BECOMING CHURCH: AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF FAILURE, EMBODIED POLITICS, AND QUEER GRACE

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation investigates theories of embodiment in ecclesiology, focusing on the significance of ecclesiology as a Christian practice with political impact on queer bodies and queer life. While scholars in the field of theology have begun utilizing queer theory in constructive theology, a queer ecclesiology has yet to emerge. Exploring recent trends in ecclesiology, including a turn towards embodied practice, this project critiques the continuation of ecclesiological idealism that converges with the marginalization of queer people within church life. Instead, this project suggests that both our embodied practice and the practice of church are plastic by divine intention. God forms both individual bodies and church bodies through the grace of Christ. Drawing on queer theories of recognition, performativity, and failure, this project proposes that church failure has queer potential, opening possibilities for ecclesiological evolution. Further, practices of queer life in the context of church transform the norms of Christian community, illumining church as always in the process of becoming the Body of Christ. Those whom the church has lost or rejected know something about what church is and the potential of what church can become. This project argues that queer Christians long for the church to get lost with them, not to find them. For perhaps in the losing there is a saving.

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Losing Church: The Politics of Ecclesiology

"Risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer..." –Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others[1]

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it." Mark 8:35 (New Revised Standard Version)

Losing Church

This dissertation begins with loss. I have in mind those who have lost church, but also, more particularly, those whom church has lost. There is a particular pain in the realization that the losing was willful, that the lost have been, in fact, "driven away."[2] Both theologians Wendy Farley and Mary McClintock Fulkerson have argued that pain is a good place for theology to begin. Fulkerson writes, "Theologies that matter arise out of dilemmas-out of situations that matter. The generative process of theological understanding is a process provoked, not confined to preconceived, fixed categories."[3] This provocation, Fulkerson suggests, often originates "at the scene of a wound." The wound invokes a concern for what is broken, "a fracture in things that should be joined" and "a kind of longing for it to be otherwise."[4] Thus, this dissertation begins with the particular wound of queer Christians losing church, or being lost by church. It begins with a longing for church to be otherwise.

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[1] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 21

[2] Wendy Farley. *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1.

[3] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Wordly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13.

[4] Ibid.

However, to begin a theology for those lost by church is to begin in the middle. In this middle we have the institutional church that has existed in widely diverse forms for over two thousand years. Even in the narrowed story of American Christianity in the 21st century, there are over 217 denominations and 35,000 independent or nondenominational churches.[5] Thus, it is impossible to even speak of *the* church as a single entity. Though grammatically awkward, it is more accurate to speak of "churches." My practice will be to remove the article "*the"* and speak either generally about church or specifically about churches. This is not a perfect solution, but it hopefully provides a means by which to interrupt the monolith of "the church" while retaining an ability to talk about the interlocking system of church as a whole. Further, while I acknowledge many churches that are inclusive to queer Christians, my aim is to addresses churches that exclude or struggle to include queer people in the context of their dominant and primary reliance on heteronormative assumptions and traditions. In all their multiplicity, when we talk about churches as institutions we are talking about buildings, congregants, clergy, polities, boards, procedures, practices, and theologies. These intersect in what we know of as church, and thus church is not one thing, but is always in the process of forming and reforming in contestation and compromise.

In this forming and reforming, bodies are made, bodies are recognized, bodies are rejected, bodies are wounded and killed. Therefore, one dimension of the provocative longing that begins this project is the longing for church to be responsible for the body count. In this work, I'm specifically interested not only in the bodies lost, but also those bodies that remain. This project recognizes queer Christians who go to churches, are

[5] "Fast Facts about American Religion," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#denom. Data for these figures is drawn from the 2006 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches and the US Religion Census of 2010.

baptized in churches, take communion in churches, pray in churches, preach in churches, are married in churches, and are buried in churches. Even so, queer Christians are markedly absent in the Christian rhetoric against queer life promoted by many churches. Yet, queer Christians remain.[6] I posit that queer Christians in church also intimately know what it means to lose church, to be lost by church. However, this losing is also a critical opening, a grace, and a gift that queer Christians give to church. The lost know something about what church is and the potential of what church could become. This project argues that queer Christians long for the church to get lost with them, not to find them. For perhaps in the losing there is a saving.

In this introductory chapter I will outline several themes that intersect with the project of writing an ecclesiology for the lost. These include 1) a reading of political theology that understands theology as cultural practice with political and material impact, 2) an account of contemporary political Christian rhetoric against queer life, and 3) trends within theology and ecclesiology that shift focus from abstract systematics to more embodied, practical, and lived forms of Christianity. These themes intersect to point towards the need to develop an embodied ecclesiology that accounts for the ever evolving and diverse church. Specifically, I will read both the work of Stanley Hauerwas and Kathryn Tanner to reveal how a focus on embodied Christian practice in ecclesiology is an important development in ecclesiology, and one with specific political impact on queer bodies. Hauerwas' work makes important strides in crafting a Christian identity

[6] Elizabeth Stuart, *Religion is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People* (London: Cassell, 1997), In an early practical resource for queer Christians Elizabeth Stuart discusses the difficulty of being both queer and Christian and being misunderstood by the (mostly) straight Christian community and the (mostly) secular queer community. See pages 13-19.

formed in church life. However, I suggest that Hauerwas overdraws the positive aspects of Christian practice while ignoring those that continue to uphold systems of injustice. In contrast, Tanner's focus on becoming church allows for an understanding of Christian identity and community as partial and unformed, retaining a plasticity that allows for church to reshape in response to faithful communal discernment. Building on Tanner, in the final chapter I will argue that queer Christian embodiment and practice disrupts current ecclesiology in ways that have transformative potential to how we understand church and what we imagine church might become.

Defining Queer

The concept of queer is operative in this project in two ways. First, I use queer to denote subjectivities that are claimed in a normative/non-normative framework. These subjectivities, especially related to social constructions of gender and sexuality, are formed at the intersection of both internal and external social forces. Within a frame of social construction, I use queer as an identity marker for individuals whose gender expression and/or experience of sexual attraction are non-normative. Individuals use diverse labels to describe non-normativity such as transgender, non-binary, intersex, same-gender-loving, gay, lesbian, and bisexual. I use the term queer to encompass these different identifications. I acknowledge the potentially infinite differences within each of these identifications, particularly as these identities intersect with other social constructions, especially race.[7]

Second, I also employ the term queer as a term that destabilizes subjectivities and disrupts normativity. Queer theory has understood that subjectivities are infinitely

[7] For more on intersectionality, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York: New Press, 2016).

unstable, always in the process of change, development, and response. As Sara Ahmed has said, we do not have to "stabilize queer as an identity category…to explore how the sexual specificity of being queer matters."[8] Queer is also deployed as a verb that disrupts and destabilizes normativity. Judith Halberstam has defined queer as a collection of practices emerging from "nonnormative logics and organizations of community."[9] Sara Ahmed writes that if we describe queer as an orientation, "a way of approaching what is retreating, then what is queer might slide between sexual orientation and other kinds of orientation. Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object that slips away."[10] In orienting towards the queer, Ahmed describes a feeling of disorientation, even a feeling of being lost.[11] As an identity, orientation, practice, and politics, the term queer carries a disruptive and oppositional quality.

Theologians working with queer theory have utilized the term queer in provocative ways. Robert Goss, a theologian who wrote an early pioneer of queer theology, defines queer as a transgression of the status quo, "turning upside down and inside out" that which is normative, including "heteronormative theologies."[12] Similarly, Marcella Althaus-Reid, who remains a pioneer in queer theology, connects queer theology to what she calls "indecent theology" since decent theology is that which

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[8] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology,* 172.

[9] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6-7.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, 20.

[12] Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 228-229.

excludes those on the margins. Althaus-Reid famously begins her indecent theology with the lemon sellers, those women who live on the streets of Argentina, making ends meet through selling both fruit and their bodies. Althaus-Reid brings the "indecency" of these women into the realm of the theological, proposing writing theology without underwear. Such theology should, she argues, "deconstruct a moral order which is based on a heterosexual construction of reality, which organizes not only categories of approved social and divine interactions but of economic ones too."[13] In *Queer God*, Althaus-Reid connects queer with disruption, "the struggle for spaces of freedom and social justice…constitute the real Queer traditions of the church, which are characterized by processes of sexual ideological disruption in Christianity, and not by its continuity. Disruption is our diaspora."[14] Patrick S. Cheng, who writes an introduction to queer theology, defines queer as that which erases or deconstructs binary categories of gender, sexuality, and race.[15]

Queer, then, is a term describing lived experience, but also describes a way of conceiving of theological, social and political disruption and resistance. These modes of resistance are disorienting, but also reorienting in turning towards those who are othered and lost. I use the term in both ways in this project. The destabilization of subjectivities in queer theory can be connected to theories of subjective becoming. I will expand on this in

[13] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics.* (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

[14] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2007), 9.

[15] Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 8.

the last chapter where I relate the becoming subject to the becoming of community and the becoming church.

Political Theology

The contemporary discourse of political theology is an important theme for this work. Within this discourse, I identify two understandings of political theology, one that pursues the implicit theology at work in political structures and movements and another that pursues the implicit politics at work in more confessional theological claims. For the first understanding of political theology, a key interlocutor is Carl Schmitt, who declared that all secular authority is premised on theological formulations.[16] Responding to Schmidt, work in the contemporary discourse of political theology aims to uncover and critique theological assumptions in political notions and structures, such as sovereignty and the nation state. Interestingly, the thrust of this discourse has come from philosophers with a decidedly atheist stance, including Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Zizek.[17] For this discourse, a helpful definition of political theology comes from Hent de Vries who characterizes political theology itself as an empty signifier, one that "can become dogmatically fixated, socially reified, and aesthetically fetishized."[18] Thus, de Vries

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[16] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985).

[17] See, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Slovoj Zizek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[18] Hent de Vries, "Introduction: Before, Around, and Beyond the Theologico-Political," in *Political Theologies : Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed Hent de Vries and Sullivan Lawrence Eugene (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 46. De Vries notes that Schmidt was largely avoided in the academy, in part due to his controversial involvement with Nazi Regime. Through Agamben's engagement with him, political theology has resurged. Clayton Crocket also contends that political theology remains an "unstable critical discourse, and while in the post-secular context political and

identifies a primary concern of contemporary political theology as the deconstruction of static and fixated notions. For example, Jeffery Robbins deconstructs the theo-political interlocking of a sovereign state and sovereign divinity in order to make room for a theology of radical democracy.[19]

A second way of understanding political theology is as the uncovering of the politics of confessional theological claims. In this mode of political theology, scholars have engaged more explicitly with the theological traditions of particular religious communities. These scholars follow a linage of political theologians including Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Solle.[20] Kathryn Tanner demonstrates the contemporary thrust of this discourse in her declaration that "all theology is political" because theological statements are beliefs related to the ordering of social relations which translate into an embodied way of life.[21] Each theology conveys a political "mythos" of how human community should be organized.[22] A primary concern of scholars working in this vein is to uncover the relationships between beliefs, social relations, and the politics of embodied life. I have already referenced the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, who can

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religious imply each other, they do not necessarily point to confessional theology." *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics After Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 30.

[19] Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). See also Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

[20] See Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God : The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); and Dorothee Solle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

[21] Kathryn Tanner, "Trinity" in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 319-332.

[22] Daniel M. Bell Jr. "State and Civil Society," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 423-438.

also be read as a political theologian. Althaus-Reid exposes as political the heteronormative values operative in prominent liberation theology. She strives to construct a queer theology that begins with and opens possibilities for queer sexual relationships and queer lives.[23]

This dissertation proceeds from this second understanding of political theology, tracing connections between embodied Christian practice, ecclesiology, and the impact on and viability of queer life. Although not a theologian, political philosopher William Connolly pursues a similar strategy in his investigation of a "resonance machine" between the theological claims of evangelical Christianity and the practices of capitalism.[24] In Connolly's understanding, the political realm is made up of a "complex assemblage of heterogeneous elements bound loosely together."[25] These elements do not have to relate through agreement of doctrine or belief; rather a myriad of micro-tactics (economic, religious, educational) fold and blend into a moving complex that Connolly names a resonance machine.[26] These micro-tactics may be intentionally connected but they can also be unintentional, as seemingly disparate discourses are caught up together in larger assemblages forming a machine of resonance. These resonance machines can be

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[23] Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology,* 2.

[24] William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 39.

[25] William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 50.

[26] Ibid., 40. Connolly is working explicitly with Gilles Deleuze in developing a rhizomatic theory of politics. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnisota, 1987).

systematic in proportion resulting in larger social patterns of discrimination and oppression.[27]

Following Connolly, I argue that theological beliefs are a "real force," as one element among many other complex elements that form our embodied cultural and political life.[28] Part of the responsibility of theological writing is to identify how those ideas connect to larger political powers and movements, specifically those that survive and thrive on the oppression of others. Emilie Townes's "fantastic hegemonic imagination" is helpful on this point. Drawing on Foucault and Gramsci, Townes develops the "fantastic hegemonic imagination" to describe how a set of ideas is culturally produced and utilized by dominant groups to gain subordination and control over other groups. Some examples include white superiority, homophobia, and sexism. These ideas are produced in interlocking ways through family, school, politics, and church. They "breed a kind of false consciousness…that creates societal values and moralities such that there is *one* coherent and accurate viewpoint in the world.[29] The fantastic hegemonic imagination is a kind of resonance machine that supports oppressive systems and upholds dominance.

Connolly's resonances between theological beliefs and embodied politics are key to my argument that the production of ecclesiology is never neutral. Ecclesiologies contribute to what bodies are valued and recognized in church and thus to what bodies

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[27] Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, 39.

[28] Ibid., 42.

[29] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil.* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6. See also bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love,* (New York: Atria Books, 2004). "I often use the phrase 'imperialist white-supremacist capi-talist patriarchy' to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation's politics," 17.

are viable. Further, the recognition of specific individual bodies is connected to the way we conceive of, construct, and reproduce the corporate Body of church. Connolly argues that, "no political economy or religious practice is self-contained. Particularly in politics these diverse elements infiltrate each other, metabolizing into a moving complex."[30] The "moving complex" of homophobia within the church is the concern of this dissertation. Thus, I explore ecclesiological writing as one element in a resonance machine that produces homophobia, makes vulnerable the viability of queer life, and eclipses queer Christian life altogether. However, the reverse is also true. Ecclesiologies can be intentionally shaped to affirm queer life, connecting with larger movements of liberation for queer people. This queer ecclesiology aims to expose the former and support the latter.

Christian Rhetoric Against Queer Life

Part of the resonance machine that produces homophobia is Christian rhetoric that targets queer people. The feeling of loss that queer Christians experience in relationship to church is specifically related to the anti-queer rhetoric of American Christianity. Certainly, there are many individual churches and denominations that now affirm queer bodies, queer life, and queer Christians. I pastor such a church. Some of my heterosexual church members have asked me why, in the context of welcoming churches, do queer people continue to feel persecuted by Christianity. The answer I give is that even in a cultural climate of increasing acceptance of queer people, the dominant Christian rhetoric in the public sphere remains against queer life. The rhetoric is perfectly distilled in the

[30] Ibid.

sentence added to the United Methodist Book of Discipline in 1972, "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."[31]

The conflict within American Christianity regarding minority sexuality and gender expression has been building for over a half century. However, the seemingly established fact that religion had always condemned homosexual acts has a more nuanced history. For example, while conservative Christianity has grounded their anti-queer stances on specific bible passages, the concept of homosexuality as a sin was not introduced until 1946. [32] Mainline Protestants, increasingly convinced by the fields of psychiatry and psychology, added the word "homosexual" to the Bible in the Revised Standard Version translation of 1 Corinthians and Romans, effectively barring homosexuals from "inheriting the kingdom of heaven" and connecting homosexuality with "sin."[33] Around the same time, journal articles in pastoral care described how pastors might provide counseling to homosexuals to help them turn to healthy heterosexual desire.[34] As White points out, it is ironic that conservative Christianity's insistence on the biblical foundations for the sin of homosexuality originated with a liberal biblical interpretation.[35]

White's historical excavation of early liberal protestant activism further intercedes on the secular and religious divide in activism. What looked like a secular movement

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[31] "Qualifications for Ordination," *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶ 304.3 "Qualifications for Ordination."

[32] Heather Rachelle White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 1.

[33] Ibid., 1.

[34] Ibid., 5.

[35] Ibid, 6.

predicated on challenging religious condemnation had broad liberal Protestant involvement and support. As early as the 1960's, mainline Protestant clergy were arrested in San Francisco and the post-Stonewall activist movement in New York met in church basements.[36] Liberal protestant activism also arose within specific denominations and saw gains in the 1970s and 1980s as mainline denominations issued statements affirming civil rights of LGBT persons.[37] However, the internal battle within mainline denominations became evident in the 1980s when mainline denominations erected formal bans against LGBT ordination.[38] These did not begin to be overturned until the beginning of the 21st century along with the prohibition against presiding at same-sex weddings.[39] White's work on Protestant activism supports her argument that, "the contenders in this battle to govern sex were not Christianity and secularism, but two varieties of Protestantism."[40]

Yet even as these internal denominational positions evolved, the rhetorical terms of the debate remained the same. White contends that these spatial metaphors paint the

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[36] Ibid., 106.

[37] For example see "Resolution on Human Sexuality and the Needs of Gay and Bisexual Persons," The United Church of Christ 10th General Synod, 1975, http://www.ucc.org/lgbt_statements.

[38] White, 178.

[39] Resolutions on ordination came later: UCC (1985), ELCA (2009), Episcopal Church (2009), PCUSA (2010) and resolutions on marriage: UCC (2005), ELCA (2009), PCUSA (2014), and Episcopal (2015). See "LGBTQ in the Church," The Episcopal Church, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/lgbt-church; "Human Sexuality," The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Human-Sexuality; "Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Approves Marriage Ammendment," Presbyterian Church (USA), March 17, 2015, https://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/3/17/presbyterian-church-us-approves-marriage-amendment/; "Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Approves Change in Ordination Standard," Presbyterian Church (USA), May 10, 2011, https://www.pcusa.org/news/2011/5/10/presbyterian-church-us-approves-change-ordination/. For a sociological account of the controversy over LGBT inclusion in the mainline see Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[40] White, 109.

church and the Christian tradition as "normatively anti-homosexual" and as defensively needing to protect itself from intrusions from the secular realm. "The debate figured gay and lesbian 'inclusion' as a question of Christians' openness to challenges and changes that originated from outside of their traditions."[41] For an individual or a church to become more welcoming of LGBT persons was to become less Christian. This rhetorical frame contributes to the formation of a Christian sexual identity politics, similar to the identity formation of gays and lesbians in relationship to sex. Evangelical Christianity added "rightly ordered practices of gender and sexuality" to other practices such as biblical authority and born again identity.[42] This point is further underscored by recent anti-gay marriage legislation, which asserts the religious freedom of evangelical Christians to discriminate against gay and lesbian marriage.[43]

The ugliest extreme in the anti-queer rhetoric may be Westboro Baptist Church's insistence that "God Hates Fags."[44] The micro-tactics of Christian hatred of queer people contributes both to the suicide rate and religiously motivated violence against queer people.[45] My interest in ecclesiology is how theory and theology about church resonate

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] See Garrett Epps, "When Public Servants Refuse to Serve the Public," *The Atlantic,* August 16, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/religious-freedom-gay-marriage/401390/ This article reports on the highly publicized case following the Supreme Court's decision that states must allow same-sex couples to marry. Kim Davis, Clerk of Rowan County, Kentucky, who refused to issue state marriage licenses to qualified couples on the grounds of religious freedom.

[44] Kate Dailey, "Fred Phelps: How Westboro pastor spread 'God hates fags'" *BBC News Magazine*, March 21, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26582812. Westboro received national attention when they picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student who was beaten and left to die in Laramie, Wyoming. They continue to host a regular picket schedule around the country picketing pride parades and even funerals of American service people.

[45] For the violent impact of anti-queer religion on queer life see Michael L. Cobb, *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). See also Tina

with the anti-queer rhetoric, or with assumptions at work in the rhetoric. I also want to emphasize how the rhetorical frame eclipses the practicing queer Christian. If becoming more inclusive to queer people is to become less Christian, a queer Christian is the anomaly that the rhetorical frame cannot hold. This dissertation argues that queer Christian bodies disrupt the rhetorical frame of anti-queer rhetoric as Christian identity. Further, I suggest that ecclesiology is an important site for theorizing and theologizing Christian identity in ways that either resonate with or disrupt this anti-queer rhetorical frame. In chapter four, I will utilize queer theory to exemplify how the experience of queer Christians can be transformative of ecclesiology and ecclesial practices.

Trends in Theology and Ecclesiology

What church is and whom it includes is impacted by the practice of theological writing. Thus, I argue that the exclusion of queer Christians from church, and the rhetoric that eclipses queer Christians from church, are important *ecclesiological* issues. This is James Alison's point when he suggests that all our arguments over sexuality and the church might just be a "huge giggle"— a good joke God has played on us, if a benign one. If we can get the joke then we can learn what we really need to learn about who we are in God and who we are as God's church.[46] Alison likens his own identity as a gay Catholic to being invited to a big party. He writes, "One of the things about this party is that quite a lot of us spend quite a lot of time trying to work out who should be at the

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Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[46]Alison, James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 167.

party and who shouldn't, even when the evidence is that the host is pretty promiscuous in his invitations."[47] But our capacity to enjoy the party at all has been threatened by a prolonged worry about who is on the guest list, and if these guests were, indeed, invited by the host or by someone trying to destroy the party.[48] Alison argues that this focus on who belongs misses a larger point of process -- "What runs the risk of destroying the party is much more how we talk to and about each other then it is what conclusion we reach."[49]

In other words, how we understand *what* church is relates to *who* is found and *who* is lost by church. Following Alison, I identify an ecclesiological need to theorize the Body of Christ as community because of, and not despite of, continued discernment, dialogue and disagreement. One reason I emphasize dialogue and disagreement is because queer Christians, and the "argument" they make by their very presence, have been eclipsed by the anti-queer Christian rhetoric. However, there is something else at stake in holding onto dialogue and disagreement as constitutive of Christian community. It helps to disrupt the idea that unity must mean uniformity and that we will only arrive at Christian community when we all agree. While I do not want to downplay the importance of agreement in political discourse, there is an equally important role for humility in community. The thrust of my ecclesiological interest is to argue fiercely for queer inclusion, but in doing so I am also arguing for argument. Put another way, I aim to construct an ecclesiology that will help churches hold different ideas, practices, and ways

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., 168.

[49] Ibid., 169.

of being in tension as they continue to be community together. Towards this end, my queer ecclesiology emphasizes failure, grace, and discernment. In doing so, I suggest that the ecclesiological work ahead is, as Alison says, that of "slowly trying to construct ways of talking into which people will be able to relax when they tire of the current fights."[50]

The Cultural Turn In Theology

One specific trend in theology that helps to bring the contestation of Christian community into relief is a turn away from more abstract, systematic theologies towards theologies rooted in the lived and embodied experience of individual Christians and church communities. This trend is sometimes called the "cultural turn" in theology. The cultural turn in theology follows a more general shift in the academy at large. Although a broad generalization, the cultural turn is best situated within the paradigmatic shift from modernism to postmodernism. By postmodernism I simply mean a dismantling of Enlightenment universals, replaced by an increased understanding of the particularity and situatedness of knowledge.[51] Theologian Sheila Davaney writes that this amounts to an epistemological shift. "Over against notions of rationality and experience as ahistorical, commonly structured, and temporally invariant, there have emerged assumptions of the located, particular, pluralistic, and thoroughly historical nature of human existence,

[50] Ibid., 173.

