts with changing socio-political and religious ideologies. For young adults, this literature is an escape as well as a therapeutic tool, giving examples of how characters are able to cope and heal. In her article “Bonding in the Broken Places,” Kathy Cline points out, “Through problems and conflicts, literature allows young adults the catharsis for healing, rebuilding, and changing” (par. 1). Queer sexuality, religion, and spirituality, however, are under-represented

topics within the rapidly growing body of Young Adult (YA) literature; few authors, until recently, have taken on the task of burrowing into questions relating to spiritual, religious, and sexual identity and growth. While each topic on its own is strangely absent, even less evident are YA novels dealing with queer sexuality within the context of religion and spirituality.

In the early 21st-century, a number of promising authors have emerged who are not afraid to tackle the issue of queer sexuality as part of life, even in a religious or spiritual setting. The first novel of significance in this particular case is David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). The main character's best friend, Tony, is gay and has extremely conservative parents. Tony does not have much of a problem dealing with what his parents consider a paradox, but he does end up learning to accept that his parents may need more time and understanding to come to their own conclusions.

The next of these books is *Latter Days* (2004), by C. Jay Cox. Originally a movie and later adapted to novel form, the story follows Aaron, a Mormon missionary, as he falls in love with the boy next door and has to deal with excommunication from the church for his sexuality. Along the same lines is Robin Reardon's *Thinking Straight*, in which Taylor is sent away from home to a straight camp where he meets other young people in the same predicament. Through a series of hardships and friendships, Taylor is better able to understand his own spirituality and sexuality.

Later novels such as Alex Sanchez's *The God Box* (2007), and Mark Hardy's *Nothing Pink* (2008) look much more intimately at the theological issues that face the protagonists at home, at church, and at school. Each of these main characters spends a significant

amount of time dealing with personal spiritual and sexual identity issues. Having been raised hearing the homosexuality is a sin, each boy has to understand the paradox and attempt to use personal experience to create a theology more fitting to who they are as people.

While not all of these novels deal specifically with Christianity, each character still faces the challenge of living in opposition to an institutional ideology, and at the same time has to construct a personal theology. This personal “everyday theology” is what will allow young adults – whether in the novels or in reality – to live within the spiritual framework that they are comfortable with while allowing for an acceptance of sexual identity otherwise contrary to institutional theology.

In terms of queer youth of the early 21st century, it is likely that they will continue to find it difficult to access a wide variety of fictional resources to help them in these challenging times. In situations relating to any interaction between sexual identity development and religious and spiritual development, the number of novels for teens to identify with is extremely limited. Even the novels discussed here fail to present any unified methodology for dealing with these issues. Between the categories of sexual and religious reconciliation or abandonment, the number of novels in each category is not indicative of a strong cultural bias toward either view. The necessity for developing personal spiritual belief systems is evident, then, since neither view is particularly favoured, which young adults may find discouraging. Many Christian young adults struggling with homosexuality may find it similarly disturbing that so many Queer YA novels simply focus on the physicality of sexu-

ality rather than identity and ways of understanding and exploring it. So, how is religion and theology to be understood, then, within the Queer YA novel?

Religion is the catalyst that encourages young adults to engage sincerely in an internal dialogue about why they believe what they do and how their life experiences affect the development of personal spirituality and sexual identity. Without serious internal probing into the “why?” questions, young people navigating adolescence can easily find themselves being influenced by exterior institutional teachings without the benefit of a personal spirituality. It is difficult, then, to consider religion merely as either a good or bad force in the life of young adults. Instead, religious conflict can serve to leading them to search for answers outside of the doctrines and dogma so often taught in religious institutions.

It seems, then, that Roberta Trites, author of *Disturbing the Universe*, is correct in her assertion that struggles against institutions are integral to identity development: in Queer YA literature, specifically in the context of religious institutions and sexual identities. In all of these texts, each protagonist manages in some way to navigate through the process of religious and sexual reconciliation; whether they are successful or not seems to depend mostly on the strength of the character’s personal beliefs. This involves the creation of personal spirituality by utilizing both life experiences and those religious beliefs that are positive and constructive in light of such experiences.