[51] This describes the effect of the postmodern era on academic practices. A more thorough treatment of the cultural evidence of the postmodern era or debates about its onset (and even demise) are beyond the scope of this work. See Jean François Lyotard, Robert Harvey, and Mark S. Roberts, *Toward the Postmodern* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 1999). Paul Heelas, *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell and Taylor, 2008).

experience, and knowledge."[52] Put another way, the well established scholarly 'view-from-nowhere' gave way to explorations of the limits of knowledge, and an emphasis on the scholarly 'view from somewhere.' Linell Cady, another theologian summarizing postmodernism's impact on the academy, notes that scholarship now takes on a "heightened self-reflexivity as the scholar attends not just to the objects of study but to the discourses by which and through which objects are approached."[53]

This shift impacted theology specifically. Sheila Davaney notes that more conservative and confessional theology relied on the "sui generis character of religion" and thus assumed the separateness of Christian beliefs and practices from larger cultural processes.[54] The cultural turn, however, has required theologians to move more explicitly towards a 'naturalized' definition of religion, seeing religion and theological writing as embedded in culture. This has opened new space within theology to focus on the material practices of everyday Christians as a starting point for constructive theology.[55] Davaney sees this shift in various theological schools of theology including post liberalism, pragmatic historicism, and liberationist and revisionist theology.[56]

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[52] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis" in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, Kathryn Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

[53] Linell E. Cady, "Loosening the Category That Binds: Modern 'Religion' and the Promise of Cultural Studies" in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 18.

[54] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," 7.

[55] Ibid., 8.

[56] Ibid., 9.

A shift in theology's starting point and sources of authority impacts theology's internal self-understanding, but also influences how theology justifies itself to the larger academy. Ted Smith argues that theology was greatly impacted by the view that all theological claims are conditioned by cultural and history. This left theologians with no grounding for making normative theological statements, and resulted in a theological timidity, even silence. With the cultural turn, however, theology can "evade the epistemological block on theological claims by making claims first about publicly assessable cultural forms." That is, theological claims can be justified when grounded in the practices of a particular community or the experiences of a certain marginalized people.[57] Thus, Smith notes, the fields of sociology and anthropology "have shown growing power to legitimate other kinds of discourse" including theology.[58]

As theology grounds itself in the lived practices of a community, I stress that theological writing itself is a part of the cultural practice of Christianity. That is, theological writing points to the lived experience of Christianity, but it is also *produced from* the lived experience of Christianity. Even further, connecting to political theology and Connolly's theory of resonance, ecclesiological writing is part of larger political resonance machines. Ecclesiology is not only written for and by Christians, but is situated within and influenced by a larger cultural order. As such, this dissertation argues that ecclesiology both emerges from Christian community and impacts Christian community. I will expand on this point in subsequent chapters, especially related to Hauerwas and Tanner's work.

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[57] Ted A. Smith, "Redeeming Critique: Resignations to the Cultural Turn in Christian Theology and Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 24, no. 2 (2004): 90.

[58] Ibid.

The Cultural Turn in Ecclesiology

Within theology, the sub-field of ecclesiology has been slow to incorporate the cultural turn or to recognize the impact of ecclesiological ideas on the lived experience of Christianity. Ecclesiologist Nicholas Healy has made this point, arguing that the systematic trends of 20th century ecclesiology has hindered the ability of churches to engage in critical self-reflection and for churches to situate themselves in their contemporary contexts.[59] Specifically, Healy says that modern ecclesiology has been "focused more upon discerning the right things to think about the church rather than orientated to the living, rather messy, confused, and confusing body that the church actually is."[60]

Healy names modern ecclesiologies "blueprint ecclesiologies" for their focus on the systematic architecture of ideas about church while ignoring the messy reality of church itself. Healy identifies several methodological elements in modern ecclesiologies that contribute to this problem. I will focus on two, systemization and idealization. Healy notes that systemization often begins with a model, for example Karl Rahner's church as "sacrament," Emil Brunner's church as "mystical communion," Dietrich Bonheoffer's church as "servant," and Karl Barth's church "body of Christ."[61] These models are used to describe the current church according to the author but also prophetically "to lead to

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[59] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., 27.

new insights about [the church's] nature and activity."[62] There is not agreement on one correct model. Each theologian strives to articulate a new systemizing model that criticizes the former while also asserting that their particular model is correct.[63] Healy argues that this tendency to search for a "supermodel" for ecclesiology, one that is doctrinally definitive like that of the model of Trinity, may not be possible or even preferable. Is there a compelling reason why we need to choose between "body of Christ" and "People of God," for example? Healy's concern is not just the search for the ideal model, but also the way the model is meant to function, as a way of "gathering together and organizing everything else that is finally more significant than the model is itself."[64] Healy's point is that these systematized models have a way of eclipsing the multi-facetted "everything else" of ecclesiology, including the inconsistencies as well as the sins of the church.[65]

Blueprint ecclesiologies also idealize the church. Healy notes the seeming underlying belief that "it is necessary to get our *thinking* about the church right first, after which we can go on to put our theory into practice."[66] While remaining at the abstract level may be a rhetorical strategy to present an ideal vision that the church can follow, Healy argues that this vision comes at the expense of too little articulation of the church

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., 32.

[64] Ibid., 46.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., 36.

in its concrete reality including its struggles and its sin.[67] These blueprint theologies, "undervalue…the theological significance of the genuine struggles of the church's membership to live as disciples within the less-than-perfect church."[68] Since the actual church cannot stand under the weight of such perfection, it leads both to the hiding of imperfection by individuals and institutions, while those outside churches view church with a healthy dose of cynicism.[69]

I have already emphasized the importance of dialogue and disagreement in ecclesiological writing. Yet, Healy argues that these modes of systemization and idealization in ecclesiology have specifically impacted the self-understanding of churches in ways that perpetuate their view of themselves as perfect and unified. This is reinforced by various theological claims, for example that the church is unique from other institutions because of the power of the Holy Spirit or that the church as the Body of Christ is perfect in Christ and it is only the church's members who are mired by sin. There is some nuance here, especially in regards to how different denominational traditions approach ecclesiology. I will explore this in later chapters.

I would also add to Healy's argument that it is not just theological idealism that perpetuates the idealism of some churches, but also a material interest in maintaining oppressive power structures. Homophobia is a powerful idea that overlaps with sexism and racism to create a resonance machine that preserves present power structures in churches. In this way, I argue that ecclesiological claims are not just ways of thinking

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[67] Ibid., 36-37.

[68] Ibid., 7.

[69] Ibid., 37.

about church, but have specific material consequences on bodies and lives. When ecclesiology does not engage in critical self-reflection, this impacts those whom the church has othered, specifically queer people and those identities that always intersect with queer, such as gender and race.[70]

Thus, the cultural turn in the sub-field of ecclesiology is unique in that as theology turns to the messy, lived experience of Christianity, ecclesiology turns towards its own theological subject matter, the lived experience of Christians in churches. In this turn, Healy has proposed that ecclesiology move away from "finding the single right way to think about the church."[71] Rather, ecclesiologists should use models more playfully, in a way that helps them "discover and explore imaginatively the many facets of the Christian church."[72] This includes not only the plurality and multi-faceted nature of churches in their historic, global, and denominational contexts, but also that plurality of peoples, practices, and beliefs that exist within one individual church community.

Being playful with models is one way that ecclesiology can re-imagine Christian community and its capability for inclusion, diversity, and a unity without uniformity. The playful model of the "lost church" frames this chapter. In subsequent chapters, I describe how the plasticity of humanity and community can open a playful mode in the acceptance of God's gifts and grace. In the final chapter, I play with queer practices of recognition,

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[70] Stefanie Knauss, "Church and Homosexuality: Beyond Exclusion," Dennis M. Doyle, Timothy J. Furry, and Pascal D. Bazzell, *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012) 183-198.

[71] Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 38.

[72] Ibid., 36.

performativity, and failure in order to suggest that the shape of church might be impacted by, and learn from, the shape of queer life.

Embodiment and Ecclesiology

Before turning to the more constructive section of queer ecclesiology, this project examines the ecclesiological thinking of Stanley Hauerwas and Kathryn Tanner. I focus on Hauerwas and Tanner for their development of theories of embodied practice in their writing about church. It is important to note that neither Hauerwas nor Tanner produce focused work on ecclesiology, however several scholars have identified ecclesiological innovations in their broader work.[73] Notably, Healey identifies both Hauerwas and Tanner as forging a "new ecclesiology" that turns ecclesiology away from ahistorical universals towards "the necessarily communal and active nature of Christianity."[74]

Hauerwas and Tanner have important similarities and differences that make them interesting conversation partners for this work. Both Hauerwas and Tanner were trained in the postliberal school of thought, although they have diverged from this school as their work progressed.[75] Interestingly, postliberal theology can itself be seen as an example of the cultural turn in theology. Building on scholarship in anthropology and philosophy,

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[73] Nicholas M. Healy "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Vol 5 No 3 (Nov. 2003): 287-308. John B. Thomson, *The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas: A Christian Theology of Liberation* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001). Brad East "An Undefensive Presence: The Mission and Identity of the Church in Kathryn Tanner and John Howard Yoder." *Scottish Journal Of Theology* 68, no. 3 (2015): 327-344.

[74] Ibid. On the cultural turn in theology see Ted A. Smith, "Redeeming Critique: Resignations to the Cultural Turn in Christian Theology and Ethics" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 24, no. 2 (2004): 90.

[75] See Gary Dorrien, "Truth Claims: The Future of Postliberal Theology," *Christian Century*, July 18-25, 2001, 22-29.

George Lindbeck forwarded a "cultural-linguistic" interpretation of religion, describing how the narrative or grammar of Christianity produces the particularity of the Christian experience.[76] The legacy of post-liberalism in both Hauerwas and Tanner's work can be seen in their negotiation of how Christian identity is formed in embodied Christian community. Both also emphasize the political impact of Christian community. For my work, I'm particularly interested in how they shape Christian identity towards a peaceful and grace-filled witness.

Hauerwas and Tanner's differences are also impactful for this work, particularly in their distinct understandings of Christian practice and how this impacts how the Christian community relates to the broader culture. In an effort to contrast these differences, I describe Hauerwas's work as an "ecclesiology of distance." Hawuerwas envisions his Christian community of peace a distinct and separate from the wider culture, formed through the practices of the tradition. In turn, I describe Tanner's ecclesiology an "ecclesiology of plasticity" where Christians seek to both recognize and give away God's gifts of grace while also continuing to engage in dialogue and debate about what it means to be Christian.

Hauerwas' Ecclesiology

Hauerwas' ecclesiology is crucial to this dissertation for its emphases on the shaping of a particular Christian community through the stories and rituals of the church.

[76] George Linbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 4, 6, 19. This is based on Wiggenstein's theory of language which describes how meaning, even truth, arises by learning a "language game."

[77] Hauerwas' vision is that through participation in community individuals undergo a transformation to be "not just good, but holy."[78] Hauerwas follows Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of "social practice" which argues that practices form individual character because, in order to achieve excellence in the practice, an individual submits to the authoritative standards of the practice, and thus acquires the virtues inherent in the practice.[79] Thus, for Hauerwas, individuals become community through participation in common formative practices of the Christian tradition. In doing so, the Christian community is more able to witness to God's story, protect the vulnerable, and enact a peaceable kingdom.

However, while Hauerwas turns away from systematics towards practices, his treatment of church remains abstracted and idealistic in ways that mirror Healy's critiques of the 20th century. Kathryn Tanner criticizes how Hauerwas and others conceptualize Christian community with a modernist view of culture, which understands culture as a whole way of life based on member's agreement on customs, values, and practices.[80] I argue that this view of culture applied to ecclesiology impacts how the church is able to account for its own internal difference and disagreement. It is not so much that Hauerwas believes that everyone who attends church is in agreement, but both his conception of practices and framing of Christian witness require the church's distance

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[77] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, 373.

[78] Stanley Hauerwas, "How to Keep Theological Ethics Theological," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 73.

[79] Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 191. MacIntyre's view, built on Aristotle, is that practices form individual character because in order to achieve excellence in the practice an individual submits to the authoritative standards of the practice, forming humility.

[80] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 25-27.

and even opposition to the broader culture. [81] In this distancing from culture, Hauerwas' church may inadvertently resonate with anti-queer Christian rhetoric that defines its own Christian identity over and against queer people.

Tanner's Ecclesiology

In contrast, Tanner envisions an ecclesiology that is more plastic, formed by God and by the broader culture. For Tanner, church is always being formed and reformed both theologically and practically. Theologically, church is formed through the grace of God, as individuals and communities respond to God as "the giver of all good gifts."[82] Practically, Tanner emphasizes culture as fragmented and plural, where Christians construct church from broader cultural practices constantly being contested and renegotiated. [83] She writes, "Christian social practices are never themselves anything other than the transformation of what is outside; if, that is, Christian identity is established from the beginning through the use of borrowed materials."[84] This does not deny that existence of Christian community or Christian faith as a "whole way of life;" it

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[81] This is especially evident in Hauerwas' emphasis on Christians as "resident aliens." See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989). This is also linked to Augustine's two cities, where the member of the city of God is a pilgrim not at home in the world. See also Stanley Hauerwas, "Character, Narrative, and Growth in Christian Life (1980)" in *The Hauerwas Reader*, 226. Lindbeck also points to the development of an "alien faith" close to the early Christian ecclesia or monastic communities if Christianity wants to practice social deviance. See Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pres, 1984), 64.

[82] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

[83] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," 5. See also Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 42.

[84] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, 114.

is just a way of life made from the practices of the wider society.[85] Most Christian practices remain partial and unarticulated. Theology becomes necessary in investigating disagreement and disconnect between belief and practice.[86] For Tanner, Christian community is not made through unification or agreement in belief or practice; rather Christians come together by "a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out."[87]

In Tanner's thought, a shared sense of discernment as the process of Christian life is also connected to her theological anthropology of plasticity. The plasticity of individuals and communities is both how we are made in the image of God and why we must continue to be formed by God "inside of the great adventure of new creation."[88] Tanner's plasticity has resonance with the queer theory and theories of becoming. Thus, in the last chapter I connect Tanner's plasticity of self and community to queer theory and queer life, showing how queer practices of recognition, performativity, and failure all encourage a return to plasticity of self and community as the both continue to be formed in a God-ward way.

Political Theology of Lost Church

In conclusion, my work builds on the intersections of political theology and Christian political rhetoric as they pertain to the cultural turn in theology and ecclesiology. At these intersections I claim that theology is a Christian practice with

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[85] Ibid., 103.

[86] Tanner writes that theological reflection arises for Christians in everyday life when there is a question or a disconnect between belief and practice, in the process of "trying to interpret novel circumstances in light of one's Christian commitments." *Theories of Culture*, 82.

[87] Ibid., 152-153.

[88] James Alison, "Failure and Perfection," *Perfection* 4, no.1 (2006).

political impact. More specifically, I seek to uncover how ecclesiologies impact the practices of church and how they resonate with or resist the Christian rhetoric against queer life. Following Connolly, I understand that assemblages are not transformed by masterful blueprints, but by a myriad of micro-tactics of everyday life. Ecclesiologies, as well as other Christian practices, can be considered among such micro-tactics. Thus, the politics of ecclesiology occurs both in the writing of ecclesiology and in the everyday micro-tactics of particular Christian communities.

In the more constructive piece of this dissertation, I argue that queer bodies and queer practices also impact church. Although in many cases church has lost them, queer Christians continue to practice church.[89] The disorientation of queers in relationship to church is an invitation for church to reorient itself. As Sara Ahmed writes, "Risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer..."[90] This is an invitation for church to get lost. Queer Christians invite churches to examine their exclusion of queer people as illustrative of what church is and what futures might be possible for church. What transformation of the whole Body might be taking place as churches begin to orient towards and recognize queer bodies in church? In becoming welcoming to queer people, might the church Body chart new understandings of unity that embrace, not eclipse, difference? Can queer people in church be like a leaven, which causes the whole bread to

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[89] Here I refer primarily to churches that exclude or struggle to include queer people. I also acknowledge, but do not emphasize, important movements for inclusion within churches. Of particular importance is the Metropolotain Community Church founded by Rev. Troy Perry in 1968 with an explicit ministry for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. http://mccchurch.org/overview/history-of-mcc/

[90] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 21.

rise? Such rising would be queer indeed. For it is a queer project to understand the lost as leaven, as that yeast which infuses the flour and transforms it into bread for all (Matthew 13:33).

Chapter 2

Being Church: Stanley Hauerwas' Ecclesiology of Distance

"Because the Eucharist is an embodied, corporate practice, God's people need to come together in one place. They become, for that period, a visible community. The Church is not, for that period, a vague idea, a marvelous principle, an invisible influence. It becomes something, and thus can no longer be anything, gives up being everything, and is much more than nothing." Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, *Blackewell Companion to Christian Ethics*[91]

"In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." Ephesians 2:21-22, NRSV

Introduction

As outlined in chapter one, the cultural turn in theology precipitated a shift in ecclesiology away from systematics towards reflection on the concrete life of the church. Instrumental in this ecclesiological turn, Hauerwas' work emphasizes the lived story of Christianity actualized in the embodied practices of the church. I am interested in Hauerwas' ecclesiology for its vision of church as a countercultural community capable of witnessing Christ's peace to the world. Hauerwas foregrounds Christian identity, aiming for a gathered church community that is a visible and concrete "something" making possible an alternative polis with political impact. Hauerwas' ecclesiological goal is to "recover the everyday practices that constitute the polis called church… What we Christians have lost is just how radical our practices are, since they are meant to free us from the excitement of war and the lies so characteristic of the world."[92] Politically,

[91] Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 20.

[92] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 8.

Hauerwas' ecclesiology proposes a nonviolent church capable of listening to the most vulnerable of society in contrast and critique of the violence of the nation state.

Hauerwas is innovative in his understanding of the practicing church as a community of resistance. In this way, Hauerwas' ecclesiology could lend itself towards protecting and including queer Christians. Yet, I worry about how he constructs his ecclesial vision through distancing the church from the broader culture. While it may be that Hauerwas' church is meant to be rhetorically rather than practically separate, his church at a distance tends to emphasize its similarities in practice and ignore its differences and disagreements. Further, I suggest that Hauerwas' ecclesiology of distance may inadvertently resonate with anti-queer Christian rhetoric which has defined itself *as Christian* over and against the broader culture and its embrace of queer life.

Overview of Hauerwas' Ecclesiology

An ethicist, Hauerwas' ecclesiology emerges out of his desire that Christianity be 'something' as opposed to the 'everything' he finds in the law-like universalism of western ethics. For Hauerwas, moral and rational claims need not be understood as universal as much as contextualized, and evolving within the traditions of particular communities who search for the best account of truth at any given time.[93] Hauerwas finds no place for the concrete practices of the Church within liberalism, which he describes as "a stoic inner conviction of human dignity and individual autonomy, with [its] sense of finitude and an orientation towards common striving."[94] In contrast, Hauerwas urges the church to embrace its unique particularity, exploring what it means "to worship Father,

[93] Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy: Volume 1: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 6-15.

[94] Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics,* 34.

Son, and Holy Spirit –not just as concepts but as habits, attitudes, and forms of life."[95] Christianity, for Hauerwas, is not a set of beliefs or moral principals, but is a life of habits formed in the context of community, particularly in worship.[96]

Thus, the church is the place where "something" particular is taking place, a community embodying God's story through practices able to transform individuals to be "not just good, but holy."[97] Hauerwas has centered his work on the church, yet does not claim to specifically be writing an ecclesiology. In fact, although much of his writing is theological, he is suspicious of theology that aims to systematize. Instead, he argues that theology should be occasional, with the goal of calling the church to faithfulness. As a corollary to this, he warns against dilution of the church's witness through secularization, in the sense that the church has surrendered to narratives that promise fulfillment by the world.[98]

In total, however, I interpret Hauerwas as developing an ecclesiology. Below, I identify Hauerwas' ecclesiology as pivoting around three broad concepts: story, practice, and witness. The three are interconnected. To become 'something' the church simply has to "be the church," a community where Christians join in God's story by embodying the practices of the faith.[99] It is through this embodiment that the church becomes an alternative polis, making witness to the world possible. A tension that I find in Hauerwas

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[95] Ibid.

[96] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 373.

[97] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 73.

[98] Herman Paul, "Stanley Hauerwas: Against Secularization in the Church," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie, Heft* 59, Jahrgang 29, Nummer 2 (2013): 12-33.

[99] Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 374.

is how to emphasize the particulars of Christian identity without idealizing or overdrawing the differences between Christians and it's "others." Can church be distinct in a way that also acknowledges difference, disagreement, and sin within the church?

A Storied Community

In his ecclesial vision, Hauerwas stresses that Christian life is not about individuals, but "about a life together"[100] To become a Christian is to join a story "declaring [an] allegiance to those people, past, present, and future, who continue to struggle to live faithful to the God we find revealed in Israel and Jesus Christ" [101] Hauerwas emphasizes that living faithfully within the story is to live peacefully, in contrast to the violence of the world.

Hauerwas' emphasis on story draws on the postliberal movement in theology led by the Yale-School.[102] Part of the larger cultural turn, postliberalism crafted a new methodological approach to theology drawn from a postmodern philosophy of language and hermeneutics. Under the leadership of theologians Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, postliberalism argued that religion, specifically Christianity, could be understood as a linguistic system with an internally coherent grammar. Lindbeck cites Wittgenstein, in

[100] Ibid., 371.

[101] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 39.

[102] Hauerwas doesn't claim the term postliberal for himself, Gary Dorrien identifies him as continuing the postliberal tradition into its second generation. See Gary Dorrien, "Truth Claims: The Future of Postliberal Theology," *Christian Century* (Jul 18-25, 2001). For a good overview of Hauerwas in relation to social ethics see Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*, (Minneapolis: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

particular, as critical for understanding how meaning arises within a "language game."[103] In this approach, religion is not a set of beliefs about what is true or good but "a framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought."[104] The narrative or grammar of Christianity thus produces the particularity of Christian experience. Within this cultural-linguistic understanding of Christianity, the biblical narrative, as the story of the Christian people, is that which situates doctrine, liturgical practices, and moral formation within it. This has an effect on theological practice, as doctrine is not "directed by apologetic concerns but by a sense of responsibility towards the grand ideas of the Christian tradition."[105] Lindbeck calls this method "descriptive theology," the task of giving "a normative explication of the meaning a religion has for its adherents."[106] Thus, doctrines do not reveal ontological truth as much as they reveal the operative rules of the community. They "illustrate correct usage rather than define it."[107]

While doctrines may not point to the ontological truth of God, the community certainly does. Hauerwas' ecclesiology can be understood as providing a normative description of church for the life of the Christian. Rather then an apologetic, we can view Hauerwas' ecclesiology as descriptive, identifying the communal mechanisms, especially worship, through which one learns the grammar of Christianity. But he moves further than description. As Herman Paul has said, Hauerwas' church does not just witness to the

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[103] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 33.

[104] Ibid.

[105] John Webster, "Theology After Liberalism?" in *Theology After Liberalism: Classical and Contemporary Readings,* ed. John Webster and George P. Schner (Minneapolis: Wiley, 2000), 55.

[106] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 113.

[107] Ibid, 81.

story of God but is also a "participant *in* the narrative."[108] As a part of the story being told, the church, for Hauerwas, has a role in the telling, in forming people in light of God's story. In church "we become part of God's story by finding our lives within that story."[109] This emphasis on narrative underscores the role of the church as both "the subject of the narrative as well as the agent of the narrative."[110]

> [It] is an attempt to draw our attention to *where the story is* told, namely in the church; *how the story is* told, namely in faithfulness to Scripture; and *who tells the story,* namely the whole church through the office of the preacher.[111]

Here, Hauerwas departs from a tendency in postliberal theology to conflate narrative theology with fidelity to the narrative of the biblical text.[112] Church, then, *is* the story of God and tells the story of God. The sermon, for example, is one of many church practices by which "Christians are formed to use their language rightly."[113]

Hauerwas' description of church is perscriptive as well as descriptive. He emphasizes Christianity as distinctive from other ways of life. The church is a "distinctive people formed by the narrative of God."[114] Hauerwas often uses his own sermons or stories to illustrate and make concrete his theology. Take, for example, the essay "God's New Language" which begins with a sermon given on Pentecost. In the

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[108] Herman Paul, "Against Secularization in the Church," 12-33, 18

[109] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 102.

[110] Ibid, 158.

[111] Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 160. Emphasis original.

[112] Ibid, 152.

[113] Ibid, 159.

[114] Ibid., 371.

sermon, Hauerwas describes the scattering of people after the fall of Babel; people live in chaos not recognizing their dependency on God. In contrast to a life of destruction, the people of Israel and the church are called by God to become a people with the capacity live differently.[115] Here Hauerwas underscores that salvation is not knowledge or belief, but a whole way of life lived as an alternative to the life offered by the world. Church is the embodiment of this difference. In the telling the story with their lives, Christians are "challenged to be a people capable of hearing God's good news such that we can be a witness to others."[116] Hauerwas emphasizes the craft, or the art of being shaped by God's story in order to become a living example of the saving power of the story. Hauerwas writes, "Insofar as we are the church, we do not just have an alternative, we are the alternative. We do not have a story to tell but in the telling we *are* the story being told."[117]

In developing the church as the vehicle for communicating God's story to a particular people, Hauerwas' emphasizes the difference between the story of Christianity and other stories. In an essay "A Tale of Two Stories" he contrasts the story of himself as a Texan and as a Christian. Through his story about being a Texan, Hauerwas argues that the stories of our lives "cannot within their own framework account for their own limits and the tragedies that result from that."[118] As they take on central meaning and become

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[115] Ibid, 50.

[116] Ibid, 53.

[117] Ibid, 54. Note Hauerwas avoids supersessionism here but sees church, like Israel, as "becoming[ing] peculiarly a people who live by our remembering the history of God's redemption of the world"

[118] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 38.

indispensible to us, our stories rely on violence to secure themselves over and against other stories. For Hauerwas, this violence underscores the way in which such stories are false.[119] Hauerwas notes a difference in the Christian story, however. As Christians adopt the story of Jesus as their own, they learn the skills "to be free from our self-imposed fears."[120] These skills include acknowledging the evil connected to our stories by "learning to live the life of the forgiven." In short, the truth of the counter-narrative of the story of Jesus puts into perspective our own failings, and the way our stories fail us. "To live in this manner strikes at the heart of our illusions, underwritten by many of the stories that grip our lives."[121]

While Hauerwas emphasizes the violence of individual stories, he does not theorize how the church itself might be implicated in stories of violence through its practices, policies, and theologies. Even further, one worry is how God's story might be told in a way that upholds power and continues oppression through the violent story of racism, sexism, and homophobia within the church. [122] I wonder if this calls into question the limits of the church as a peaceful witness.

Embodying Practices

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid., 40-41.

[121] Ibid., 42. Jesus' story is "the ultimate adventure story, as it invites us to contribute to God's kingdom through our living faithful to it."

[122] James Samuel Logan, "Liberalism, Race, and Stanley Hauerwas." *Cross Currents* 55, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 522–33.

My work seeks to understand how both theories of practice, and Christian practices themselves, have political impact through their resonance with larger political movements. Hauerwas turns to the practices of the church for producing lives capable of telling the truth of God's story. He writes, "To become a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding, but rather to become part of a different community with a different set of practices."[123] Hauerwas defines practices as "regular patterns of action that embody the goods that God conveys."[124] Such patterns of action are especially found in worship, which shapes Christian character through formation (preaching, catechesis, baptism), church life (praise, thanksgiving, silence, intercession) and restoration (penitence, discipline, forgiveness). [125] Through worship, Christians become church, since "worship trains Christians to be saints."[126]

In describing Christian practice, Hauerwas draws largely on Alistair MacIntyre's definition of practice as an embodied, culturally complex form of action.[127] Some examples include farming, basketball, or chess. For MacIntyre each cultural practice contains a standard of excellence and internal goods, the act of aiming for excellence extends the capacity of humanity to achieve the good, or virtue, contained within the

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[123] Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 107.

[124] Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics, 18.*

[125] Ibid, 19.

[126] Ibid., 26. Hauerwas also classically repeats the protestant adage that "the church is known where the sacraments are celebrated, the word is preached, and the upright lives are encouraged and lived" *The Hauerwas Reader*, 383

[127] See Alastair MacIntyre, "What Is A Human Body," in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume I*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95.

practice.[128] To illustrate his point, MacIntyre gives an example of a boy who is paid to play chess and given extra money if he wins. At first the boy plays only to win, even cheating if he has to, in order to obtain the external reward. But through the act of playing, or engaging in the practice, he slowly shifts his reasons for playing to the internal goods of the practice of playing chess, such as the pleasure of analytical thinking or the joy of competition. Eventually, even though he still plays to win, he doesn't play for money but for the excellence of the game.[129]

Thus, practices form character because in order to achieve excellence in the practice an individual submits to the standards of the practice, and this submission fosters humility. Through achieving excellence, the individual acquires those virtues inherent in the practice such as courage, humility, or honesty.[130] The virtuous formation of an individual contributes to the larger story of the community, serving as a model and bringing others into the practice.[131]

With the template of MacIntyre's theory of practice, Hauerwas describes the church as a practice, one that forms people in Christian virtues. He views the church as a community of formation. For Hauerwas this cuts against a concept of Christian faith which is more "voluntaristic…presuppose[ing] that one can become a Christian without training. The difficulty is that once such a position has been established, any alternative

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[128] Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 186.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid., 190-191.

[131] Ibid., 193. MacIntyre clarifies that someone who achieves excellence at a practice can still be vicious or prideful "where the virtues are required, the vices also may flourish," but these cases usually rely on the virtues achieved by others in order to both succeed and bypass internal goods.

cannot help appearing as an authoritarian imposition."[132] Rather than frame Christian practice as authoritarian, however, Hauerwas views Christians as being an apprentice to Christ.[133] Christianity is thus not a belief system, but a craft learned over many hours and days of practice and apprenticeship to Christ in the practice of Christian community. Through learning the craft of Christianity, one learns the specialized language and practice that the craft requires. In mastering the craft of Christianity, Christians obtain the virtues of the Christian life, such as peace and patience. Hauerwas clarifies that virtue is not an individual achievement but a mode or expression of embodiment.[134] Following Aristotelian thought, Hauerwas understands the virtues as acquired through "infusion." For Christians such infusion is achieved through practice, but only comes from God, because through Christ Christians become "a new creation."[135]

We can explain Hauerwas' meaning of the craft of Christianity through the example of worship. Worship trains the body in the practices of the tradition. In worship, through the Holy Spirit, "people learn how to read Scripture, and how to read their own story as narrated by the scriptural story. People learn how to look and pray for the coming of the kingdom, and how to let the form and content of their practice be

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[132] Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, 99.

[133] Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Robert Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 69.

[134] Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Robert Pinches, Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 64-65. Hauerwas acknowledges his debt to MacIntyre, his postliberal commitments also compel him to critique MacIntyre for not sufficiently opposing the morality of modernity with Christianity. Citing John Milbank on this point, Hauerwas opposes a Greek understanding of the virtues because of its fundamental connection with war, and the virtuous individuals a hero of battle. "Christianity is not a continuation of the Greek understanding of the virtues, but rather the inauguration of a new tradition that sets the virtues within an entirely different telos in community" one of peace. (63-66).

[135] Ibid., 69. 1 Corinthians 6:17

transformed by the anticipated character of life with God."[136] In undergoing the training of worship, Christians become Christians, and thus become different then those who do not worship. "That is what makes us a holy people, a people set apart, so that the world might know there is an alternative to murder."[137] Hauerwas' vision is that people do not understand Christianity as just one of many ways to describe themselves, but that through the worshiping community Christians become "distinctive nouns—people, disciples, witnesses."[138]

In his theory of practices, Hauerwas describes how the story of God is told through Christian bodies formed in church. MacIntyre's theory of practice has been influential and contributed to a refocusing in both practical theology and ecclesiology on the formative power of Christian communities.[139] Kathryn Tanner, however, has critiqued such theories of practice, which construes Christian community as a culture unto itself, separate from wider cultural practices. Hauerwas' use of MacIntyre helps maintain his ecclesiology of distance, a distance that is important for forming a community of resistance but also may inadvertently resonate with anti-queer rhetoric.

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[136]Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 18.

[137] Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resource for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 161. See also Hauerwas and Wells, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 5. "Worship is indeed a kind of play with a different set of rules—for, without such games, who would recognize that 'real' life is also a set of games with their own rules?"

[138] Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 13.

[139] MacIntyre's understanding of practice is referenced as the primary influence on the new focus on Christian practice within the field of practical theology in Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practice," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 20. See also Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997) and Craig Dykstra, *Growing in Our Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices,* second edition, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). MacIntyre is also a key interlocker, although in the end also critiqued, in John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, a formative work in the radical orthodoxy movement. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory : Beyond Secular Reason* (Boston: Blackwell, 1991).

Becoming a Witness

According to Hauerwas, to join the story and embody the practices of the Christian tradition is to be transformed, to acquire a character "capable of worshiping God."[140] The character transformation Christians undergo in church makes Christians collectively capable of witness to the world. Witness is a central theme in Hauerwas' ecclesiology, both the witness of the 'saints' of the church, to whom other Christians look to emulate, and the witness of the church to the world, since the church "worships a God which the world knows not."[141] Witness thus functions both as an internal communal symbol, which helps shape the practices of the community as a whole, as well as an external one, where the practicing community lives as an example to the world.

The witness of saints demonstrates the virtues of the Christian life, and other Christians learn from them. "Like apprentices who learn their crafts by working alongside the master craftsman, we Christians need exemplars or saints whose lives embody the kingdom way."[142] The authority of saints is gained from the discernment of the whole community, however it is difficult to recognize a saint "because they remind us how unfaithful we have been to the story that has formed us."[143] Like MacIntyre's practice, the virtues achieved are inherent in the practice itself, and not in the practitioner. "Often the best teachers in a craft do not necessarily produce the best work, but they help

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[140] Hauerwas, *Hauerwas Reader*, 72.

[141] Ibid., 71.

[142] Ibid., 372.

[143] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 104.

us understand what kind of work is best."[144] While the saints are not perfect, they are those who have truly been teachers of the tradition, the church exists because of their witness.

In emulating the saints, the virtues are achieved and thus the Church can fulfill its mission to be a truthful witness to the world.[145] Of course witness itself is a practice, a gift from God in order to point back to God. "Witness names the Christian hope that every action…points to God, and invites an inquiry into the joy that inspires such actions."[146] It is in pointing to God that the church fulfills its prophetic mission. The church's witness demonstrates "to the world that it is not the Church" and is instead a world that does not yet know God and is governed by other "theories, practices, or stories."[147] The perfection of saints, then, points to the telos of perfection for the community as a whole, "If Christians are not being sanctified, our affirmations of our belief in God mean little, and we lack the power to stand against the powers of the world."[148] Hauerwas often repeats that "the church does not *have* a social ethic; the church *is* a social ethic."[149] In other words, the church serves the world by being the

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[144] Hauerwas, "Discipleship as Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community.*" The Christian Century* (October, 1991): 881-884.

[145] *Christian Existence Today*, 18.

[146] Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 19. Several examples of such actions are named: "–whether for peace, for justice, for stability, for alleviating distress, for empowering the young or weak, for comforting the lonely, for showing mercy to the outcast, for offering hospitality, for making friends, or for earning a living."

[147] Ibid., 21.

[148] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 18.

[149] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1983), 99.

church God called the church to be. Saints are those that call the church into these practices by their exemplification of the practices; "People of virtue sustain the church as a social ethic."[150] Hauerwas points to examples of such witnesses in the lives of Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder, and John Paul II. He finds that they each "represent the recovery of the politics necessary for us to understand why witness is not simply something Christians 'do' but is at the heart of understanding how that to which Christians witness is true."[151]

Hauerwas has clarified that practices are learned even when saints are not perfect. Yet, one might ask if his emphasis on the virtues achieved through practices ignores contestation and conflict within practices. One also wonders how the Protestant emphasis on "simultaneously sinner and saint" might apply to Hauerwas' ecclesiology. For example, when he points to John Howard Yoder as a Christian witness, he is silent on Yoder's harassment and sexual abuse of women.[152] He is similarly gives little emphasis to the church's communal sins, such as racism. I will be discussed this more thoroughly below.

Ecclesiology of Distance

Political Witness

Hauerwas' distinctive Christian witness hinges on the church's distance from the larger cultural context. I reason that this distance does not serve Hauerwas' larger hopes

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[150] Hauerwas, *Hauerwas Reader*, 378.

[151] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 217

[152] Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (January 2015): 7-80.

for an ecclesiology of peace. The politics of Hauerwas' church as witness is found in "the gospel call to join a countercultural phenomenon."[153] Hauerwas writes, "Without the church the world would have no way to understand what justice entails."[154] For Hauerwas, a communal life lived in contrast to the broader culture has a saving quality. "Salvation is a political alternative that the world cannot know apart from the existence of a concrete people called church. Put more dramatically, you cannot even know you need saving without the church's being a political alternative."[155] Thus, salvation is not one's individual eternal security or effort in personal meaning making, but is about becoming a part of a community by being "engrafted into practices that save us from those powers that would rule our lives making it impossible for us to truly worship God."[156]

Hauerwas emphasizes the church as a minority in a more secular post-Christian culture. Drawing on Yoder, Hauerwas describes a church that can resist its Constintinian linage. He writes, "Constantinism is the attempt to make Christianity necessary, to make the church at home in the world, in a manner that witness is no longer required."[157] Hauerwas argues that the church is not called to translate the gospel into universal

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[153] Hauerwas, *Resident Alien*, 30.

[154] *A Better Hope*, 157.

[155] *After Christiandom*, 35.

[156] Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 8. On Hauerwas' indebtedness to MacIntyre see footnote 2 in Stanley Hauerwas, "A Retrospective Assessment of an 'Ethics of Character': The Development of Hauerwas's Theological Project," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). Hauerwas is wary, however, of making a 'god' of virtue itself, or of simply recapitulation of the Greek understanding of the virtues. Christianity calls for a transformation of the virtues, specifically from the hero of war to the telos of peace.

[157] *With the Grain of Universe*, 221.

language, but rather to emulate the gospel.[158] This requires the church not to be entangled in the power of the state, but to be set apart. Christians are "called not to make history come out right but to be faithful to the kind of care we have seen revealed in God's Kingdom."[159] For Hauerwas, this requires an embracing the church's minority status. Drawing on Yoder, he writes that we could "be more relaxed and less compulsive about running the world if we made our peace with our minority situation."[160]

In crafting an ecclesiology that is set apart, Hauerwas has engaged in a sustained critique of liberalism and liberal Christianity. He joins the communitarian critique, which accuses political liberalism's presumed neutrality of neglecting the situated nature of the self and the political and moral formation that occurs through communal relationships.[161] In claiming neutrality, liberalism erases the particularity of its values and stories while it aims to organize society around the principal of personal freedom.[162] In Hauerwas' view the church has capitulated to liberalism in adopting these liberal values as Christian values. In this way, he argues that the church forfeits its ability to truly by a witness to the

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[158] Ibid., 223.

[159] *Christian Existence Today*, 105.

[160] Ibid., 183.

[161] Michael Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism" *Political Theory* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1990): 6-23. Walzer argues that rather than being a neutral adjudicator of diverse moral claims, liberalism produces increasingly disassociated individuals whose only social union is the state. MacIntyre also accuses political liberalism of "founding a form of social order in which individuals could emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition by appealing to genuinely universal, tradition-independent norms." See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 335.

[162] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

particular story of God as distinctive from the world's values, especially the Christian virtue of peace.[163]

Witness of Peace

As noted above, I'm interested particularly in how Hauerwas emphasizes non-violence as a central and yet counter cultural Christian practice.[164] Listening to the most vulnerable is a key practice in this. For example, Hauerwas has pointed to L'Arche communities, who care for adults with disabilities, as communities that enact the care of Christ.[165] Hauerwas also manages to circumvent both conservative and liberal extremes in his ecclesiology. Michael Northcott has argued that Hauerwas' ecclesiology critiques violence in both conservative and liberal American Christianity by "being faithful to the mutual submission and patient attentiveness and care that mark the true politics of the body of Christ."[166] Such liturgical politics, Northcut argues, are a powerful counter narrative to American Christianity's faith in an American way of life including "the 'tyranny' of individual autonomy writ large in the totalizing institutions of capitalism and a strong state."[167] As Herman Paul says more pointedly, "Hauerwas warns as loudly as his voice allows against domestication of the gospel, that is, against narratives and

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[163] James Samuel Logan, "Liberalism, Race, and Stanley Hauerwas." *Cross Currents* 55, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 522–33

[164] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

[165] Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2008).

[166] Michael S. Northcott, "Reading Hauerwas in the Cornbelt: The Demise of the American Dream and the Return of Liturgical Politics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 275.

[167] Ibid, 277.

practices that suppress Christian witness by softening the difference between God's kingdom and this world."[168]

Distance as Orientation

For Hauerwas the political witness of the church is achieved through the church's particularity, by being the church. This distinction between the church and the world is not metaphysical, but is rather an orientation towards God; "Some have not yet believed."[169] Hauerwas says that the distance of the church from the world is also not self-righteousness, as the church is also always under the judgment of the kingdom. The church also has needs to remember "how deeply our lives remain held to and by the world."[170] While the church is not morally superior to the world, Hauerwas stresses that it must embrace its distinctiveness in order to be faithful to God's story, which calls the church to be in service to the Kingdom.[171] While the church itself is not the kingdom, Hauerwas writes that the goal of church is to provide a foretaste of the kingdom. "In the church the narrative of God is lived in a way that makes the kingdom visible."[172] Hauerwas does allow that the kingdom can be recognized beyond the church, since the church "does not posses Christ" but still, he emphasizes the church as the place that trains us in the ability to recognize Christ both in and outside the church.[173] Again, the church's

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[168] Herman Paul, "Against Secularization in the Church," 24.

[169] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 102. See also *Hauerwas Reader*, 375 for how this distinction is not ontological. Hauerwas cites Yoder in both of these texts.

[170] Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 102.

[171] Ibid., 102. Yoder has also pointed to how Judaism is a positive witness to the church.

[172] Hauerwas, *Hauerwas Reader*, 373.

[173] Ibid., 372.

task is "not to make the world the kingdom, but to be faithful to the kingdom by showing to the world a community of peace."[174]

In Hauerwas' understanding the particularity of the story of God is what matters, and in his view this particularity requires a distinction between the church and the world. Only through this distance can the church can serve the world by being a community of peace, an alternative to the world's violence. However, one wonders if this distinction to easily slips into an idealism of the church, ignoring the churches own imperfections and failures.

Theoretical and Theological Critiques

Hauerwas' provocative ecclesiology has drawn devoted fans and intense critics. Many of Hauerwas' critics have taken issue with the way that he construes the church as separate from the rest of society in a way that risks sectarianism and as well as political cynicism and withdrawal from public political life.[175] Russell Reno has argued that many of the critiques of Hauerwas stem from his rebellion against liberal theology's main strategy of reconciling Christianity with "modern secular forms of life." In contrast, Hauwerwas has proposed a robust church that emphasizes both distance and eccentricity.

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[174] Ibid., 379.

175 James Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University," in *Moral Discernment in the Christian Life: Essays in Theological Ethics*, ed. James M. Gustafson, Theodoor Adriaan Boer, Paul E. Capetz. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 142-154. Jeffrey Stout has a sustained critique of Hauerwas' influence on Christian political involvement. See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 150. See also Stout and Hauerwas' discussion in "Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout's Democracy and Tradition" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* Volume 78, no 2 (June 2010), 413-448.

[176] "What liberal Protestantism imagined as a problem to be solved—the existentially painful gap between traditional Christian forms of life and the exigencies of modern existence—is transformed by Hauerwas into the solution to a larger problem: the power of American culture to absorb us."[177]

In other words, Hauerwas' church is more at a distance from American culture then the more theological term of "world." This distance has, in part, to do with his performative methodology. Critical of theology as Christian apologetics or explanation of beliefs and doctrines, Hauerwas aims to "display the character of Christian convictions rather than explaining or translating them."[178] Hauerwas praises Barth in this regard, when he says that Barth could not say what he was trying to do without disrupting what he was trying to accomplish.[179] In a similar way, Hauwerwas is trying to speak a distinctive peaceable church into being.

However, as I have noted at key points above, Hauerwas' ecclesiology of distance results is an idealism that is difficult to reconcile with the reality of actual Christian communities. While one role of ecclesiology may be to provide an ideal that the church can live up to, Hauerwas' church idealism seems to ignore real difference and contestation within the church. It also masks the way in which the church itself is implicated in sin. Hauerwas certainly knows the church is not perfect, saying, "I am not

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176 Russell R. Reno "Stanley Hauerwas and the Liberal Protestant Project," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 324. Reno agrues that Hauerwas himself operates at a distance, advocating for tradition and community from outside of a particular tradition or community.

177 Ibid.

178 Jennifer A. Herdt, "Hauerwas Among the Virtues," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40.2 (2012): 220.

179 Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 184.

unaware of the highly compromised nature of the church. I am, after all, a Methodist."[180] However, he does not construct an ecclesiology that helps churches contend with or confess the ways in which they are compromised. This, I think, detracts from Hauerwas' overall project of a peaceable church.

Distancing that Avoids Diversity and Conflict

Hauerwas' distancing of church from the wider society emphasizes a unified church while ignoring diversity and even failure within church life. Nicholas Healy has argued that Hauerwas' view of church "cannot make sense – theological as well as theoretical sense – of those within the church who are not the kind of Christians whom Hauerwas wants us to be."[181] That is, for Hauerwas' church to fulfill its mission it must form exceptional disciples. This is rather different than the membership of most congregations, which might include a few saints, but mostly "admirers, hangers-on, and those barely there."[182] Even further, drawing on accounts of ethnographic studies of congregations, Healy emphasizes how individual members variously negotiate and interpret church traditions to construct a Christianity that feels authentic to them, leading to an internal diversity within each congregation. This contrasts with Hauerwas' reliance on MacIntyre's "tradition of inquiry" where individuals are formed within one tradition without much variation.[183]

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180 Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 5.

[181] Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eardmans, 2014), 16.

[182] Ibid., 79.

[183] Ibid., 93.

Hauerwas' church at a distance also emphasizes agreement and continuity in the tradition, and eclipses contestation within the church itself. Similar to Healy, Kathryn Tanner has critiqued Hauerwas' reliance on MacIntyre for his understanding of Christian practices. Tanner argues that those who want to construe Christianity as a separate culture are relying on a modern understanding of culture. Tanner notes that modern anthropology promoted an understanding of culture as constructed by yet determinative of collective human behavior. Modern culture helped define the boundary between one society and another and accounted for diversity among groups, but not within groups. A modern understanding of culture emphasized shared agreement, "a culture is evidently what every member of the group more or less shares."[184]

Tanner draws on postmodern anthropology to show how the church is more fragmented and plural then an understanding of modern culture would allow. Rather then a static shared agreement of cultural practices, postmodern notions of culture argued that meaning is constantly being contested and renegotiated. "Culture never appears as a whole for the participants in it," Tanner notes.[185] Since culture is not a whole it does not require the agreement of individual members to hold it together or to keep civil order. Rather, culture is produces variously by a "multitextured network of relations."[186] Therefore postmodern anthropology has become increasingly interested in how cultural meaning is not only constructed by elites but is also "produced in non-linguistic and

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[184] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 25-27.

[185] Ibid., 42.

[186] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

nondiscursive modes" such as social and economic practices, the body, or popular culture.[187]

Hauerwas' emphasis on the cohesive tradition of Christian practices eclipses contestation within Christianity both presently and historically. Christian practices like communion, prayer and forgiveness are not held together by unified agreement by rather are constantly being negotiated and reinterpreted both by theologians and church officials as well as by Christian practitioners. Tanner specifically argues that Hauerwas and other postliberals misunderstand theology as "theoretical reflection on material social practices." As such, they construe the role of theology as simply describing Christian practices and beliefs, offering critiques where practices "deviate from 'the' logic or grammar of the faith."[188] Almost speaking directly to Hauerwas and MacIntyre, she says that while some practices, *like playing chess*, might require certain coordinated action, there is no good reason to think that Christian practices hang together like the rules of a chess game. Rather, within a postmodern understanding of culture, Christian practices appear more partial and fragmented.