Each character, whether they accept both identities or reject one over the other, make a decision to re-write the theology and doctrine they have been taught since childhood in order create what

Dawne Moon terms “Everyday Theologies.” According to Moon, in *God, Sex, and Politics*, “[p]eople’s experiences teach them about life and shape what makes sense to them. In this way, [people’s] understandings of Scripture are shaped by their life experience” (62). Queer YA literature in the 21st century brings a full range to the cathartic experience; characters are able to create for themselves a theology that can function on a personal, spiritual level. So much more than simple escapism or cultural commentaries, Queer YA fiction is a valuable asset for navigation through often confusing institutional ideology and individual construction of the self within the larger context of society.

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Why Church Still Has a Role to Play in Society

Tyler Gingrich

Church? *gasp.* OK... church, mosque, synagogue, temple... what-have-you. But don't jump to conclusions, please – hear me out. (And I'll try to be brief.)

It was once said that everyone needs some kind of value outside of themselves. A faith community can provide this.

In case anyone may think that I'm oblivious to past wrongs of the church, I'm not. To those who would like to absolve themselves of any responsibility by staying away from church now, I'd like to say to them: if your heritage is European, you're part of church history, like it or not. Faith and culture are invariably intertwined.

So what is a faith community about? It is not about a set of beliefs

where adherents are to follow blindly. Rather, it is about a way of life, and followers live out values that are seen as important for the common good.

Church is a place where people of various ages and backgrounds come together. It is a gathering of people that happens regularly – so the journey of life is done in community, and people share in each other’s celebrations and sorrows. Church, hopefully, brings diverse people together and celebrates gifts that all people have. Church also means a level of responsibility to each other, and a certain kind of obligation. In a culture that tends to cringe at commitment, church can be a good discipline!

So what’s new about church these days? I suppose it depends on the particular building whose doors you darken. But I know that I am encouraging people in my little congregation to be more environmentally conscious, more politically aware, and more social-justice-oriented. Yes, we say prayers, read the Bible, and sing hymns. The intent with those practices is to give the gathered community pause for reflection – and it’s helpful to have a time to do this on a regular basis (weekly!) because it’s easy to get caught up in life and neglect the bigger picture. And there are new understandings of how to ‘do’ prayer, and how to read the Bible (a literal interpretation often is not the best) and there are new songs of faith that might surprise you! (No, we don’t use an organ; but there are churches that still do.) And when there is a life-transition to celebrate, we surround the family with a warm embrace – as they baptize a baby, or unite in marriage, or grieve the death of a loved-one. Another new thing about church today is that more churches have more open-minded clergy leading thinking people

in their congregations. In my congregation, there is a basic acceptance of people of various sexual orientations and gender identities; we are not hard-and-fast about abortion; most people accept evolution; and the larger church has been ordaining women for a few decades now.

Mainline denominations (i.e. Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, Anglican) have policies that require their clergy to usually complete a graduate-level degree at an accredited institution before being eligible for ordination, so they are trained professionals and can offer a variety of services beyond the Sunday morning ones!

Church, these days, can be a place to engage in activism work and it can even offer opportunities to be active in the community. It follows that, if we're talking about people and life, we need to be active in life for all people (near and far). Give church a try!

About Contributors

Anonymous is a genderqueer Christian activist trying to link it all together, living on these stolen lands full of so much grace and beauty in spite of it all.

Audray Kuehn is the pen name of an SCM Canada member.

Geoffrey Dice is one of two elected National Representatives for the SCM National Board. He lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Hailey Tallman (cover artist) is an alumni of Victoria SCM (2004-5). The icon of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well underscores that Jesus crossed boundaries of social stigma and marginalization. Hailey lives in London, Ontario.

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Tyler Gingrich was ordained a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (www.elcic.ca) in 2004. He chairs the Central Okanagan Ministerial, and is active in social justice work in Kelowna, including sitting on local committees like Inn From The Cold, KAIROS, Central Okanagan Stimulant Abuse Task Force, and the Poverty and Homelessness Action Team of the Central Okanagan. Tyler is active with the UBCSUO campus club, Peace Seekers, and can be reached at gingrich_tyler@yahoo.ca

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