Further, theology itself is a material social practice "specializing in meaning production."[189] Beyond the theoretical argument, Tanner expresses that there is no good theological reason to assert the insularity of Christian practices since God can work through ambiguity and disagreement as well.[190] To assert otherwise, she says, "is to be

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[187] Ibid., 6.

[188] Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda For Theology,* 72-74.

[189] Ibid.

190 Ibid.

less than fully cognizant of human fallibility before a finally unapproachable Truth that is God's alone."[191] In the next chapter, I will explicate how Tanner's theory of practice draws from postmodern anthropological understandings of culture to form a more plastic church, flexible both to being shaped by God, as Hauerwas emphasizes, but also shaped by culture.

Distancing That Eclipses Sin

I also worry that Hauerwas' distinctive church privileges unity and agreement in a way that masks the church's struggles and sin. This is especially true regarding sexism, racism, and homophobia. Hauerwas certainly is aware of and mourns the church's sins. On divisions in class and race he writes, "the first concern of any Christian social ethic must be with the fellowship of the church."[192] Hauerwas, however, has not further developed fellowship as a theme, or addressed these particular divisions within the church. In fact, during the period of time that liberal theology has produced work directly critiquing the church on sexism and racism, Hauerwas has maintained his argument that liberal theology has capitulated to liberalism's ideals of freedom and justice and relinquished its Christian particularity.[193]

This approach is evident in critiques of how Hauerwas' addresses sexism. Gloria Albrecht argues that Hauerwas's use of dualisms such as church and world promotes a

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191 Tanner, "Theological Reflection and Christian Practice," 231.

192 Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 103-105.

[193] Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013?). Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

unity that masks the church's violence against women and other marginalized groups.[194] Others have defended Hauerwas' record. For example, Debra Dean Murphy uses Hauerwas's own argument against liberalism to critique Albrecht. Murphy argues that Albrecht is not making a Christian theological argument but rather is promoting a "pluralist ideology which assumes the universal availability of a discourse that is, in reality, highly specific to Western, liberal, capitalist modes of thought: the `values' of freedom, equality, and Justice."[195] Murphy points to Hauerwas' record on promoting nonviolence while acknowledging that he may need to be more specific about what kind of nonviolent practices are called for in the face of different kinds of violence including institutional violence, economic violence, and domestic violence.[196] However, I find that the focus on liberalism distracts from the more specific point of how Christian practices, and the theologies that interpret them, are part of a larger system of power. As Tanner has argued, struggles over meaning are intimately connected to struggles over power.[197] In a similar way, Jeffery Stout has found Hauerwas to be "insensitive to a range of vices that his form of traditionalism fosters" especially related to marginalized groups.[198]

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[194] Gloria Albrecht, *The Character of Our Communities: Toward an Ethic of Liberation for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

[195] Debra Dean Murphy. "Community, Character, and Gender: Women and the Work of Stanley Hauerwas." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 3 (January 1, 2002): 341.

[196] Ibid. 345. See also, Linda Woodhead, `Can Women Love Stanley Hauerwas?: Pursuing an Embodied Theology', in *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 161-188.

[197] Ibid., 47. Although Bourdieu does not theorize as much about the possibility of cultural transformation, he clearly sees the point of his own intellectual work as the public exposure of masked interests, thus opening the possibility for "altering existing social arrangements." Swartz, *Culture and Power,* 10.

[198] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 150.

Hauerwas's ecclesiology also avoids the sins of white supremacy and racism, if not also sexism. Hauerwas has emphasized how the church witness through example, and not through fixing the world. However, this emphasis avoids how the church is itself implicated in deep injustices in the world. On this point James Logan writes, "Hauerwas does not call for Christian participation in the management of a society in which 'peaceable' Christians have aided and abetted the brutal oppression of others."[199] Logan specifically criticizes Hauerwas for his separating his own story of being raised in segregated white schools and churches in Texas from the story of the oppression of black people. "It is one and the same social story, albeit experienced and interpreted from very different perspectives*."*[200]

Further, Hauerwas envisions the church as witnessing to God's story while remaining largely silent on how the institutional church has upheld, through its theology and Christian practice, white supremacy and perpetuated anti-black racism. In fact, to ignore this is to maintain the privileges of white superiority and to further the deeply oppressive racism of the church. Churches must be self-critical of they way that they are implicated in stories of violence.[201] Clearly, Hauerwas' church as a community of peace has self-reflexive work to do in further telling the story of God as a people of God who aspire towards "a life together."[202]

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[199] James Samuel Logan, "Liberalism, Race, and Stanley Hauerwas," *Cross Currents* 55, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 530.

[200] Ibid, 526.

[201] Traci C. West also develops a theory of how racist rituals of white superiority are ritualized in Christian worship in white churches. See Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 122-128.

202 Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 371.

Distancing That Limits God's Grace

Theologically, one might worry that Hauerwas' ecclesiology of distance limits God's grace. In his argument against Hauerwas, Logan emphasizes the free movement of God's grace both in the church and in wider society. "God's grace works against the story of racism and other complex alienations that divide individuals, families, communities, churches, society, and the world."[203] Healy also worries that Hauerwas has underdeveloped the ability of the Holy Spirit to work apart from the church, or the means by which God's grace is active when the church fails in its mission.[204] The Holy Spirit works both within and outside of the institution of the church, perhaps even working in and through processes to call the church to account, as James Logan notes in the case of the church's white supremacy.

Another risk is that the church's practices, what the church does, becomes more of a focus than that to which the church is supposed to point. Nicholas Healy writes that Hauerwas risks confusing "the objective component of witness, that to which one witnesses….with the subjective component, the form of witness."[205] The practices that shape a holy church become the end rather then the means. Making a similar point, Ted Smith argues that Hauerwas' ecclesiology misunderstands the church as constitutive *of* the gospel, rather then constituted *by* the Gospel.[206] That is, the witness of the church to

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203 Logan, 531.

204 Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, 122-124.

[205] Nicholas M. Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Vol 5 No 3 (Nov. 2003): 287-308, 300.

[206] Ted A. Smith, "Redeeming Critique: Resignations to the Cultural Turn in Christian Theology and Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 24, 2 (2004): 89-113.

the world is only possible in and through the witness of God to the church. More of an emphasis on the dependence of the church on grace may help to counterbalance this tendency in Hauerwas' ecclesiology.

Resonance with Anti-Queer Christian Rhetoric

The various modes of distancing in Hauerwas' ecclesiology have resonance with anti-queer Christian Rhetoric. As I argued in the introduction, a resonance does not mean that Hauerwas' ecclesiology must have a direct impact on queer bodies and lives. Rather, resonances between theologies and other cultural practices work together to form an assemblage that becomes a powerful "resonance machine" contributing to patterns of discrimination or patters of liberation.[207] Below I'll connect some of the ways in which Hauerwas' methods of distancing may have an unintentional resonance with anti-queer Christian rhetoric.

First, Hauerwas' ecclesiology distances itself from and criticizes American culture and advocates for Christianity to become comfortable as a minority. For Hauerwas' this distancing allows the church to proclaim and develop itself as a peaceful community in contrast to the world's violence. However, the church and world contrast is also used as the rhetorical frame for anti-queer Christian arguments which frame a division between a "homosexual agenda" and Christians. As Mark Jordan has said, "The dichotomy was not invented by the controversies, but it has shown itself perfectly adapted to them. Some partisans on both sides find it immensely useful to pretend that on

[207] William E. Connolly, Capitalism and Christianity, American Style, (Duke University Press, 2008), 39.

one can be both queer and Christian."[208] As Jordan points out, one way that this false dichotomy is perpetuated in when anti-queer arguments claim Christianity as justification "as if those grounds were settled." These claims obscure centuries of debates among Christians on numerous topics, not the least of which are sex and marriage.[209] Yet, Hauerwas's ecclesiology of distance fits directly with this rhetorical dichotomy. As I will point out below, his theory depicts practices as undisputed aspects of a Christianity that is separate from the wider culture. Even further, Hauerwas' encouragement for American Christianity to claim its minority status has also been used as a rhetorical tool of anti-queer Christian rhetoric. Anti-queer Christians claim that they are persecuted as a religious minority by the secular state when required to accommodate queer people under equality laws. This is both part of a larger political strategy of the religious right, but also is practiced piecemeal by individual Christians. Two examples include a bakery in Gresham, Oregon that refused to sell a wedding cake to a lesbian couple, and a county clerk in Kentucky who refused to issue marriage licenses after the US Supreme Court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage.[210] Below I will further explicate Hauerwas' view on two Christain practices that have resonance with anti-queer rhetoric.

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[208] Mark Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

[209] Ibid.

210 Casey Parks, "Christian Bakers Take Fight Over Same-Sex Wedding Cake to Oregon Appeals Court," *The Oregonian*, March 2, 2017, http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2017/03/sweet_cakes_appeal.html Aaron and Melissa Klein claim both free speech as artists and a religious exemption from Oregon's Equality Act. Kim Davis spent five days in jail for contempt of court. See Associated Press, "Kentucky Bows to Clerk Kim Davis and Changes Marriage License Rules," *La Times*, December 23, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-kentucky-kim-davis-20151223-story.html

Hauerwas' practices focus on producing virtuous Christian character, but ignore the ways in which practices are contested or harmful. A particular practice that relates to queer Christians is the practice of confession and forgiveness. Although Hauerwas does not himself name homosexuality as a sin, his understanding of the practice of forgiveness has resonance with churches that demand a confession of sin from queer Christians. In the practice of forgiveness, Hauerwas encourages Christians to confront one another's sin because of their shared history of forgiveness and repentance.[211] For Hauerwas, part of the practice of forgiveness may also include exclusion of individual members if they do not admit to needing forgiveness. "To act like one not needing forgiveness is to act against the very basis of this community as a community of peacemaking."[212] Further, he has also defined the role of the church as a disciplining community in order to restore a relationship between the offending member and the community. Such discipline might include "the use of persuasion, warning, constraint, and even punishment in an effort to bring the offender to truthfulness, penitence, and reconciliation" in the practices of forgiveness and restoration.[213]

While it may be important to retain the practices as a way for churches to be in active discernment regarding the Christian conduct of their members. However, these practices are not inherently virtuous but contested, and often applied in ways that uphold the privilege of those with power while unjustly impacting the vulnerable. For example, aspects of exclusion and discipline in relationship to the practices of forgiveness have

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211 Hauerwas, *Hauerwas Reader*, 323.

212 Ibid.

213 Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 19.

been used against queer Christians. One specific example occurred in the United Methodist when pastor, Rev. Ed Johnson, denied a gay man membership for his failure to repent of homosexuality. Rev. Jonhson's legal council, Rev. Tom Thomas, wrote, "The first vow in taking membership in the United Methodist Church is to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness and repent of your sins. The pastor felt that the person was not able to take that vow, because he did not honestly acknowledge that his practice was a sin."[214] A high court of the UMC later supported Rev. Johnson's decision; even though bishops later also affirmed that "homosexuality is not a barrier to membership in the United Methodist Church."[215] There is no clarity in Hauerwas' theory of practice of how practices might simultaneously form virtuous character for some but have be exclusionary and harmful to others.

Another contested practice is marriage. Hauerwas has argued for the virtuous character forming qualities of Christian marriage, but again in a way that ignores contestation over practices. Although Hauerwas mentions queer Christians in two short essays on marriage, his argument positions queer Christians as beneficial to strengthening the *heterosexual* practice of marriage while ignoring the way that heterosexual marriage has been used to discriminate against and abuse queer Christians. Hauerwas argues that the debate on homosexuality detracts from the real enemy, capitalism, which frames bodies as a locus of consumption and encourages sexual choices without long-term

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214 Alan Cooperman, "Case of Gay Worshiper in Va. Splits Methodists" *Washington Post*, October 28, 2005. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/27/AR2005102702148.html

215 Tim Tanton, "United Methodist Bishops Affirm Church Membership to All," *Bishops Statements*, November 3, 2005, http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/united-methodist-bishops-affirm-church-membership-open-to-all

commitments.[216] To this end, "the church's commitment to maintain marriage as lifelong monogamous fidelity may well prove to be one of the most powerful tactics we have to resist capitalism."[217] In response, he argues that the Church should articulate an understanding of marriage as procreative and heterosexual. However, his friendship with gay Christians leads him to conclude that there should also be exceptions to this rule, such as the marriage of those past child-bearing age, and faithful monogamous relationships between gay people. In fact, Hauerwas praises gay relationships as a helpful way to improve and clarify the Christian promise and practice of "lifelong monogamous fidelity."[218]

Here Hauerwas's treatment of practices is occasional, he does not write a whole book on forgiveness or on Christian marriage. However, his essays repeat the pattern of centering Christian practices as a continuous and uncontested tradition to which individual Christians conform. In the case of marriage, this formation is explicitly heterosexual. Although Hauerwas is making room for queer Christians in these two short essays, queer Christians are only an exception to an already established rule. Gay relationships, however, on not just a means to an end in Hauerwas' schema of strengthening Christian practices.

Hauerwas' tactics on marriage resonate with the larger cultural rhetoric, which divides the debate between secular culture and Christians, eclipsing queer Christians from view. As Mark Jordan has argued, there is no one from "the outside" imposing queer

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[216] Hauerwas, *A Better Hope*, 48-50. *Stanley Hauerwas, Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).106-107.

[217] Ibid., 51.

[218] Ibid., 120.

marriage on the church, rather it is queer Christians who are asking for their relationships to be blessed.[219] These requests "are made by Christians of their own leads. Often they come from individuals or couples who have been active parishioners or congregants and long-time students of the Scriptures. Members of the vestry or the choir, directors of religious education and deacons… They come carrying their Bibles." Jordan argues that the dichotomous terms "Christian Marriage" and "Queer Relationship" are not as much part of a tradition of Christianity as much as they are part of the "chatter" of contemporary debate, even propaganda. If one thinks longer about Christian marriage and same-sex unions one will indeed find Christian traditions that condemn same-sex unions, but "it is equally true to say that Christian traditions have been highly suspicious of heterosexual marriage." It took many centuries for Christian theologians to get heterosexual marriage on an equal playing field with celibacy, a history that is forgotten in the current debates.[220] Further, Jordan's point is that these debates are neither new or are they secular, they are part of a discussion among Christians about "how to read the Bible, how to interpret tradition, and how to live faithfully in the present." Another way to say this, is that these are debates about how to *be* the church, as Hauerwas puts it. Thus, "be the church" cannot be a solution to the debate, but rather describes one aspect of a very long conversation.

Disrupting the Story

Hauerwas has emphasized a practicing church, not centered on abstracted beliefs but on living out the story of God through the practices of community. These practices

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[219] Mark Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions,* 13.

[220] Ibid.

shape the people of God into a holy people. On the path towards sanctification, the church can truly witness to the world and be the place "that the story of God is enacted, told, and heard."[221] Hauerwas has emphasized that in order to show the world its unfaithfulness, the church must become something. Specifically Hauerwas constructs the church as a peaceable kingdom, capable of revealing an alternative to the world's violence. Hauerwas writes, "Every polity is ultimately tested by the kind of people it develops."[222]

Certainly church cannot be everything, but in constructing a church that is "something," Hauerwas' minimizes the fact that the "something" of the church can bolster some while harming others. Specifically, the rhetoric of distance creates an insular Christianity unable to account for its own internal diversity. Neither does it account for the ways in which practices uphold power and privilege and continue to mask those who are oppressed and made vulnerable by the church's racist, sexist, and homophobic story and practices. Further, Hauerwas' sets the church apart so that church appears to have something to give the world but nothing to learn from it. This minimizes the church's need to look outside of itself for the activity of the Holy Spirit. Last, Hauerwas' ecclesiology has resonance with the Christian rhetoric against queer people, particularly the rhetoric that emphasizes Christian identity as a minority persecuted by the liberal state for requiring tolerance of queer people.

Hauerwas has said that one way that the church becomes a place that tells the story of God is by recognizing the saints. And yet, recognizing saints is difficult "because

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221 Hauerwas, *Christian Existance Today*, 101.

222 Quoted in Healy, Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction, 33.

they remind us how unfaithful we have been to the story that has formed us." That is, the saint makes evident the contrast between what the church is, and what it could be. The saint points to the way in which the church has not *been* the church and points to the way in which the church might faithfully *become* the church. By faithfulness I mean an external turning towards God and others. To this end, I suggest that queer Christians are a presence that requires a shift. Their presence in church, and the grace they extend the church by their presence, points the way towards the church's further faithfulness. In one of only a few essays that refer to queer Christians, Hauerwas admits that queer Christians contribute to the church community. "They are there in a manner that would make us less if they were not there. I take that to be a stubborn theological reality that cries out for thought."[223] I insist that this stubborn theological reality is a stubborn ecclesiological reality. That is, the presence of queer Christians requires a reimagining of both our theoretical and our theological concepts of community. As I will demonstrate in further chapters, an ecclesiology of plasticity and an emphasis on the becoming of the church are faithful ways to think about how the church is being transformed into the body of Christ.

[223] Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them*, 108.

Chapter 3

Becoming Church: Kathryn Tanner's Ecclesiology of Plasticity

"At the end of the day it is our bodies that are to be remade into Christ's body" Kathryn Tanner[224]

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV)

Introduction

In building towards an ecclesiology able to hold dialogue and disagreement within community, Kathryn Tanner's work is crucial. Tanner has written about the church but has not completed a formal ecclesiology. I clarify Tanner's ecclesiological intentions by connecting her theological anthropology with her theory of Christian practice. Tanner's anthropology of plasticity posits that what makes humans unique is not specific human characteristics but a kind of formlessness, opening the possibility that human life can be formed by God. Tanner applies this same logic to her theory of practice, drawn from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, where Christian life is not defined by particular practices, but by the practice of borrowing and transforming cultural practices in response to being formed by God.

At the intersection of Tanner's anthropology and theory of practice is an ecclesiology of plasticity where Christians form the shape of the body of Christ in and for the world. Tanner's ecclesiology does not describe "the church" as one continuous tradition as much as it describes church always in the process of becoming. For Tanner, becoming church emphasizes an ongoing dialogue between God's gift-giving and the individual and church response through the distribution of God's gifts. In this way,

[224] Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 50.

Tanner insists on Christian community as a community of argument with a focus on discernment of how to continue becoming God-ward. Christian practices, albeit unarticulated, are the outgrowth of church communities wrestling with how to respond to God's gift-giving, particularly the gift of grace. This grace can, I will argue, be dubbed queer in the sense that it disrupts clear boundaries of church and calls the church towards further plasticity and becoming. I conclude by articulating how Tanner's ecclesiology has a specific impact on political implications in its resistance to Christian rhetoric against queer life and its resonance with queer theory and politics.

Overview of Tanner's Ecclesiology and Contrast to Stanley Hauerwas

I suggested in chapter two that Hauerwas' ecclesiology describes church as practicing the story of God. Hauerwas aims to emphasize embodiment over belief, and community over individualism. In doing so, however, he constructs an ecclesiology that hinges on the church being a continuous tradition with common practices, ignoring ongoing community debate and contestation. Rhetorically, he also constructs a church that is necessarily separate from the broader culture in order to be a witness. As outlined in chapter two, Tanner critiques Hauerwas and other postliberal understandings of the Christian community that are construed as separate from the larger culture.[225]

In contrast, Tanner's ecclesiology emphasizes both the ambiguous practices of church and the inevitability of conflict and contestation in church as it continues to evolve. Church for Tanner is a "a genuine community of argument."[226] For Tanner,

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[225] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theolo*gy (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 25-27. See also Tanner, "Theological Reflection and Christian Practice," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 231-242.

[226] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 123.

Christians enact church through the borrowing of cultural practices from the broader culture, transformed in dialogue and debate about what it means to be a disciple here and now.[227] She understands church not as a single entity separate from culture, but as "a hybrid formation" constantly transforming itself in response to being formed by God.[228] Both Hauerwas and Tanner emphasize Christian life lived in and through the Christian practices.[229] The difference is that for Hauerwas church practices are fully formed and distinctive, while Tanner's practices are more open ended leading to an understanding of Christian identity that is always evolving.

Important to this work is a parallel I trace in Tanner's thinking between the plasticity of human nature and the plasticity of the church community. For Tanner, God is the giver of all that we have, God's is overflowing with gifts and the world is created, exists, and continues because of God's giving. Gift is a key theme in Tanner's anthropology, as humanity recognizes and receives God's gift through participation in Christ.[230] This participation is made possible by the plasticity of human nature, a plasticity that mirrors God's own incomprehensibility. The strategy of plasticity is repeated in Tanner's theory of Christian practice where no one practice or set of practices defines Christian community. Rather, community is realized is the "messy, ambiguous,

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[227] Ibid., 124-128, 151-155.

[228] Ibid., 114.

[229] Although, Tanner's Christian is taken up into Christ and Hauerwas' Christian is taken up into God's story, a difference that is certainly metaphysically significant if not practically.

[230] See Brandon Lee Morgan, "Gift, grace, and ecclesial time in the theology of Kathryn Tanner." *Perspectives In Religious Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 49-64. Morgan gives an overview of how Tanner relates to the philosophical and theological debate about the gift economy. For a critique of Tanner's use of gift, see Sarah Coakley, "Why gift? Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner." *Scottish Journal Of Theology* 61, no. 2 (2008): 224.

and porous character of the effort to live Christianly."[231] Tanner's plasticity of individuals and church preserves God's freedom in giving gifts to the world, particularly the gift of grace. The mission of the church is to both receive the gifts of God, and give them away. The body of Christ emerges in the world as it mirrors God's relationship to the world as gift-giver. This is similar to Hauerwas in that church's tell the story of God through their actions as a community. However, rather then describing practices and the church community as already established, Tanner's community is being continually shaped in discernment of gifts and how to give them.

As I describe Tanner's ecclesiology further, I identify and explore two aspects of her theology, which I name "recognizing gift" and "practicing gift." I bring these together into an ecclesiology of plasticity shaped by what I name as a "queer grace."

Recognizing Gift

God's Gift Giving

Tanner's notion of human and communal plasticity is her most important contribution to my queer ecclesiology project. However, it is important to first explore Tanner's understanding of God, as both her anthropology and her ecclesiology emerge from her Trinitarianism. For Tanner, the Triune God represents perfected gift giving. This giving is communicated within the Trinity, as each Person of the Trinity is "communicated totally or completely to the other two, without…loss or depletion."[232]

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[231] Katheryn Tanner, "Shifts in Theology Over the Last Quarter Century," *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 39-44.

[232] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 39. Here, Tanner uses an image of three overlapping suns mutually illuminating one another as a way of describing the Trinity.

The gift giving of God flows out of the Triune life, overflowing into the world. God relates to the world as "the source and securer of good gifts."[233] Thus, the world is created, exists, and continues because of God's giving.

Tanner outlines several characteristics which illuminate the nature of God's giving. The gifts of God are given unconditionally, not because they are deserved. "God gives us all that we are as creatures and therefore prior to these gifts of created goods, there is nothing to us to obligate God's giving them."[234] Gifts are also given without an expectation of reciprocation. In fact, they can't be returned both because God has all that God needs in abundance, and anything we might want to return to God is also already a gift we received ourselves.[235] Further, God's giving gifts does not diminish God. Instead, "God's gifts to the creature are a kind of love-filled non-purposive or gratuitous Trinitarian overflow."[236]

Humanity and God come together in and through Christ. In one sense all of creation, including humanity, exists because of the overflowing gift-giving of God. However, humans specifically receive their gifts from God through participation in Christ, Christ being the ultimate gift. Tanner uses the language of 'assumption' in describing how human life is caught up in the life of the Triune God.[237] In Christ, God shares God's

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[233] Ibid., 67.

[234] Ibid., 84

[235] Ibid., 85.

[236] Ibid., 68.

[237] Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 198-206; Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, 78-95.

life with humanity, and invites humanity into this fullness of life.[238] This is made possible in and through the incarnation, where Jesus assumed humanity into the divine life. Our lives, then, "are to be formed according to the mode of Jesus' own life, the mode of the second Person of the Trinity, and thereby incorporated within the workings *ad extra* of the Trinity."[239] Being incorporated into the life of God sets us on a path to live a life in union with God in much the way that Jesus did.[240]

Our life lived in union with God is, of course, marked by sin, so our lives reflect "far less than Christ's own life did from the start."[241] While sin is the reality of our lives, Tanner does not understand the cross to be a punishment for sin; it is not a way of paying God back for a debt owed.[242] In fact, Tanner deemphasizes the cross as salvific and focuses on the saving quality of the incarnation instead.[243] Christ saves humanity by making humanity divine through his living as human. In the same way that Jesus' humanity is taken up and assumed by the Word, we are assumed by Christ.[244] If the cross saves at all, what it saves us from is the "debt economy" of the world, which is canceled "by God's own economy of grace."[245] We participate in sin out of our free will, and sin

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[238] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, vii.

[239] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, 67.

[240] Ibid., 74.

[241] Ibid., 71.

[242] Ibid., 87-88. "The humanity of Jesus is not blessed by God, in a way that extends the blessing of God to all of us, because Jesus is obedient; Jesus is obedient because his humanity is already blessed."

[243] Ibid., 87.

[244] Ibid., 72.

[245] Ibid., 88.

being those actions that “interrupt the reception and distribution of Gods gifts.” In recognizing God’s gift, we begin to form our lives in the shape of Christ’s own life, and thus into the Triune life of God.[246] Tanner writes, "Assumption by Christ sets us the hard task of leading lives actively reformed, purified, and elevated beyond their otherwise sinful ways."[247]

Although union with Christ is always our reality (justification), humans begin to flourish when we recognize this gift and find its meaning in our lives.[248] Thus, for Tanner, the Christian life is one lived “eccentrically,” focused on and welcoming God’s help as we seek to live out God’s mission of gift giving (sanctification).[249] Living a life of gift giving is not our obligation, or a fulfillment of a debt, but "is simply the only way of life appropriate to the way things are.”[250] We cannot offer anything to God in return, except our willingness to receive more, which God grants in God’s extravagant gift-giving way.[251]

Plasticity

Where Tanner’s anthropology becomes important for this work is in her articulation of why it is even possible for us to be formed in response to God’s gift, in particular the gift of God’s self to us. For Tanner, our formation is possible because we

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[246] Ibid., 86 and 58.

[247] Ibid., 71.

[248] Ibid., 86.

[249] Ibid., 75.

[250] Ibid., 85. Tanner cites Karl Barth here, see Ethics, 404,462.

[251] Ibid., 87.

are created in God's image. Tanner criticizes those theological treatments of human nature in which human nature is described as "well defined and neatly bounded characteristics that both make humans like God and clearly distinguish them from other creatures."[252] Rather then identifying the 'image of God' as related to characteristics inherent in humanity, Tanner follows the early church in her understanding that humans are created to 'image' the divinity of Christ.[253] "In Christ, human nature, in short, is itself re-fashioned in the divine image so as to become humanly perfect."[254] Tanner describes this participation in the image of God in two ways, which she calls a weak and a strong sense. In the weak sense, we are made in the image of God because we are "creatures of God."[255] In the strong sense, we are made in the image of God by participating in what we are not. Human beings image God not by themselves, but by "drawing near to the divine image, so near as to become one with it."[256] In this sense Tanner describes humanity as "living off God."[257] This strong participation is achieved by the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit within each person. [258]

The possibility of 'living off God' is actualized in a plasticity of humans. For Tanner, humans have a unique capacity "both to receive the presence of the divine image

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[252] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 1

[253] Ibid.

[254] Ibid., 17.

[255] Ibid., 8.

[256] Ibid., 13.

[257] Ibid., 16,

[258] Ibid., 36.

and to be transformed thereby in imitation of it."[259] This capacity for transformation is made possible by humanity's formlessness. Tanner again begins with God; "humans imitate God's own incomprehensibility" in their nature.[260] However, God's incomprehensibility and humanity's incomprehensibility are different. God is "unlimited through inclusiveness, through unbounded fullness" while humanity is "unlimited through lack."[261] This is not necessarily negative; it simply means that humans are something of a "blank slate" in their ability to "make an object of themselves in projects of self-fashioning and refashioning."[262] It also helps to explain the reason why humans can shape their lives in very sinful ways and yet remain continually open to being formed by God. Tanner writes, "we are an incomprehensible image of the incomprehensible both in those natural capacities that allow us to be radically re-formed, and in what we become in relation to the true image, the Word incarnate."[263]

Tanner identifies four dimensions of the plasticity that allows for humanity to be made in the image of God through participation in Christ. First, humanity has an expansive openness, a human nature that can make room for the presence of God.[264] Second, humans have a "changeable nature" and a certain "malleability" which allows them to be formed towards God.[265] Third, humans are "susceptible to radical

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[259] Ibid., 37.

[260] Ibid., 53.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Ibid., 46.

[263] Ibid., 55

[264] Ibid., 39.

[265] Ibid.

transformation beyond the limits of their own created nature."[266] Fourth, humans are also susceptible to being shaped by outside forces and pressures.[267] This explains the wide variety of human behavior, both the ways that humans can be evil, but also how they are open to transformation. Tanner writes, "humans, at their best, reflect the goodness of God by a self-conscious, and freely chosen active alignment of what they are with God's gift-giving to them. In that specific way, they are the image of God"[268] As David P. Henreckson has said, Tanner's anthropology connects human flourishing with a dependence on divine power. "To pursue the goods of life, we require the Word and Spirit. This realization gives us both a very low and a very high anthropology; we are destitute without Christ; yet also, in [Christ], even as human beings, we have everything."[269]

One critique of Tanner is that her scheme doesn't/ account for temporality in the "exchange between gift, recognition and response."[270] While she is strong on the universality of all of humanity receiving the gift of Godself, the temporal reception of this gift lacks specificity. That is, in Tanner's thought it's difficult to sort out when, where, and how an individual recognizes the gift of God's grace, and to what practical effect. Some of this critique is addressed when Tanner explains how Jesus' life is sanctified by the Holy Spirit throughout his life, and not as a one-time event of the

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[266] Ibid., 40.

[267] Ibid., 41.

[268] Ibid., 70. *Christ the Key*, 41.

269 David P. Henreckson, "Possessing Heaven in Our Head: A Reformed Reading of Incarnational Ascent in Kathryn Tanner," *Journal Of Reformed Theology* 4, no. 3 (2010): 171-184.

270 Morgan, "Gift, Grace, and Ecclesial Time," 49-64, pg. 50.

incarnation or the cross. In this way, the incarnation itself unfolds or "becomes" as Jesus becoming divine throughout his life.[271] A similar divinization might be said of the path of an individual human life. I would add that I read Tanner's theology as having a mystical quality. The mystical moment of recognition that all of life is lived within God is subsequently lived out in a more deliberate way, framed by the impulse to graciously give back what one has received from God.

In conclusion, Tanner's anthropology began by framing God's relationship to humanity as one of gift giving. Finding ourselves caught up in God, we recognize God's gifts and strive to shape our life in response to these gifts. What makes life in God possible is the plastic nature of humanity. The ability to conform to the image Christ is made possible by the presence of Christ within each person, and our plasticity to form to this presence. Tanner even says that overcoming sin is "becoming plastic once again," or returning to our divine nature.[272] Humanity's incomprehensibility is thus fulfilled by the incomprehensibility of God, an ability to become plastic again.

The movement of becoming plastic is important to my work in its disruption of the more self-assured ecclesiology that Hauerwas constructs via church practices. While the ancient practices of the church do have power to form people to tell God's story, these same practices can also abuse the vulnerable and preserve oppressive systems. In emphasizing the incomprehensibility of God and the movement of humanity towards this incomprehensibility, Tanner focuses ecclesiology towards a more continual discernment. What once might be understood as a practice that tells God's story might later be

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271 Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 28.

272 Ibid., 87.

discerned as a sinful practice. The call to become plastic again emphasizes a humble individual and communal encounter before God.

Individuals in Community

One is left wondering how individuals come together as community in Tanner's anthropology. While Tanner's anthropology centers on the Trinity, she argues that relations between humans should not be understood as the same as relations between Persons of the Trinity. In her estimation, the co-inherence of the three-in-one in the godhead is not possible in human relationships because of human individuality.[273] Rather, for Tanner, human community is made possible through our being united with one another in Christ. This community is universal, in theory. Tanner writes that "we are united with one another, we form a community, the church, as we are united in Christ through the power of the Spirit. This is to be a universal community in that the whole world is at least prospectively united with Christ in and through the Triune God's saving intentions for the whole world."[274] In the weak sense humans are united in Christ in their being created by God as gifts. In a strong sense as we recognize these gifts, we conform our lives to Christ, taking on God's gift-giving mission for ourselves. So it is because of gift giving that community is formed and finds its mission within the world.

Practicing Gift

Before turning to a fuller explication of Tanner's ecclesiology I explore plasticity of human community in her theory of practice. I connect Tanner's anthropology of

[273] Ibid., 82.

[274] Ibid., 83.

plasticity with her theory of Christian practice, which includes, but is not limited to, practices of the church. Different than Hauerwas, Tanner's theory of Christian practices offers a more general description of Christian culture as embedded in and responsive to the larger culture.

Postmodern Culture

Tanner argues that Christian culture cannot be identified as a separate society or even by continuities in belief and action.[275] Instead, Tanner situates all Christian practice as a form of cultural production embedded in the larger cultural context. [276] Drawing on postmodern anthropology, Tanner understands cultural production as multiple and always contested. Shared elements of culture are often vague, and are more likely common habits and expressions, rather then well articulated principals or belief systems. So while theologians (or church authorities) might point to consensus in Christian beliefs and practices within a particular tradition, more likely there are a number of contested meanings for a single theological concept, such as 'God' or 'love of neighbor' and the connected practices, like prayer and programs of mercy. This postmodern view of culture disrupts the supposed separateness or uniqueness of Christian practice by revealing both the permeable boundaries between cultures as well as the fluid, loosely connected, and constantly contested practices and meanings within a culture.[277] Still, cultural forms can not be made to mean just anything; there are interpretations and applications of specific cultural forms already in play. However, because cultural forms are constantly being

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[275] Ibid., 96.

[276] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 96.

[277] Ibid, 51.

reproduced, novelty and innovation are also always at work.[278]

Christian Practices

Tanner uses French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in her thinking about Christian practices. For Bourdieu, practices are the intersection of habitus enacted in a field.[279] A field is a "space of action" enabling the "production, circulation, and consumption of various forms of cultural as well as material resources."[280] Religion, or specifically Christianity, is a field where Christian culture is produced. Bourdieu describes cultural production in the field as playing a game. In order to operate and succeed in the field one agrees to the rules of the game so that they become second nature. The "feel for the game" is internalized, like a skilled soccer player who masterfully maneuvers the ball. Habitus is the embodiment of the rules, through which the body becomes "a socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world."[281] Thus, for Bourdieu, a theory of practice cannot consist of simply following prescribed rules. In fact, an awareness of habitus most likely inhibits the execution of the embodied technique, like thinking about tying your shoe. Rather, Christian social practice is habitus enacted in a field, or an embodied skillful execution of the 'game' of Christianity.

The embodied game of Christianity is not a bounded cultural group. "Christian

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[278] Ibid, 52.

[279] David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 41.

[280] Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 40.

[281] Bourdieu, "Is a Disinterested Act Possible?" in *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 81.

social practices form a voluntary association within a wider society, rather than a separate society in and of themselves."[282] Christians play the game of Christianity by borrowing materials, meanings, and practices from the wider culture and using them differently. That is, "Christian practices are always the practices of others made odd."[283] Take, for example, communal eating; the cultural practice of sharing a meal is borrowed from the wider cultured and reinterpreted in the practice of the Eucharist. Tanner argues that this has been the case throughout Christian history; "Christian social practices are never themselves anything other than the transformation of what is outside; if, that is, Christian identity is established from the beginning through the use of borrowed materials."[284] This does not deny that Christianity is a "whole way of life"; it is just a way of life made from the practices of the wider society.[285] "The distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at* it. Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural process occurring at the boundary, processes that construct a distinctive identity for Christian social practices through the distinctive use of cultural materials shared with others."[286] That is, distinctiveness is always being produced, contested, and negotiated.

Moreover, Christian practices remain mostly "underdeveloped, ambiguous, or

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[282] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 96.

[283] Ibid. 113. Tanner cites Kierkegaard here.

[284] Ibid., 114.

[285] Ibid., 103.

[286] Ibid, 115.

many-sided" hybrids of material brought in from elsewhere.[287] There are, indeed, certain practices that remain basic to Christian identity, such as reading scripture, reciting creeds, taking communion, and being baptized. Indeed, in and through these practices Christians believe "the Word of God is heard…[and] the Word of God is present."[288] However, the presence of God is not limited to these practices. Further, while Christians refer back to these practices in order to discern how to lead their life, the expressed meaning of such practices is ambiguous, underdeveloped, and constantly changing. For example, marriage is a practice of the wider culture. In a contemporary context, the meaning of Christian marriage as a practice is under negotiation as gay and lesbian people marry both in city halls and in churches. In fact, where theology really gets its feet, Tanner argues, is in the need to negotiate particular disputed meaning about practices.[289] Everyday theological reflection arises for the Christian community when there is a question about or a disconnect between belief and practice.[290] Theology is itself a cultural practice that helps a community articulate the ambiguity of their practice in such a way as to clarify, contest, or redirect the community's direction.[291]

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[287] Kathryn Tanner, "Theological Reflection and Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 230.

288 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 153.

289 Ibid., 70.

290 Theories, 82.

[291] Kathryn Tanner, "How my mind has changed: Christian Claims," *Christian Century*, Feb 23, 2010, 41. For Tanner the cultural turn also redefines theological success. Since Christian social practice is voluntary, and theological ideas circulate freely, "the ability of specialized theology to influence everyday Christian life is therefore dependent on the consent of regular rank-and-file Christians." By this estimation, Christian theology must engage with popular theology, what Christians actually already say and do. Theology is credible not because of the use of internal norms or sources but because it makes practical and plausible proposals about life that are also "aesthetically pleasing" and "satisfying of basic human needs" 41.

Christian Particularity and Identity

The question remains how Christianity coheres for Tanner. She works towards this in several ways using various tools from postmodern cultural analysis. One way is by understanding Christian life not by *what* cultural material is used but by *how* it is used. That is, Christianity is a matter of "style," or the patterned way a practice is performed to the exclusion of other possible ways.[292] However, even the style of Christianity cannot be characterized by one common way material is used, or even by resemblances or reoccurring features of use. Yet another way to understand how Christianity coheres is to say that Christians are united in the *why* of Christian practice.[293] That is, Christian practices are "united in a task," of answering the question of who Jesus was and what difference he makes to Christian lives now.[294] Tanner also names the task as "refer[ring] all things to God, and in that way to revitalize them."[295] Thus, for Tanner, what unites Christians as Christians has nothing to do with something inherent in practices or beliefs or the continuity of the tradition. Rather, Christians are united by "a concern for true discipleship" and "a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out."[296]

Connecting this with Tanner's theological claims, Christians are united in and through their assumption in Christ. This ecclesiology centered in God allows for the church to be what Brad East has called "an undefensive presence," a church released

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[292] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 144-145, see also chapter 3.

[293] Ibid, 145.

[294] Ibid., 153.

[295] Ibid., 145.

[296] Ibid., 152-153.

from the anxiety of securing its place in the wider society.[297] Secure in God, Christians are able to discern how to best give the gifts of God away. With this Godward focus for Christian practices, Tanner maintains her value of plasticity. Humans are plastic in order to become formed by God in Christ. Christian communal practices are also plastic, so the community must continue to debate and discern how Christian life is lived through practices and how they point to God. There is an important opacity to Tanner's plasticity in practices. Tanner says "what holds all different practices together as a unity is nothing internal to the practices themselves; the center that holds them all together should remain….empty."[298] That practices are empty however is only to say that they do not have a unity in and of themselves, but rather what holds them together is Christ.

One reason for this emphasis on plasticity in practices is to preserve the freedom of God to work in new ways. Because of free grace, we cannot understand Christian practices as simply repetition of what has gone before.[299] Similar to her argument about the postmodern culture, tradition is always contested. "As a matter of historical record, there are always various and conflicting arguments, even in a single situation, about how [interpretation] is to be done. This is because the history of interpretation, like the history of culture generally is…a history of struggle."[300] Any perceived continuity in practices, such as the practice of not ordaining women, or the practice of heterosexual marriage, is

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[297] Brad East. "An Undefensive Presence: The Mission and Identity of the Church in Kathryn Tanner and John Howard Yoder," *Scottish Journal Of Theology* 68, no. 3 (2015): 327-344.

[298] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 135. Here Tanner is surprisingly citing Karl Barth, see *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 864-71.

[299] Ibid., 137.

[300] Ibid., 135.

potentially a human interpretation of how to arrange the material of the tradition. "God does not direct the efforts of Christian discipleship in different times and places through some feature of Christian practice that itself controls the movements of Christian history." To say otherwise is to "illegitimately elevate" something human in the place of God.[301] God is free to work in new ways, ways outside of humanity's perspective of what is continuous about tradition.[302] Tanner emphasizes the importance of being disciples of God, rather then "disciple of God's witnesses."[303]

Human fallibility and the freedom of God point toward an unexpected grace. "Although the God Christians hope to obey is one and the same, the results of this common effort are not one in any obvious way, because of the fallibility and sin of these human efforts at discipleship and because of the freedom of God to ask the unexpected of people in new times and places." Therefore, in being God-ward, Christians should come to *expect* that God's grace is often unexpected. Tanner points to such unexpectedness as in Jesus' death and resurrection and in God's welcome of Gentiles into the covenant with the people of Israel. [304] Tanner writes that in the story of God and God's people there is the consistence of God's grace "but it is a consistency that…appears only in retrospect."[305] The consistency of unexpected free grace is one that "cannot rule out the

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[301] Ibid., 136.

[302] Ibid., 135. Of course, Tanner is not without her critics. Theologian John Thiel takes on Tanner's denial of any real continuity to the Christian tradition. Thiel argues that one can trace a continuity in the Christian claim for unity of tradition. Thiel describes this as a "retrospective" tradition because it is proclaimed now by an affirmation of the faithful. See John E. Thiel, "The Analogy of Tradition: Method and Theological Judgment," *Theological Studies* 66/2 (2005), 358-80.

[303] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 138.

[304] Ibid., 136.

[305] Ibid.

outrageous novelty to come, novelty that breaks previous human assumptions about the way it all hangs together."[306]

Community of Argument

At times, it is hard to determine how, in Tanner's thinking, Christian culture, Christian practices, and the church intersect. Tanner is more explicit when she names Christian community a "community of argument." She says that usually Christians frame their conflict as coming from the outside or from not doing Christianity "right." In her postmodern framing of Christian culture, however, she identifies conflict as inherent in an open and evolving system. "Conflict may arise through the simple effort of all parties to follow the directives of Christian culture."[307] There are certain positions, however, that she says contribute to the ability for the "community of argument" to be together. The community of argument is sustained when all parties "believe that the project of interpretation, which leading a Christian way of life requires, is properly pursued by way of an extended argument with everyone else engaged in the same project."[308] Christians might not agree on results, but Christian unity can be sustained through a commitment to be together in the dialogue. "Through the ongoing practice of choosing dialogue over monologue, there emerges a strengthening of the commitment to search for the meaning of Christian discipleship together."[309] Contestation over cultural production and meaning within the Christian field is simply an indication of a continued investment in a Christian

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[306] Ibid.

[307] Ibid., 159.

[308] Ibid., 154.

[309] Ibid., 175.

way of life.

It is interesting that Tanner names a Christian community of argument and Christian life in the singular. Tanner seems to insist on a Christian catholicity, a unity in Christian community in and through a multiplicity of partially articulate practices, in and through argument. Here, we can see that Tanner is herself producing Christian culture as she is describing it. Her analysis aims to both unmask argument and disagreement in Christian community and assert that argument and disagreement are not the end of community but inherent to it. The community evolves through the freedom of God to bring about the unexpected and the novel and the ability of the community to discern and adapt to God's call. Plasticity seems to be what is required in keeping open to God's direction. In the struggle for the inclusion of queer Christians in churches requires both the ability to be comfortable with communal disagreement and an ability to further discern God leading in new directions. We'll see a continuation of this commitment to plasticity in the next section where Tanner's ecclesiology is further oriented towards reflecting God in the unconditional distribution of gifts.[310]

Tanner's Ecclesiology of Plasticity

In defining Tanner's ecclesiology, it is difficult to reconcile her more theological emphasis on God's gift giving and assumption in Christ with her more pragmatic emphasis on the postmodern culture of Christianity. How, for example, does our unity in Christ connect to the church as a "community of argument?" I argue that Tanner's ecclesiology is found in a synthesis of both individual and communal plasticity. Plasticity

[310] Ibid., 83.

allows for the individual and the community to take on the shape of Christ and Christ's life by becoming ministers of God's gift to others.[311] In addition, I will show how plasticity is interconnected with another key feature of Tanner's theology, grace. Grace is the connector of the individual to community, and the focus of community mission. Grace is both the gift received and the gift given. Finally, grace is important for this work in the way that it breaks the usual boundaries of church and allows for more open and constant discernment of communal life together. I call this disruptive spirit of grace "queer."

Individual Plasticity

Recall a key feature of Tanner's theology is being caught up in the Trinitarian life through Christ. The ability to receive this gift of God's self is made possible by our plasticity. Tanner writes that, "all living creatures become themselves…by taking in things from outside themselves."[312] Becoming ourselves is made possible by plasticity, to form and be formed by our surroundings. We might become in any number of ways, but there is a specific kind of becoming that is becoming in God. Christ took on the shape of humanity and formed it to God. In Christ, we become "a new creation."[313] In Christ, we become plastic as God is plastic. Tanner writes, "Aided by God to become what we are not, we might one day come to imitate in our humanity the inclusiveness of the absolute being and goodness of God."[314] On the one hand, the life we live in the Trinity seems

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[311] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 59.

[312] *Christ the Key*, 41.

313 2 Corinthians 5:17 NRSV

[314] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 55.

atemporal. Humanity is always and already caught up in the Triune life in Christ. However, there is also a temporal dimension of plasticity that is ongoing throughout the Christian life, like a spiritual discipline. This mirrors Tanner's rather unique description of how Jesus' perfects human nature throughout his life, and finally in his death.[315] In a similar way, our lives conform to Christ over time. Tanner provides less examples of how this takes place in the Christian life. However, I think she leaves this purposefully vague, focusing rather on the importance of discernment of how to imitate Christ in giving God's gifts to others.[316] To be Christian is to constantly be returning one's life to God to "become plastic" again. In doing so we are remade in God's image, shown to us in the life of Jesus.

Communal Plasticity

An emphasis on becoming plastic as a spiritual discipline helps connect individual and communal plasticity. Tanner's Trinitarian theology provides an important foundation here. As already outlined above, there is a unity of individuals in God, "Christ is what unifies us in our relations with the Father, as both a gift to us and as an example for us."[317] In this way humanity is formed into one body.[318] Just as the shape of our individual lives takes on the shape of Jesus' life, so the shape of church takes on the

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[315] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 59.

[316] Morgan, "Gift, Grace, and Ecclesial Time," 49-64. Lee criticizes Tanner for her lack of temporal definition, suggesting that church, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist, is a place where the temporal gift of grace can be received and responded to. Tanner does develop the Eucharist as an example in Christ the Key, however she has also said that she does not want worship to eclipse service, as both are critical for living in response to God's gifts. See K. Tanner, "The Church and Action For the World: A Response to Amy Pauw," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (2004): 228-232.

[317] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 239

[318] Ibid., 238.

shape of the body of Christ. Living in God and receiving God's gifts, the church becomes "a community of mutual fulfillment" marked by patterns of unconditional giving and non-competition in gift giving.[319] Tanner views the community of argument not as a counterbalance to the community of mutual fulfillment; but rather a community of argument is what a community of fulfillment looks like under sin.[320] This only further emphasizes the importance of the church's continued discernment, and even disagreement, of how to live its corporate life in response to God's gifts. Just as with an individual Christian life, churches must return to plasticity in continuing to become the Body of Christ.

Grace and Plasticity

This discussion about both the individual and communal shape of a life lived in God frames Tanner's understanding of who we are and what we can be. A key link in the gap between our present reality and what we hope to become is grace. Grace is connected to plasticity in that the gift of grace allows for plasticity beyond our human capabilities. Human nature has an "expansive openness" which God opens even further. The "presence of the divine is what makes the human capacities of reason and will expand, but for this to happen these human capacities must be expandable, open-ended."[321] There is nothing we need to do to earn grace; the transformation of Christian life is simply recognizing the gift of grace given in Christ.[322] In this recognition

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[319] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 90-95.

[320] Kathryn Tanner, "The Church and Action For the World: A Response to Amy Pauw," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (2004), 232.

[321] Tanner, *Christ the Key* , 38.

[322] Ibid., 101.

Christians understand they share in all the gifts of God through Christ and orient their lives God-ward, as Christ did.[323] This recognition also brings about humility, and a posture of humility keeps us spiritually grounded in gratitude for all that we have in God.[324]

Further, grace connects what is otherwise unconnected. Humans are connected to divinity through Christ, and thus are connected to God. Since humans are not God, they are formed in the image of God by becoming what they are not. Grace is that which aids this process, "humans have divinity 'as a matter of grace.' "[325] This grace is realized through Christ who perfected the shape of humanity through the incarnation. Tanner writes, "Christ is the highest possible form in which the good of God's own life can be given to us." Our becoming divine in Christ is further complicated by sin, which Tanner defines as the "loss of what we are not," the loss of divinity.[326] The transition from sin to a graced state is made possible through the "attachment of humanity to the divine in Christ."[327] Humanity becomes caught up into the trinity through Christ, given the gift of "a new form of natural connection with what is life-giving and nourishing by nature to counter our second nature of sin."[328]

Finally, returning to the church, the gift of grace through Christ forms both our

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[323] Ibid., 87.

[324] Ibid., 77-79.

[325] Ibid., 59.

[326] Ibid., 65-68. Sin is not natural but that which corrupts the environment in which we live. "Sin forces us…to make do with external inputs to which our nature does not suit us."

[327] Ibid., 73.

[328] Ibid., 75.

individual and communal mission in the world. Our whole life is "an offering to God, a form of God-directed service" in which we mirror God's radical gift-giving by passing on God's gifts.[329] God's own movement outside of the Triune community to share gifts with those who are not-God sets up a model of gift giving that Christians should emulate. This is true for individual Christian lives, but especially for the church. The mission of the church is to give the gifts of God away. For Tanner, the church is turned, like God, towards the world. The church's "primary concern is with action in the world, with cosmos-wide transformation of the broadest possible socio-economic and political sort. That kind of transformation is what the church is *for*."[330]

Queer Grace

One of the reasons that the church is called to plasticity is because of the universality of grace. "The unconditionality of God's giving implies the universal distribution of God's gifts."[331] In further explaining the church's gift giving mission, I playfully call grace queer. This is because grace "breaks all the usual boundaries of closed communities" including the community we call church.[332] Tanner and Hauerwas are similar in their thrust to point the church towards the broader culture, but Hauerwas does this through having the church becoming an example for the broader culture from a distance. In contrast, Tanner points the church towards service and mission outside of itself. If the church is organized as a community of mutual fulfillment, it is so that the

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[329] Ibid., 206.

[330] Tanner, "The Church and Action For the World," 228-232, 228.

[331] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 88.

[332] Ibid.

whole of creation can be organized in this way too.[333] The free grace that Christians witness to is not something to which Christians have an exclusive claim. Different from Hauerwas' ecclesiology, where the world's salvation is dependent on the church's sanctification, Tanner's boundary between church and world is more permeable, as my review of her theory of Christian practices has already demonstrated.

This permeability of church and world extends to sin, and to God's activity outside the church. Tanner writes of Christians, "If anything enables God's grace to find [Christians], it is what they share with those outside the church." [334] God's grace is for Christians not because they are Christian but because they are human beings. Tanner resists the idea that the church relates to the world only for the purpose of bringing the world inside of the church.[335] For Tanner, the church should be oriented outward, indicated by "the eccentric, God-ward character of one's acts."[336] Here, Tanner refers to eccentricity as turned outward towards God. However, the meaning of eccentric as odd connects us back to queer life. Sara Ahmed's queer orientation is useful here. Orienting towards queer is also conceptualized as a turning, turning towards those "whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange and out of place."[337] To orient towards queer is to be disoriented, but it is also to intentionally reorient in ways that open new possibilities

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[333] Tanner, "The Church and Action For the World," 229.

[334] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 101.

[335] Ibid.

[336] Tanner, "The Church and Action For the World," 230.

[337] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 179.

and new futures.[338] Similarly, in orienting towards God, Tanner's church is also oriented outwards towards the broader culture. The Holy Spirit is at work there, beyond the boundaries of church and Christian witness.[339] Queer grace is calling churches to reorient itself, crossing boundaries as insulated communities and turning towards the world in service. Disorientation, then, might be understood as a disruption that moves the church to become plastic again, reorienting its practices towards God and towards those understood as vulnerable, both within and outside of the church.

Another dimension of queer grace is how it operates as a simultaneous ground and a destabilizing force. First, there is a grounding effect to Tanner's emphasis on all of creation receiving God's gifts, and specifically humanity being caught up in the Triune life through Christ. As Brad East has pointed out, by being centered in God the church can be "undefenseive" church, letting go of its anxiety about its own existence, its disagreements, and its relationship to the world. This grounding or centering for church, however, is what allows Tanner to emphasize church as partial, unfinished, discerning, and always undergoing change. Grounded in God, church can be ready for the unexpected, ready to follow the Spirit towards its further becoming. For Tanner, dialogue and discernment are features of community life. And yet in her postmodern cultural analysis, change for churches is not achieved through an agreement by the majority of Christians to a new normative way of interpreting Christian life. Rather, change comes about when a majority of Christians begin to make similar "ad hoc judgments" that a

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[338] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology, 20-21.*

[339] Ibid.

certain practice no longer fits, or now fits with Christian beliefs and practices.[340] Elsewhere Tanner has underscored her belief that Holy Spirit works slowly though institutions, helping to "loosen up the usual sources of religious authority by increasing their flexibility, tolerance for diversity of opinion, and openness to change."[341] It is important to stress that not all openness or deviation is necessarily life affirming. However, what Tanner emphasizes is communal discernment. Since church is oriented towards God, church can also be disoriented by the Holy Spirit at work in the institution. Conflict does not always require defense of tradition, but can be an opportunity to reorient towards others, and to reinterpret practices in light of an unexpected Spirit calling the church to become "a new creation." Queer grace does not describe one church practice in particular but, like becoming plastic, invites humble reflection on practices. Queer grace is necessary as churches continue to discern the gifts of queer Christians in their communities.

Ecclesial Politics and Queer Life

The politics of Tanner's ecclesiology are made clear by tracing resonances between her theology and embodied politics, specifically queer life. Resonances between theologies and other cultural practices work together to form assemblages. These assemblages are made up of micro-actions, often disparate, that coalesce as resonance

[340] *Theories of Culture*, 154. Tanner uses the example of enslaving people as a practice that became incompatible with Christianity.

[341] Tanner, *Christ the Key, 291.*

machines, contributing to patterns of oppression or liberation.[342] With Hauerwas' ecclesiology I suggested that resonances can be unintentional, but still caught up in larger structures of oppression. Resonances can also be intentional. Theologians and church communities can articulate theologies and practices that resonate with larger movements of liberation and freedom.

Connolly's concept of resonance fits well with Tanner's view that theology is a Christian practice that is shaped by and shapes Christian culture.[343] In Tanner's theological practice, she advocates borrowing widely from the Christian tradition.[344] This, she beliefs, "helps the theologian move beyond a narrow contemporary sense of the possible."[345] Utilizing the whole of the tradition, even those aspects of the tradition which have been contested or which are long neglected, allows the theologian to see "the variety of ways that Christianity can be put together and pulled apart for novel rearrangements, and at what real human costs."[346] Her referral here to the costs of particular theological construction demonstrates her concern for the political impact of theological practice. Drawing on the tradition in one way or another can have life and death consequences. Tanner is interested in "Christianity as a worldview capable of orienting social action."[347]

Drawing on an example from her own work, Tanner has utilized her noncompetitive

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[342] William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 39.

[343] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 67 and 84.

[344] Ibid.

[345] Kathryn Tanner, "Shifts in Theology Over The Last Quarter Century" *Modern Theology* 26:1 January 2010, 42.

[346] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, xvii.

[347] Tanner, "How my mind has changed," 43.

economy of grace as an intervention into the competitive economy of money, which operates on scarcity. For Tanner, this comparison "suggests[s] that a Christian economy has everything to do with the material dimensions of life—with the economic more narrowly construed."[348] In her comparison of money and grace, "Grace has everything to do with money because in grace money finds its greatest challenger and most obstreperous critic."[349] This example demonstrates how Tanner hopes that theology might contribute to Christian practices that have a material impact.

Following this, I argue that Tanner's ecclesiology of plasticity has resonance with liberation for queer bodies and lives in several ways. One resonance is her emphasis on how God's grace can operate outside of the consistency of the tradition, in ways that are novel and unexpected. The consistency of God is "beyond the control of human expectation, it is a consistency, moreover, that cannot rule out rather outrageous novelty to come, novelty that breaks previous human assumptions about the way it all hangs together."[350] Consistency of the tradition is one of the arguments made *against* queer inclusion. But, in Tanner's schema, its human consistency that is tentative. God's consistency might be said to be queer, in that it disrupts human consistency, calling individuals and the church to become plastic again.

Another resonance is Tanner insistence that the whole point of the church community receiving gifts is to humbly give them away. This is how we continue to be formed in God's image, by also becoming a gift giver. Tanner argues that it is wrong, therefore, for

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[348] Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 29.

[349] Ibid., 29.

[350] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 136.

the church to refuse to pass on gifts. "God's gift giving is not owed to creatures but if those gifts are being given unconditionally by God to all in need, creatures are in fact owed the goods of God by those ministering such benefits."[351] The church should not withhold gifts. Tanner does not list the gifts of God that the church is giving, but considering Tanner's understanding of grace, the gifts of welcome and forgiveness come to mind. In relationship to queer Christians, it is against the church's mission to actively refuse grace to queer people in the form of the Eucharist, baptism, church membership or other exclusions. Tanner asserts that God more often partners with those on the margins of their own communities. "God offers the gift of Godself in partnership with a people by choosing those who are deprived and enslaved strangers within the community in which they reside."[352] As Tanner's ecclesiology allow us to clarify how queer people in church have recognized God's grace and are discerning how to live a God-ward life. If queer Christians are instructive to the church, it is in calling the church back to its gift-giving mission.

A Queer Plastic Body

If Tanner's ecclesiology is not fully formed, this is in part because of her insistence on plasticity. Humans are plastic so that they can welcome God's gift of grace, being caught up into Trinitarian life through Christ. In Christ, human formlessness is not a lack but a fulfillment in God, the ability to become plastic again. In response, humans form their life in God, specifically by mirroring God's gift giving. Christian practices are

[351] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 89.

[352] Ibid.

also plastic, remaining partial and open ended in order to evolve as Christians discern the unexpected and free movement of God in the world. Christian community is made in mutual fulfillment of gift giving, and in continued discernment, even argument, about how to give God's gifts away. Finally, grace is both the gift given to individuals and community, and the mission of living a Godward life. I call grace queer in the way it disrupts the boundaries around church, destabilizing church and calling it to become plastic again, in order to give more fully embody its gift-giving mission.

A final resonance between Tanner and queer bodies and queer life points us towards the next chapter. I find in Tanner's methodology, in particular her strategy of plasticity, specific overlap with queer theory, practice, and politics. Tanner's emphasis on plasticity connects with queer scholarship on destabilizing subjectivity and reveals the politics of identity. Judith Butler in particular has argued that subjectivity, including gender and sex, is a cultural script written on the body, one continually constructed through performative gestures and other bodily acts.[353] A central goal of her landmark text, *Gender Trouble,* was to demonstrate "how non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis."[354] Certain queer practices, Butler argues, serve to reveal this instability. Butler classically uses the example of how drag performance reveals heterosexual assumptions. The "replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but rather, as

[353] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 173.

[354] Ibid., xi.

copy is to copy."[355] In fact, we are all doing drag when we are doing gender (or as Butler says elsewhere, when gender does us).[356] In this way, Butler argues for a plasticity in gender by showing how queer performativity disrupts the normative categories of sex and gender.[357]

There is a parallel between Judith Butler's theory of gender and Tanner's theological method. Tanner understands theological construction as a rhetorical strategy. By uniquely combining aspects of the tradition in surprising and yet convincing ways, "theology has the ability to propose the unexpected, to shock and startle."[358] Tanner has also said, in public forums, that she sometimes views her theological work as 'ironic.' [359] Her methodology of drawing on the tradition, especially ancient patristic work, appears to parallel orthodox theology in its faithfulness to the tradition. However, by coming to very different conclusions using the same resources, Tanner's work exposes the specific politics that underlie the orthodox project, often politics that preserve and police the tradition to include certain bodies and exclude others. When Tanner says she is doing theology ironically, I argue that she is doing theology in the same way that the drag king is doing gender. For Tanner, theology has no original; there is no inherent stability in the tradition to ground one's claims. Similar to any Christian practice, all theology is a copy of a copy. Tanner's theological "performance" unmasks theology, which masquerades as

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[355] Ibid., 41.

[356] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

[357] For Butler the performance of drag is itself ambiguous, but hold the possibility of transformative transgression of the norm of a seemingly more stable gender.

[358] Tanner, "How my mind has changed," 43.

[359] Kathryn Tanner, Comments at Transdisciplinary Theology Conference, Drew University, October 2, 2010.

"real." This instability, partiality, and plasticity at the center of theology allows for an opening for theology to be done otherwise.

I argue that the same can be said of the church Body. Tanner's emphasis on the plasticity of church helps to expose the supposed stability of church as one continuous and uncontested tradition to which Christians conform their life. Further, the presence of queer Christians in church ruptures this orthodoxy of the tradition, calling the church to become a plastic Body once again. Queer Christians in church are not asking for inclusion as much as they are pointing to the possibility of ecclesiological transformation. I will take this up in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Queer Church: Failure and Becoming in the Body of Christ

"For the body is not one member, but many." 1 Corinthians 12:14 (NRSV)

"The point is not to queer the tradition, but to let its orientation queer us." Gerard Loughlin[360]

In this chapter I turn towards a queer ecclesiology focusing less on what bodies do with each other sexually and more on how we are one body together. As anticipated in 1 Corinthians, this queer ecclesiology asks how church can be both one body and a multitude of members. How does our understanding of the body as a whole function to include some members and exclude others? This work theorizes the one body because of, and not despite, continued discernment, dialogue and disagreements. As articulated in chapter one, I seek an ecclesiology that does not focus on one right way to think about church but rather breaks open the concept of church to find more imaginative and playful ways for the church to continue to become.[361]

To queer ecclesiology is also to offer a queer church. In other words, "queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact."[362] Rather, to queer ecclesiology is to find what is queer in church, specifically queer Christians, in order to point towards what church is and what it might become. That is, how we

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[360] Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction: The End of Sex" *Queer Theology. Rethinking the Western Body*, edited by Gerard Loughlin, 1-34. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, 12.

[361] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36.

[362] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 4. I recast Ahmed's phrase "to queer phenomenology is also to offer a queer phenomenology."

understand church, how church is thought, is transformed by queer experience in church and by the practices of queer life. Embodied queer life has already been disruptive to the ecclesial body, a disruption has the potential to transform social norms of self and community. Thus, I explore three queer practices to uncover the deeper meaning of what queer lives offer the church. These include *graceful recognition, prophetic performativity, and faithful failure*. Queer Christians invite the practices of recognition as a way for Christians to practice God's grace with one another. The performative presence of queer Christians disrupts the heteronormative logic of sameness as a unifying principal in understanding community. Queer failure invites church to divest from success in order to be faithful to its own becoming. By faithfulness I refer to a reorientation of communal life towards an incomprehensible but present God. In becoming plastic again, the Body engages in communal discernment about who churches are and who they can become.

Together, these transformative practices open a fresh possibility for becoming the body of Christ. In the previous chapter, I explored Tanner's understanding of the church as plastic, as flexible in being oriented God-ward and thus always forming and reforming. Tanner's ecclesiology posited a church that is always in the process of becoming. However, Tanner does not thoroughly engage Christian life together.[363] While Tanner's universal ecclesiology has all of humanity caught up in the Triune life through participation in Christ, we noted that she does not explicate how Christians negotiate church as a community of argument while moving towards the promise and possibility of church as community of mutual fulfillment. How is the gift of God's grace exchanged among Christians? How do Christians, in their differences, craft a life together as the

[363] Brad East. "An Undefensive Presence: The Mission and Identity of the Church in Kathryn Tanner and John Howard Yoder," *Scottish Journal Of Theology* 68, no. 3 (2015): 327-344.

body of Christ? I deepen Tanner's ecclesiology with queer theory, connecting Judith Butler's theory of the becoming subject with how Christian selves are formed and transformed together through baptismal vows. Further, Butler's performativity combined with Sara Ahmed's queer orientation interrupt the norm of community as a unified whole, specifically as Christians gather in the practice of communion. Both the practices of baptism and communion are woven together with stories from the everyday lives of queer Christians in church.[364]

Last, I suggest the practice of queer failure as a form a resistance against norms of success. If the body of Christ is always in the process of becoming, this invites church to continually repent of modes of perfection that stifle humility. The practice of queer failure returns churches to the Protestant confession of "reformed always reforming" and reminds church of the call to become plastic again in relationship to its neighbors, orienting towards those it has othered.[365] Queer failure as a practice also connects back to ecclesial politics. In a post-Christian context, church can become the body of Christ by reorienting towards Christ, which is to also be oriented towards "the great diversity of Christ's lovers," including queer Christians.[366] Through these three practices of graceful recognition, prophetic performativity and faithful failure, the church witnesses to God's

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[364] For another example of using the "texts" of lives in theology and ethics, see Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 144-179.

[365] Bush, Michael. 2008. "Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings." In *Calvinus sacrarum literarum interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, 285-299. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008. The full reformed phrase is interesting here "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi dei"* is translated as "The church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God."

[366] Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 5. Farley emphasizes that being oriented towards lovers of Christ is much different then "some tepid obligation to be inclusive," 5.

faithfulness in completing the good work that was started in us as church, the body of Christ.[367]

Graceful Recognition

In this first section I explore an understanding of the self as relational, and as known in and through community. I draw on Judith Butler's "relational ontology" to explore the queer practice I call *graceful recognition*. Butler's recognition is a relational call and response where we become ourselves through our call to the other for recognition and through the other's response. The queer practice of recognition in community helps articulate an ecclesiology where the church is faithful to changing and becoming in and through relational exchanges between people. I describe graceful recognition as a process of communal relationality whereby the community recognizes others both within and outside their community by holding open an account of the other, thus extending God's gift of grace to the other. But the opposite is also true, the other holds open an account of the community, and the community is transformed by this gift of grace. I use the example of the practice of Baptism as a practice transformed by graceful recognition understood as faithfulness to the promises and potentiality of God's grace active in communal becoming.

I develop graceful recognition as constitutive of church in order to call the church to reorient towards queer Christians, as well as others the church has othered. In doing so, I make a distinction between the creaturely other and God as divine other. Following Tanner, God's grace is a gift given to those who are not God. Tanner also draws on

[367] Philippians 1:6, NRSV

themes of recognition and reorientation in that, by this gracious gift, humans turn towards God and reorient their lives God-ward. Humanity is able to do this because of the saving power of the Triune God in Christ, specifically through the incarnation, where Christ takes up humanity into the divinity. Further, plasticity follows directly from this. Being in God, Christians and the church are able to image God's plasticity, thus remaining open and plastic to the creaturely other. In retaining divine otherness, I depart from Butler since Butler is not theorizing the divine. I do this to make a theological priority of the relational plasticity, the ability to becoming in and towards creaturely others.

Bulter's Recognition

Butler's ecstatic subjectivity draws on and reformulates Hegel's description of the moment of recognition that forms the subject. Following Hegel, Butler describes the self as constituted outside of itself, through relation to others. [368] In this ecstatic subjectivity the self relies on the other because it is dependent on the other for its constitution. For Butler, the self does not belong to itself; in fact it remains in a kind of self-unknowing, because it is in part constituted by what it cannot know.[369] The self realizes this radical dependency in the act of recognition where it is exposed to its own opacity, a sense of being other to oneself.[370] Butler calls this the "ontological primacy of relationality

[368] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) Butler dispels the notion that a self that is not "self-grounding" cannot be responsible for his or her actions. She agues the opposite, that a self-dependent on others and norms for its constitution actually creates the possibility for agency, an agency within certain boundaries.

[369] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 2009) 151.

[370] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 27. Butler writes "I am, as it were, always other to myself, and there is no final moment in which my return to myself takes place."

itself."[371] There is a parallel here in the ecstatic orientation of both Tanner and Bulter's self. Tanner's self, however, as explicated above, is oriented ecstatically towards and in God in order to be ecstatically oriented towards others.

Two points follow from Bulter's relational self. First, there is a self-awareness that takes place at the moment of recognition when the self realizes "the fact that we cannot exist without addressing the other and without being addressed by the other."[372] Second, the moment of awareness of my fundamental "sociality" also brings with it an awareness of my opacity to myself. The exchange of recognition reveals to me not only that I cannot go back to the self I was prior to the exchange but, more fundamentally, that I never was an independent "I" to begin with. Butler writes, "What is recognized about a self in the course of this exchange is that the self is the sort of being for whom staying inside itself proves impossible."[373] Butler claims that it is "precisely my own opacity to myself [which] occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others."[374]

For Butler the opacity of the self protects the exchange of recognition from appropriation.[375] This is true in part because the exchange of recognition between self and other is not enclosed in a dyadic relation but, rather, is dependent on norms. "The

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[371] Butler, *Undoing Gender,* 150.

[372] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 33.

[373] Ibid., 28.

[374] Ibid., 41. Butler acknowledges that she goes beyond Hegel on this point.

[375] Ibid., 27.

social dimension of normativity precedes and conditions any dyadic exchange."[376] The classic example of gender helps to explain this relationship. If I understand myself as a woman it is, in part, because others have 'recognized' me as a woman for my entire life. To understand myself as a woman I am dependent upon others' recognition of me as a woman. However everyone, myself as well as others who recognize me, utilize the norm of gender that inform and determine the norm of "woman" prior to my being recognized as such. Therefore, the "I" does not offer recognition to the other from its "private resources" but from the norms that are socially available.[377] The self becomes aware of its own opacity in the exchange of recognition. This opacity of the self is also related to the excess of the self. Butler explains this by way of narrative. Because I am constituted by others and by norms, which proceed me, I can never say everything that I am in my self-narrative. Further, I cannot explain or narrate my life fully because the discourse, the words I use to narrate, are not my life. My life goes on even as I narrate and I am unable to fully capture it.[378]

Butler finds an important ethical responsibility in the opacity and excess of the self as it causes her to approach her own identity and the identity of others with "humility and generosity alike."[379] Since we cannot fully narrate our own lives, we cannot expect others to fully capture their life in their account of themselves. By letting the question of

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[376] Ibid., 24. Neither does the exchange involve a collapsing of the you into the I. The "I" does not annihilate the other in the exchange of recognition. For Butler this would be impossible because, since the I is always outside itself, there is no I for the you to collapse into. See also Undoing Gender, 149.

[377] Butler, *Giving An Account of Oneself*, 26.

[378] Ibid., 36.

[379] Ibid., 42.

"Who are you?" remain open "we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give it."[380] We can give life to others by not foreclosing our account (or their account) of who they are. By leaving the question of being open in this way, Butler allows for the perpetual becoming of subjectivity. This becoming is made and remade in the act of recognition, an act that also enables the transformation of the self and the other.

Queer people know well the communal dynamic of recognition described by Butler. Many queer people can reference an experience of being able to recognize themselves when they were recognized by the queer community. This moment of recognition points to one's opacity to oneself in that it reveals one's dependence on communal recognition to make one's life "livable."[381] This is especially poignant for queer people who exist in a heteronormative society where the livability of queer people is not always recognize. An example of this surfaced after the Pulse Nightclub massacre of 49 queer people of color in June 2016. In grief, solidarity, and resistance, Queer people began to share online their first experiences of going to gay bars and clubs. The stories revealed vulnerable moment/ of how the self becomes in and through community. The New York Times interviewed several famous LGBT identified people and published their stories. Lea Delaria, for example, recalls being simultaneously surprised and confirmed in being called a "baby butch" when she went into a gay tavern to make a phone call. "I'll never forget it. I did one of those look-around takes, like, 'Oh, she's talking to me.' " Likewise, Carrie Brownstein speaks about discovering what kind of other selves are

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[380] Ibid., 43.

[381] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso 2004), xv.

possible in a Lesbian club. "Only away from the glare of homophobia could we experience malleability, a flexing of the self, a full rotation. Who knew there were 360 degrees?"[382] Brownstein's flexible self, known in community, connects with Tanner's movement of becoming plastic again. As Brownstein describes, when queer individuals are first seen by the queer community and they become recognizable to themselves, or the recognize the possibilities of what they might become.

The point of becoming "away from the glare of homophobia" highlights the difficulty of recognition when it pushes against social norms, as a lesbian request for recognition does. Although Butler is writing more abstractly about how recognition is constituted through relationality, she also stresses the particular way that recognition is at play in resisting and transforming norms. I will refer to this more explicitly in the next section. Here, Sara Ahmed's point is helpful as she describes becoming a lesbian as a process of "becoming reoriented," turning away from a compulsory heterosexuality.[383] Becoming reoriented is also to be disoriented in one's self and with the world as it was before.[384] Yet this disorienting state, which connects with Butler's opacity, also opens up possibilities of new futures. For queer people this is the possibility of becoming other then heterosexual; the queer community holds open this possibility.

Practicing Graceful Recognition in Community: Baptism

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[382] " 'My First Gay Bar': Rachedl Maddow, Andy Cohen, and Others Shared Their Coming-Out Stories" June 22, 2016 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/fashion/my-first-gay-bar-rosie-odonnell-rachel-maddow-alexander-wang-andy-cohen-share.html?_r=0

[383] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 21 and 84-87. Ahmed develops Adrienne Rich's term here.

[384] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 21.

We can apply Butler's concept of recognition to ecclesiology to understand of how the self becomes and is recognized in Christian community. Hauerwas' ecclesiology had this intuition in describing how the self is formed in community. However, Hauerwas' Christian is formed in a church that is dishonest about the unity of its practices. In Tanner's ecclesiology the self in Christian community is always becoming plastic, continually formed in relationship to being in Christ and oriented God-ward. Grace is the primary gift that Christians receive from God that enables the plasticity of the self. Here, I connect grace with recognition. The church community extends God's grace to the other by both recognizing the other and continuing to holding open an account of the other. The self does not come to the community fully formed, rather the question of "Who are you?" remains open as the self continues to become in community. By holding open an account of queer Christians, the church community gives life to the queer Christian by extending God's grace to her.

However, the self extends grace to the community as well. Church is constituted by a multitude of relationships and church continues to become in relation to the other. The church community's encounter with the other is a challenge to recognize its own opacity, to understand how dependent it is on the other for its continued becoming. By asking for recognition, queer Christians ask the church community to expand, and thus enable the church's further becoming.[385]

A helpful frame for understanding graceful recognition may be discerned in the ritual of Baptism. In baptism the church community recognizes the gift of grace in the life

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[385] Cheri DiNovo, *Queerying Evangelism: Growing a Community from the Outside In* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005). DiNovo develops a vision for her local church using the image of the queer stranger who teaches the church the truth of the gospel.

of a Christian. Baptism is not only an individual act, however, it is also a communal one. In the practice of baptism, the Christian community recognizes the person joining the community and promises to nurture that person and help them grow in their faith. The individual and communal promises made in baptism are promises to be faithful to discerning the becoming of the body of Christ and how God is calling both individuals and the community as a whole to be faithful to this becoming. Even more then a promise, Elizabeth Stuart writes that baptism represents an ontological shift, where the baptized become "ecclesial persons" characterized by a new communal subjectivity.[386] This communal subjectivity is not fixed, however, but is always in the process of becoming. In baptism the "not yet" of both the individual and the body of Christ is recognized. Stuart writes, "to be baptized is to be caught up in a kingdom that does not yet fully exist, that is in the process of becoming; it is to be caught up in the redemption of this world."[387]

If baptism is understood as a ritual of graceful recognition, an individual and communal promise to faithful becoming, then the exclusion of queer Christians from church is a broken baptismal promise.[388] Our baptismal identity, Stuart writes, "rests in being bound together with others not of our own choosing by an act of sheer grace."[389] With Tanner we are bound together with others not of our own choosing by being caught

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[386] Elisabeth Stuart, "Sacramental Flesh" *Queer Theology. Rethinking the Western Body*, edited by Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 65–75.

[387] Ibid., 68.

[388] Marilyn Bennett Alexander and James Preston, *We were baptized too: claiming God's grace for lesbians and gays*. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). Pamela Lightsey writes about the connection between the denial of baptism to enslaved Africans and the denial of Christian rituals to queer people. See Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 87

[389] Stuart, "Sacramental Flesh," 68.

up in God. We also are made subjects, and continue to become as selves by and through the gift of our relations with others. Graceful recognition mediates this process of becoming. To be ecclesial persons, to be church, is to gracefully hold open our account of one another. Another way to put this is that our baptismal promise is a promise of communal plasticity – a commitment to continue in our individual and communal becoming.

Queer Story of Graceful Recognition

As an example of a Christian community's practice of graceful recognition I turn to Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber's writing about a naming ceremony at her church, House for All Sinner's and Saints. Bolz-Weber writes about her parishioner, Mary, who was baptized as Christian as a child but had been excluded from her church community in college when she came out as a lesbian. Several years later, Mary came out as transgender taking the name Asher and identifying with male pronouns. For many years Asher did not dare enter a church. He feared that what the church of his birth said about him might be true -- that he was following the devil, that he was sinful and lost.[390] But when Asher came to House for All Sinners and Saints, he realized that he not only belonged there, but he belonged to God as God's beloved.[391]

House for All remained committed to the Christian baptismal vows made to Mary, even as Mary was becoming Asher. In marking this commitment, Bolz-Webber and Asher decided to hold a naming rite for Asher on Baptism of our Lord Sunday. Bolz-Webber writes, "Mary would become Asher in the midst of a liturgy where Jesus was

[390] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 136.

[391] Ibid.

named 'Son' and 'Beloved.'"[392] For Bolz-Weber the naming rite signified God's graceful recognition of all of humanity. She writes, "Identity. It's always God's first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God's own."[393] In the context of Christian community, on Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, the naming rite represented the community's graceful recognition of Mary becoming Asher. In doing so, the community also remains to its own becoming as the body of Christ. Their faithfulness is in discernment of how as community they need to become plastic again, questioning established habits and practices that insulate the community and protect power structures. Becoming plastic means reorienting the community towards both others and God.

Becoming a Plastic Body

Individuals, communities, and denominations on both sides of the divide lament how the "problem of sexuality" is tearing apart the church. However, queer Christians are already present in church at the baptismal font, in the pulpit, at the piano, around the communion table and in the pews. In their presence and practice within the church, queer Christians ask the church to be becoming plastic again by holding open an account of who queer Christians are and who they might becoming. This holding open of self is an invitation to a holding open of the whole community as it continues to become the body of Christ. The church community becomes plastic by recognizing itself as a body not with one member, but with many. Church is a body of bodies, a body of ecclesial persons gracefully recognizing one another, in continual becoming together. In this ecclesial

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[392] Ibid., 134.

[393] Ibid., 138-139.

vision, both queer Christians and church are evolving, becoming plastic again, by being reoriented towards God. This reorientation is directive, by witnessing to God both the individual and the church are becoming in response to God's revelation. This witness has material fruits, especially pertaining to how Christians relate with one another. As Wendy Farley writes, "The way we treat one another is the sign of how we dwell in the divine presence. It is not a political or social issue; it is the most visible fruit of faith."[394] A reorientation to God produces an orientation towards others in a way that offers mutual graceful recognition.

Prophetic Performativity

Since queer people continue to be excluded from many church communities, graceful recognition remains an unfolding vision for church, yet not the reality of every church. Therefore, it is important to describe how queer Christians are prophetically engaged in transforming church communities. This is captured in our second queer practice, prophetic performativity. Performativity is how we embody social norms. We are not always aware of our performativity, especially when our performativity of norms is part of a dominant normativity. However, when performativity pushes the boundary of the norm, an expansion of the norm becomes possible. In ecclesiology, the performativity of non-normative bodies disrupts the whole body and transforms it.

Butler's embodied performativity ruptures a notion of communal unity through uniformity. Previously I suggested that an emphasis on communal agreement in practices can ignore important differences and contestation within a community. Agreement is also

[394] Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 3.

connected to normativity and the practices and preferences of dominant groups. In ecclesiology, the performative presence of queer Christian bodies is prophetic as it disrupts a presumed unity. Drawing also on Sara Ahmed's concept of queer orientation, I argue that the prophetic performativity of queer Christians disorients the whole Body in a productive way. Christians gather around the table not in unity of shared agreement, but are disoriented by the difference of queer Christians. This disorientation has the potential to reorients the whole to discover new ways of being together, new configurations of community that recognize the other.

Butler's Performativity and Ahmed's Orientation

In Butler's thought, the performative transformation of norms is connected to recognition. Butler writes, "Its only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings."[395] However, the viability of human life is not a power that is entirely in the hands of the self or the other. Both are dependent upon norms that "exceed the dyadic exchange that they condition."[396] These available norms, however, are not static. Recognition is enabled by norms, but the process of recognition also holds the possibility for transformation of the norm. Butler writes, "Certain practices of recognition or, indeed, certain breakdowns in the practice of recognition mark a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institution of new norms."[397] This "opening" in norms, or rupture, is an opening for critique.

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[395] Butler, *Undoing Gender,* 2.

[396] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 24.

[397] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 24.

Butler uses the term performativity to describe how norms are produced through bodily performance. Butler initially theorized performativity in order to critique the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory. Butler argues that neither sex nor gender is as stable as it might seem, both are culturally prescribed, embodied, and performed.[398] "Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body."[399] Performativity is at work in all norms, but it is difficult to recognize because dominant normativity masks its constructive or performative origins. Thus, Butler, as we discussed above, uses the example of drag as a performance that reveals the performativity of all of gender. Through parody, drag performs gender normativity, revealing the constructed nature of the heterosexual norm, which masks itself as a stable original.[400] In fact, we are all performing gender, or acting out the norms of gender as they are scripted to us.[401]

Yet, performativity also challenges norms. Just as the self and the story of the self cannot be fully narrated, the body is also always "in the mode of becoming" and thus always has the potentiality to "become otherwise."[402] Queer performativity of non-normative gender expression is an example of how the norm is reworked through embodiment. Butler's theory underscores that it is through the body that we become. Butler writes, "The body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the

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[398] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 173.

[399] Ibid., 185.

[400] Ibid., 41.

[401] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3.

[402] Ibid., 217.

norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation."[403] Thus, new forms of being and new ways of living are enacted when bodies push against norms, even transgress them, and yet persist in their desire for recognition.

We should not, however, underestimate the power of dominant norms. Sara Ahmed draws attention to this when she develops the term orientation and disorientation to express the queer experience of living in a heteronormative world. Orientation is a direction we take "toward objects and others." Sexual orientation refers to deviance. Poetically, Ahmed writes that if one is straight, "one's desire follows a straight line" whereas a queer orientiation goes in a different direction, goes off track.[404] Heterosexuality becomes normalized as an orientation that need not be named, it rather becomes the background to which everyone is oriented. To be queer is to have a "failed orientation…the queer bodies…are out of line.[405] Queer, then, might be expressed as a diagonal, or living on the 'slant.' Ahmed writes,

> This is not about the romance of being off line or the joy of radical politics (though it can be), but rather the everyday work of dealing with the perception of others, with the 'straightening devices' and the violence that might follow when such perceptions congeal into social forms. In such loving and living we learn to feel the oblique in the slant of is // slant as another kind of gift. We would not aim to overcome the disorientation of the queer moment, but instead inhabit the

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[403] Ibid.

[404] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology,* 70.

[405] Ibid., 71, 87, 92. Ahmed also theorizes how whiteness is a ground for race, becoming a background and a "straightening device," 137.

> intensity of its moment...but we do not turn around. Having not turned around, who knows where we might turn.[406]

There is a disorientation associated with the transgression of norms. This is why the transformation of norms is prophetic and involves personal risk. Citing Foucault, Butler argues that the critique of norms requires a "certain risking of the self."[407] Butler argues that in this risk one might ask oneself certain questions such as "Will the 'human' expand to include me in its reach?" or "Will there be a place for my life, and will it be recognizable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence?"[408] To question in this way is to risk one's own humanity. "There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human" Butler writes.[409] This is what Carrie Brownstein means when she says that the Lesbian bar provided shelter from the glare of heteronormativity. This may be a risk worth taking, however, for those who do not perceive their lives to be viable within the available social norms. Butler writes that if we are "done" by norms "then the possibility of my persistence as an 'I' depends upon my being able to do something with what is done with me."[410]

The risk of the human in transforming norms is exemplified in queer life. When queer people embody non-normative gender expression or non-normative sexual attraction, they risk their lives in a heteronormative and cisnormative society. However,

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[406] Ibid., 107.

[407] Butler, Undoing Gender, 217.

[408] Ibid., 3.

[409] Ibid., 4.

[410] Butler, *Undoing Gender,* 3.

many queer people know that to be otherwise is not to be.[411] "The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity."[412]

Practicing Prophetic Performativity in Community: Communion

In considering ecclesiology then, we consider how prophetic performativity transforms not just the norm of gender or sexuality but also norms operative in an understanding of community itself. As emphasized in Hauerwas' ecclesiology, one norm of ecclesiology has been to describe the Christian community in terms of its internal agreement, whether unity of belief or practice. In applying the practice of prophetic performativity to ecclesiology, I argue that queer performativity disrupts notions of community as agreement, reorienting the community to communal becoming.

One problem in a concept of community as agreement is that it eclipses both fragmentation and disagreement in community. Tanner made this argument when describing modern understanding of culture as grounded in agreement. This understanding of culture eclipses the constant negotiations, dialogue and disagreements within any one culture. When applied to church, Tanner argues that conceiving of a church community as being formed through shared beliefs or practices obscures both the partiality of practices and the multiplicity of beliefs in any one community. She proposes that Christian practices coalesce around common use and towards an orientation towards God. Political scientists Hardt and Negri employ the concept of multitude as one way to

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[411] Butler uses examples of gay, lesbian, transgender, and intersexed people in much of her work, other norms include the categorization of people with physical and mental disabilities as well as norms of race, ethnicity and nationality to name only a few.

[412] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 31.

describe how difference comes together in community. They write, "The multitude is internally different, multiple social subjects whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity…but on what it has in common"[413] What unifies the body of Christ is not shared agreements or similarities, but a common orientation towards God. With Hardt and Negri we might say that the many members of the body of Christ are a multitude, a multitude with a God in common.

More then Butler or Tanner, Ahmed emphasizes how agreement can also be understood as compulsory, as the ground of a dominant experience or dominant group around which every other individual or group is expected to orient. In light of this, Ahmed suggests, "moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground."[414] Yet disorientation can also be an unwelcome everyday experience for those whose bodies and loves are already out of line. Disorientation can be paralyzing and induce crisis, but it can also be a moment that opens the possibility for reorientation.[415] Returning to prophetic performativity, we might understand prophetic performativity as an embodied performance that disrupts the norm of community as shared agreement. Put another way, prophetic performativity resists or refuses the dominant ground or background, performing difference, performing by not turning around.

Thinking ecclesiologically, prophetic performativity transforms the practice of communion from a practice that confirms agreement to a practice that awakens churches

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[413] Michael Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 100.

[414] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology,* 157.

[415] Ibid., 158.

to their becoming as the body of Christ. Above, I discussed how baptism transforms individual Christians into "ecclesial persons" entering into a process of further becoming with God and with the Christian community. The communion table also invites the becoming of the community. This becoming, however, is not a process of ease; rather it can be disturbing and disorienting. The performative difference of queer Christians disrupts the presumed unity around the communion table. The queer 'slant' makes the table "wobble." Queer bodies at the communion table produce a disorienting effect by simply being present in their difference. Difference disturbs the "the table as a shared object."[416] The table is, in this way, both disorienting and orienting. [417] It might be more disorienting to some then to others. If one is familiar with and part of the background of the proclaimed unity of the table, then the presence of queer Christians disorients. This disturbance invites the church to perform a more faithful humility around the table. It reveals that ability to gather at the table is not the correctness of belief or the rightness of any action. Rather the unity of church is the unity of absolute reliance on grace.

Gathering around the communion table, queer performativity exposes the unfaithfulness of church when it refuses to recognize queer Christians. This highlights Tanner's community of argument. Those that gather do not agree. However, the disagreement is less about permission to be at the table and more about the fact of radical difference. Bodies gathering around the table with many intersectional differences, black, brown, white, queer, trans, genderqueer, intersex, differently abled. The disorientation of

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[416] Ibid., 170. Ahmed develops the table as a concept in her queer phenomenology, although she is not talking about the communion table per se.

[417] I refer to Ahmed here, but Mark Medley has also said that the practice of communion is both a stabilizing and destabilizing to the ecclesial self. Medley, Mark S. 2003 " 'Do this': the Eucharist and Ecclesial Selfhood." *Review & Expositor* 100, no 3:383-401.

difference does not resolve, but is reformed into understanding unity in a way that does not eclipse difference. Disorientation invites an orientation towards the other. The community of mutual fulfillment is also a possibility at the table. In recognizing the other, the church community can orient towards the other, not taking the other into itself, but allowing itself to be changed by the other and therefore becoming into a more dynamic and diverse multitude. This orientation towards the other is only possible through being reoriented to God. Communion thus is understood as gathering in order to be reoriented God-ward.

Queer Christian Story of Prophetic Performativity

The movement for queer recognition in the United Methodist Church is a powerful example of disrupting the norm of community as agreement. During the United Methodist general conference in 2016 Rev. Julie Todd, a straight-identified ordained UM minister and an advocate of queer recognition, wrote a blog post reflecting on a decade of advocacy for queer inclusion within the UMC. She expressed how the body of Christ is broken over this issue, and how any effort to deny this brokenness through appeals to unity is violence. She recounted a story of the pro-LGBTQ movement going to communion services during General Conference in 2004 after an unfavorable vote for inclusion. She writes,

> We did this as a means of re-asserting our presence in that Body. We did this as a means of resistance against the false institutional proclamation of one cup, one Body, and one baptism, when clearly the actions of the General Conference actively sought to harm and exclude members of that Body. All forms of our resistance and disruption are embodied statements that the unity of the church

> cannot continue to come at the cost of LGBTQ lives. These same acts of resistance are theological affirmations that the resurrected Jesus lives on in our whole and beloved queer bodies.[418]

Todd draws on the image of Christ's body, broken in communion and broken over the conflict of inclusion of queer people. For Todd, the brokenness is denied when unity is proclaimed at the expense of queer bodies. After communion concluded, Rev. James Preston, in a moment of prophetic anger, smashed a communion chalice on the floor. It was, in Todd's words "a moment of the Spirit interceded to express anguish sighs too deep for words. In the breaking of the cup, Christ spoke to the real brokenness of the moment."[419]

Queer Christians are oriented towards God. However, the church community, here in the example of the United Methodist Church, denies the Christian witness of queer Christians through prohibitions on marriage, ordination, and sometimes membership. The prophetic performativity of queer bodies interrupts any claims of unity by means of exclusion. The act of breaking the chalice interrupted an ecclesiology of agreement as expressed through the practice of communion. The ruptured glass proclaimed the protester's grief over the body of Christ already broken in the exclusion of queer people from ordination and other church practices. This brokenness had both a theological dimension and material impact, on the lives and bodies of queer Christians. Rev. Julie Todd writes, "In the church there simply must be some recognition that parts and pieces of the LGBTQ Body of Christ in the United Methodist Church have been not

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[418] Julie Todd, https://loveprevailsumc.com/2016/05/12/on-the-body-being-broken/

[419] Ibid.

only broken, but lost. Left. Dead. Gone. Taken. Parts that aren't coming back to be made part of the whole. Irretrievable by choice or by force."[420]

Todd's grief over the fracture of the church, and for those queer people lost in the fracture, is also a call for the church to faithfully become. Communion is a practice of gathering around Christ's table. Christians come to the table by grace, but this does not preclude the possibility of disorientation at the table. For in disorientation, church has the potential to orient towards those it has othered and, also by grace, reorients towards God.

Broken Grace-filled Body

The church undergoes its own becoming through the relational transformation of selves and community. In graceful recognition, the self is formed through its exchange with the other. The church community remains faithful to its baptismal promises by continually undergoing transformation in response to the other. Further, community is formed and transformed through the prophetic performance of non-normative bodies, bodies that ask the whole body to recognize difference and become together in response to difference. In communion, the one body is broken and given for more faithful becoming of the body as multitude.

It is important to reiterate how recognition and performativity are connected. The self is constituted in relationship, through recognition by the other. The constitution of the self is also dependent upon norms, norms that precede self and other. The critique and expansion of norms is made through the embodied performativity of non-normativity. Performativity and recognition are not a one-time event, but rather a cycle of making and remaking the human.

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[420] Ibid.

I have argued that recognition and performativity are also a cycle of making and remaining community in response to difference. Butler writes that while we are constituted and dependent on norms, we also can "endeavor to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them."[421] Queer Christians live in critical and transformative relation to the norms of Christian community and in doing so the whole body is invited to disorientation and reorientation. This invitation is to become faithful to God's gift of grace by reorienting the church community towards God, allowing for a more plastic communal practice of recognizing and receiving the other.

Faithful Failure

Both graceful recognition and prophetic performativity point to how the presence of Queer Christians is transformative to the ecclesial body of Christ. I would like to consider one more queer practice as transformative of how the church as a body of Christ can be faithful to its own becoming. I suggest that the church divest from models of success and view its own becoming as a faithful practice of failure. Queer theorist Judith Halberstam argues that stories of failure can be reconsidered as new stories of the possible. A faithful practice of failure means understanding failure as opening the possibility for other ways of being community together. I specifically explore how the church can repent of modes of perfection that do not also engender humility. Recognizing failure as a possibility invites church to return to the Protestant invitation to be always in a mode of reforming. Reforming is not change simply for the sake of change, but in response to God's call to become plastic again.

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[421] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3.

Halberstam's Queer Failure

In exploring faithful failure for the church, I draw from Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*. Here Halberstam explores the gifts, openings and possibilities that failure brings. Locating failure as a mode of queer life, Halberstam argues, "failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well."[422] Failing at gender conformity and opposite sex-attraction, queers have resisted the heteronormative lifestyle and "with it all the rewards of advancement, capital accumulation, [and] family."[423] This queer failure "turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."[424] Certainly failure requires an acknowledgment of painful histories and feelings of "emptiness, loss….and modes of unbecoming."[425] But failure can also be also a mode of resistance, a political affect rooted in Foucault's "subjugated knowledge" which finds a countercultural desire "to live life otherwise."[426] This connects to a larger body of work in queer studies that defines queer as an alternative to both "hegemonic systems" and "dominant forms of common sense."[427] Halberstam writes that "heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation,

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[422] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

[423] Ibid., 89.

[424] Ibid., 88.

[425] Ibid., 23.

[426] Ibid., 23, 2. Halberstam is drawing on both Munez and Foucalt here. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009)

[427] Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 89. Halberstam is drawing on Gramsci here.

family, ethical conduct, and hope."[428] While "other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique."[429]

For Halberstam, queer failure is different from heteronormative failure which either acknowledges failure in order to eventually succeed, or collapses into the rage of the "excluded white male, a rage that promises and delivers punishments" for the marginalized.[430] Here, Halberstam is stressing that queers are comfortable with failure in a way that opens the possibility to for practices of resistance to a heteronormative regime. Halberstam's queer failure imagines the possibility of an alternative politics born of failure. Ahmed has wondered, however, how far embracing the negative can go. She writes, "To say 'yes' the 'no' is still a 'yes.'"[431] She worries that this isolates queer as a useful terms since not everyone can or will say yes to the no in the same way, especially because of the intersectional lines of race, class, and gender, in addition to sexuality.[432] I will nuance this further when I turn to church and failure and failure as a politics.

Practicing Faithful Failure in Community: Together in Sin

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[428] Ibid.

[429] Ibid.

[430] Syndicate Theology hosted a symposium on the Queer Art of Failure and Theology. https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/the-queer-art-of-failure/

[431] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 175.

[432] Ibid. "For queers of other colors, being 'out' already means something different, given that what is 'out and about' is oriented around whiteness," 175.

There is an important connection between grace and failure, failure is a grace in its invitation to be humbly transformed. Following Ahmed, we might describe the failure of queer people in church as saying yes to the no, accepting the label of failure as a gift that opens new possibilities. Faithful failure for the church, however, would be quite different. Since it is churches that say the 'no', becoming faithful is acknowledging the no and saying yes to the not-yet of church. Queer failure for ecclesiology invites a transformed understanding of sin, returning the church to humility. Queer failure is also a call for church to reorient to the wisdom of the Protestant Reformation, which itself was a call to the church to reform according to the truth of God. Proclamations like "simultaneously sinner and saint" and "reformed and always being reformed" become poignant in calling the contemporary church to become in response to queer Christians.[433]

One invitation of queer Christians is to be together in sin. From the standpoint of the heteronormative church, queer Christians are understood as having failed church or failed at Christian life because of their sin of deviant sexuality or gender identity. Queer Christians are only deemed acceptable as Christians if they confess this sin and pledge to live a life that rejects their queer identity. Queer failure might introduce a yes to this no, in asserting that all Christians have failed at Christian life through universal sin. This is to say that sin focused on specific individual acts obscures the universality of sin. James Alison, speaking from context, has found the doctrine of original sin helpful as a way to speak theologically about queer inclusion in the church. In his understanding, universal

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[433] Michael Bush, "Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings." In *Calvinus sacrarum literarum interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, 2008: 285-299. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008. Luther uses this phrase in various writings. These are reviewed in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of* Martin *Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 242-45. Althaus translates the phrase as "at one and the same time a righteous man and a sinner," 1. For how this phrase applies to ecclesiology see, Kress, Robert. "Simul justus et peccator: ecclesiological and ecumenical perspectives." *Horizons* 11, no. 2 (September 1984): 255-275.

sin binds us together, making "room for us all to be wrong together, and yet all be rescued together, and all able to learn together."[434] The universality of sin also means that none of us are equipped to judge the other, since no one has a "position of neutral objectivity."[435] Rather, we are all together in the middle of a dynamic becoming, God's call to be a new creation. Alison's pointing to universal sin encourages both individual Christians and churches to return to a place of humility in its judgment of the sin of queer people. In Protestant context, Luther's proclamation of "simul justus et peccator" points to the paradox of being simultaneously "wrong and rescued" to use Alison's phrase. In this way, Queer Christians point to the rich theological tradition for communal becoming in redirecting churches from a focus on individual sin and instead inviting a more mutual vulnerability and humility in being together in sin.

If faithful failure invites a return to the universality of sin, it also asks the church to be more publically humble in confessing corporate sin. Ecclesiologically, "simul justus et peccator" means that the church as a community, in its practices, policies, and theologies, stands simultaneously in sin and grace. In order to live this out, churches can be better at proclaiming how they are both "wrong and rescued." I have argued that Hauerwas' ecclesiology downplays the sins of church as a community. Feminist ecclesiologist Letty M. Russell describes this tendency as "the double sin of the church."[436] Churches encourage individuals to live holy lives by emphasizing Paul's

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[434] James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-in* (New York: Continuum, 2006) 173.

[435] Ibid., 79

[436] Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox., 1993), 124.

message to the Corinthians to live with the understanding that the "present form of the world is passing away." [437] Russell finds, however, that in matters of justice churches are very much centered in the world. "Their lives, structures, class divisions, sexual orientation, and prejudices all reflect the culture of which they are a part rather then the New Creation."[438] Faithful failure invites churches to more humbly recognize how they participate in sinful structures of society in their fostering of practices and beliefs that are bound up in the culture. "A little thought reminds us of the power of sin within the church, of the way in which it has frequently had to be dragged, almost as if it were against its collective will, into better forms of witness by developments in those areas of society or culture that were not specifically Christian."[439] Drawing on the paradox of the community of argument and the community of mutual fulfillment, Tanner's ecclesiology expresses more fully both the flaws and the potentialities of church as community in negotiating tradition, the wider culture, and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The Catholic Church has had a particular struggle with admitting corporate sin, in part because of a theological belief in the church's holiness and perfection as Christ's body. This plays out in various ways. One example is that when Vatican II apologized for the church's past sins, such as anti-Semitism, it maintained an understanding of the church's "indefectible fidelity" while casting the church's children as "pardoned sinners,

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[437] 1 Cor. 7:29-31, NRSV

[438] Letty M. Russel, *Church in the Round*, 124.

[439] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.

called to permanent *metanoia*, to renewal in the Holy Spirit"[440] This obscures the fact that the very structures of the Catholic church are caught up in systems of injustice. Speaking specifically within a Catholic ecclesiological tradition, Healy argues "the power of sin is manifested not only in the actions of individuals but in the Christian communal body, when the latter fosters practices, valuations and beliefs in its membership that are incompatible with the gospel."[441] In ignoring their implication in cultural systems of injustice, both Protestant and Catholic churches have been unfaithful to their own becoming.

Finally, our togetherness in sin situates our failures within God's failure. Although not drawing on Halberstam, James Alison connects Christ's failure on the cross with a humble power which disrupts our cultural understandings of perfection and success. Alison writes that on the cross Christ was not rescued from failure, but rather his failure was shown "to have been the true shape of what God's power and wisdom looked like."[442] Thus, God's own perfection is a queer failure, one that "is always, always, going to appear to us as more of a rupture than a continuation of any of our senses of perfection" writes Alison.[443] In Alison's view, this rupture or disruption is an opening for realizing that failure is not just for those who society easily victimizes as failures, but is for all of

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[440] International Theological Commission "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past" December, 1999. 1.2 Teachings of the Council http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html

[441] Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 7.

[442] James Alison, "Failure and Perfection," Rohr Institute. 2016. "Perfection", Volume 4, No.1. Also found on http://jamesalison.co.uk/texts/failure-and-perfection/

[443] Ibid.

us. This ruptured view of perfection, one that embraces failure, is what it means to be together in the new creation.[444] We are all failures, and in being so, we are all invited to become new in Christ.

A Political Ecclesiology of Failure

I've suggested that queer Christians invite a critical re-orienting for ecclesiology. I argued that in baptism the presence of queer Christians invites a graceful recognition of the other, holding open the becoming of selves in community. However, the presence of queer Christians in church can also be disorienting for heteronormative Christians in that it disrupts the presumed unity and uniformity of the Christian community. Such an understanding of unity supports the normativity of dominant groups while others, who are othered, push against the norm through prophetic performativity. At the communion table, the radical differences in community are revealed. In recognizing difference, queer Christians invite church to reorient towards God and become more plastic in orienting towards the other. Finally, faithful failure returns individuals and church to the reality of simultaneously sinner and saint and to the need to be reformed and always reforming. In response to the neighbor and the stranger, church can take a humble position, curious to find God in those others who are presumed failures, rejected by society.

I would like to end by returning to the beginning, to the political theology I articulated in chapter one. I understand theology as political in that theology is a material cultural practice that contributes, with other cultural practices, to the shape and livability of human life. I'm particularly concerned with the livability of queer life. Theology does

[444] Ibid.

not have to be explicitly anti-queer to still have resonance with anti-queer Christian rhetoric and other dominant heteronormative cultural practices. Theology can resonate with anti-queer sentiment, or it can resonate with queer liberation. In this resonance, theology is implicitly political.

Yet, ecclesiology can also explicitly address politics. In exploring a political ecclesiology of failure, I will first nuance a queer politics of failure. To emphasize failure is not to require failure as a political path everyone must follow. Ahmed's stresses that such a politics is not available to everyone, not even to all queers, because of the differences in how queers are oriented in other intersectional ways. Neither should we assume that a politics of deviation is "always on 'the side' of the progressive."[445] Rather then requiring deviation, (or failure) as a politics, Ahmed emphasizes that queer politics involves certain commitments, specifically the commitment to orienting towards and supporting "those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place."[446] In the frame of a queer ecclesiology, a queer politics is a commitment to orient towards those that church has othered.

If a politics of failure means orienting towards those it has othered, church needs to break open its self-understanding in relationship to the other. Ecclesiologist Paul Lakeland has framed this as the church needing to reconceive of its orientation to the world. A queer ecclesiology that reorients church to the world is necessary because that anti-queer Christian rhetoric associates queer people with the world, eclipsing queer

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[445] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 174-175.

[446] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 179.

Christians. Ecclesiologist Paul Lakeland has suggested that to reconfigure relations between church and world, church must emphasize humility.

Towards this end, Lakeland contrasts two readings of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The first reading is the more conventional. The church identifies with the Good Samaritan. The church aids the injured man, who represents the world. Lakeland acknowledges the importance of this image in clarifying the church's mission as servant to the world, with the role of alleviating suffering.[447] Yet Lakeland cautions the church to remember the religious figures in the parable, the priest and the Levite, who pass by the injured man. "In the Gospel parable, Jesus is most definitely not reassuring his listeners about their own role but rather encouraging them to use their imaginations to discompose their own religious universe."[448] In this way, Lakeland introduces disorientation into his first reading. "The parable of the Good Samaritan is less a story about doing good than it is about breaking boundaries."[449] Claiming the role of the Good Samaritan, church risks being too self-congratulatory, over identifying with the Good Samaritan's heroic qualities and missing that the Good Samaritan is an outcast himself, aiding another outcast. Lakeland writes that this is "at worst triumphalist and at best a sort of paternalistic vision in which the wisdom and the folly of the world alike are both subsumed in the totalizing explanation of faith."[450] Church may believe itself to be a humble servant, but it doing so it risks not learning anything from those it is serving.

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[447] Paul Lakeland "'I Want to Be in That Number': Desire, Inclusivity and the Church," in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America,* 66 (2011): pp. 16-28, pg 21.

[448] Ibid.

[449] Ibid.

[450] Ibid., 22.

In his second reading, Lakeland points out that there is no particular reason that the church needs to be read as the Good Samaritan and the world the wounded victim. In reversing church and world, the church becomes the wounded victim "in need of a lesson of humanity provided by the outcast."[451] Here, church fails queerly in finding itself in need of visitation by the stranger. Even further, the church as injured on the road is overlooked, scorned by religious leaders, but saved by one who is outcast, associated with "the world." Lakeland emphasizes the lesson for the church is that "the world itself has wisdom and grace that we do not possess in the Church."[452] Lakeland's reading allows church to both be a servant and to be served. In Tanner's gift giving church, we can say that church gives God's gifts to the world, but church also receives God's gifts from the other "encountering the grace of God in unexpected place."[453] In being open to the unexpected, the church decenters itself and its own self-assured understanding of itself. In this way, the church must fail in order to recognize the gift of queer grace, the gift of becoming plastic again.

Of course, a reading of church as victim on the road must be nuanced. The intention is to illuminate a new understanding for church in relationship the world, or more specifically in relationship to those the church has othered. Yet, as I explored in Hauerwas' ecclesiology, church as victim is too easily a position taken by Christians in power to eclipse their own role in power over the other.[454] The queer practices of graceful

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[451] Ibid., 27.

[452] Ibid., 22.

[453] Ibid., 27.

[454] A recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 57% of white evangelical see Christians as facing discrimination in America. Only 44% of white evangelicals said the same about

recognition, prophetic performativity, and queer failure invite churches to more deeply engage its own practices in response to the presence of queer Christians. To say that queer life causes disorientation for churches is to say that a queer people are in churches, performing a livable life. "Disorientation, then, would not be a politics of the will but an effect of how we do politics, which in turn is shaped by the prior matter of how we live."[455] In becoming disoriented, church is invited to follow queer people in a politics of failure. In fact, heteronormative Christians should pray for such a disorientation, so we can be disturbed from our complacently and love of power in the face of injustice, especially that injustice perpetrated in and through the practices of church. To be disoriented in such a way is to become plastic again. To become plastic is to turn towards the bodies and the lives of those who have been othered. To become plastic is to become reoriented in the life of God.

Muslims. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/perceptions-discrimination-muslims-christians/519135/

[455] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 177.

Finding Church, Finding God

"Did I build this ship to wreck?"
-Florence and the Machine

"A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Mark 4:37-38

The ship is an ancient metaphor for the church. 1 Peter 3:20-21 connects Noah's ark to the saving the waters of baptism. Jesus calls the disciples to take their boats and fish for people (Matthew 4:19). Icons often depict Christ or Peter at the helm of the ship. In one sense, to write about queer people and church is to write about a ship that has already sailed. As noted in chapter one, most mainline denominations (UCC, ELCA, PCUSA, Episcopal) have now affirmed queer ordination and marriage. After the Supreme Court declared marriage rights in 2015, many Methodist pastors begin marrying couples and several prominent evangelicals come out as affirming queer Christians, including Tony Campolo.[456] Even Pope Francis famously said "If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him?" when asked about the "gay lobby" in the Catholic Church, although he later stated his opposition to gay marriage.[457]

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[456] http://tonycampolo.org/for-the-record-tony-campolo-releases-a-new-statement/#.WOnPg1e-zWA

[457] Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the occation of the XXVIII World Youth Day. Press Conference of Pope Frances during the return flight. Sunday, 28 July 2013 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-conferenza-stampa.html. See also https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-long-awaited-document-on-the-family-pope-francis-offers-hope-to-divorced-catholics-says-no-to-gay-marriage/2016/04/07/87be6dae-fb42-11e5-813a90ab563f0dde_story.html?utm_term=.af52c23457eb

In another sense, however, to take an even wider view is to see the church on its way to wreckage. Queer exclusion, and any reversal of that exclusion, appears on a long list of failures of the church including genocide, colonialism, slavery, racism, and sexism. For centuries church has traded the gospel truth for power and domination. In this light, it is difficult to expect much from church. Wendy Farley writes, "The church no doubt does many wonderful, healing things. But it is also the place where Christians go to flee the great revelation of the gospel. It is where we look for tidied up bodies."[458] I recently attended a conference on queer theology and heard a similar sentiment. Scholars, gathered to discuss how queer theory and queer lives intersect with the production of Christian theology, had much excitement for queering theological ideas, but not much interest in or hope for institutional churches.

Another dimension of the wreckage is that the church now finds itself in a moment of transition, even desperation, at the end of Christendom. Denominations, once bolstered by the 1950's and an era of expansion, have seen steep decline.[459] Protestants in the United States have fallen to under 50% of the population. The Pew Foundation reports that though the "nones" believe in God, and even pray, they find gathering as a people of God uninteresting.[460] The final picture is a church that is neither the biggest obstacle nor the biggest advocate of cultural advances for queer people, but rather is

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[458] Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 10.

[459] A sharp decline from 18.1% to 14.y between 2007 and 2014. See http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/

[460] The "nones" refer to those who do not affiliate with any religious tradition http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-new-report-finds-one-in-five-adults-have-no-religious-affiliation/

increasingly inconsequential. Thus, we can view any welcome of queer people by the church as only a desperate welcome, a welcome extended to an already empty room.[461] In this sense church in 21st century America is like the disciples in a small boat about to be capsized. Terrified, they wake Jesus, who is fast asleep in the stern. "Teacher" they exclaim, "do you not care that we are perishing?" Like the Florence and the Machine's song, many are asking, "did we build this ship to wreck?" Will God calm the storm and repair the boat so the church can sail again? Jesus' words to the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" now take on new meaning.

This present work began from one casualty of a shipwrecked church, from the wound of the rejection of queer Christians by the church. As Wendy Farley writes, "It pierces me like a knife to know that some Christians insist that desire obscures the divine image…The heart that is led to love and desire outside of heterosexual marriage is understood to be uniquely unsuited to love and desire Christ."[462] Yet, my work has proposed that queer Christians point a way out of the wreckage. I do not suppose that queer Christians will save church, whatever that might mean. I do suggest, however, that the presence of queer Christians in church has transformative potential for church. Acknowledging the impact of ecclesiology as a material practice of Christianity, my work has sought to uncover how ecclesiologies impact the practices of church and how they resonate with or resist the Christian rhetoric against queer life. Setting the ship to sail again requires new ways of thinking about church, new ways of conceptualizing the interconnection of God, self, and community.

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[461] Here I acknowledge many individual churches who have not only

[462] Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation*, 2.

I looked first at Hauerwas' ecclesiology which emphasizes church as life together. The church's practices have the power to shape saints, to form people to practice, tell, and be the story of God. Hauerwas emphasizes how the church can witness to the world by being a community of peace. However, Hauerwas constructs an ecclesiology of distance, one that emphasizes the separation of church from world. Practices that emphasize agreement and the continuity of tradition also eclipse ongoing debate and contestation. Hauerwas is strong in his critique of state violence and advocates for a servant church able to minister to the most vulnerable, like people with disabilities. Yet he obfuscates his vision of a peaceful church by ignoring the role of practices in discrimination, exclusion, and harm of marginalized people.

While I agreed with Hauerwas that churches can be a witness by following God's call to become a people of peace, Hauerwas's ecclesiology of distance also has resonance with anti-queer Christian rhetoric. Hauerwas distances his church from the wider culture and advocates the church become comfortable as a minority. Yet, anti-queer Christians also claims minority status, claiming religious discrimination when asked to follow equality laws that protect queer people. Further anti-queer Christian rhetoric figures queer people as secular infiltrators, threatening the church's true Christian mission. The rhetoric eclipses queer people all together. In this context, Hauerwas' call to "be the church" falls flat, since the church has so much more to become.

In turning to Kathryn Tanner's ecclesiology, I found a church situated in the triune God and more openly oriented toward the world through gift giving. Tanner's ecclesiology also emphasizes the plasticity of both individual selves and church in forming and reforming according to Godward discernment. The ambiguous practices of

church and the inevitability of conflict and contestation in church coalesce for Tanner in church as a community of argument. Yet, such a community, also united in Christ, also has the potential to become a community of mutual fulfillment through the recognition and passing on of God's gifts. Grace is the ultimate gift, a gift with the potential to introduce novelty and surprise for both individual and community.

I named grace queer in the way it disrupts efforts to neatly boundary church, to say for whom it is for and what it can do. This destabilization of church is an invitation for church to become plastic again, in order keep discerning its mission of gift-giving. Finally, I connected both Tanner's ecclesiology and theological method to queer theory. Tanner's plasticity, we noted, has resonance with queer deconstruction of gender, where the 'original' is copied in an ironic parody in order to expose the power in the original. Drag opens up possibilities for many ways to embody gender, and Tanner's drag-like theology opens possibilities for ecclesiology and for church to be faithful to its own plasticity in God.

In the final chapter I returned to the lovers of Christ who have been rejected by the church. What does their love have to teach about what the church might become? Queer theory, specifically Judith Butler's theory of subjectivity of becoming, is a vision for how Christians can recognize each other with God's grace, holding open what each person is becoming in their life lived in God. I connected Butler's recognition to how Christian selves are formed and transformed together as ecclesial persons living out their baptismal vows. In a similar way, in the act of recognition, norms can be challenged, disrupted, and transformed. Butler outlines the embodied performativity of norms and how bodies outside of the norm disrupt and transform the norm. Sara Ahmed's work on

orientation and disorientation helps further explicate how the norms of the dominant culture are orienting, and how the disorientation of queer life is both disruptive and a gift to church. Around the communion table, queer disorientation disrupts the norm of unity, revealing the body of Christ as a multitude of bodies. Christ's body is broken, even shattered, by the grief of those excluded from the body. When queer bodies gather, and the broken body is given, the table expands.

Finally, I suggested the practice of queer failure as a practice that opens up new possibilities for the church. Queered failure returns individuals and church to a focus on the simultaneity of sinner and saint, inviting the church to humility in its relationship to the world, and to those it has othered. A queer politics of failure positions the church to recognize and receive the Holy Spirit at work in the world, in the neighbor or stranger who may have something to teach the church.

Finding God When the Church is Lost

God, however, is difficult to find when church is lost. There are many the church has lost, but I specifically identify the wound of queer Christians being rejected, disfigured, and misunderstood by church. Even more grievous is also that the presence of queer Christians in church is taken for granted, their gifts squandered. Queer Christians are not sailors without a boat, they are castaways marooned. The ship wants to sail on without them. Those lost by church are most keenly aware of how the church is lost. This dissertation is an effort to call the church back to a process by which it can recognize those it has lost, and in that process recognize the call that God makes for the church to be faithful to plasticity. The process of becoming plastic is ongoing, a continual communal return to God.

This is also a long process, specifically in relationship to recognizing queer Christians. In my own call as a queer minister, I have realized the power in offering a life raft to those people who have found themselves thrown off the ship that is church. This is also the quest for many individuals and churches in the larger movement for the inclusion of queer Christians. A myriad of different micro-tactics encompass the brave and prophetic justice work that has been the movement for inclusion for queer Christians. For decades this has included academic books, sermons, pastoral care sessions, church council meetings, community organizing meetings, protests, marches, blog posts, phone calls, ordinations, baptisms, marriages, art installations. There are too many stories to tell, each of them contribute to this unfolding movement calling church to be plastic, calling church to love its neighbors, calling church to further discern the work of the Holy Spirit in hearts and lives and communities.

One personal story illustrates this movement, an experience I had at the gathering of the Evangelical Gay Network. I didn't personally attend the gathering, I didn't even know that this network existed until I heard that they had scheduled their annual conference near my home in Portland, Oregon. The Westboro Baptist Church had also pledged to be at the conference with their protest signs: "God Hates Fags," "Fags are worthy of death," "Same-sex parents doom kids," "Mourn for your sins," and "Repent, the Lord is coming." Local Portland Christians, atheists, Buddhists, agnostics, clergy and lay organized a counter protest. We gathered at the convention center early and created a wall of love, a aisle of bodies shielding the conference goers from the Westboro protesters and their signs. We held signs that read: "Welcome to Portland, God loves you" and "Free Hugs." One powerful sign attested to 1 Corinthians 15:10 "I am what I am

because of God's grace, and God's grace to me isn't wasted." Another read: "We repent from hate." As attendees got off the commuter train, they heard the megaphone and the saw the awful and yet familiar Westboro signs, and then walked down the aisle of love. Our collective singing drowned the megaphone out, "They will know we are Christians by our love" and "Oh when the saints go marching in" and "Jesus loves you." Many of the attendees cried as they walked, silently mouthing 'thank you' and 'bless you.' Some of them delayed going into the conference and joined us. Near the end of the protest the sky opened up and we were all drenched by a downpour. Soon, to our loud cheers, a rainbow appeared in the sky above our heads. We ended our love protest with a prayer, blessed to be witnesses to God's promise to humanity represented by the rainbow.

We were church that day on that street. Sometimes you have to insist on church in opposition to what others say church is or could be. To journey as God's church is to be simultaneously wrong and rescued. The wrongs of the institutional church have thrown some off the boat; some have voluntarily swam away. Some do not return, and ecclesiology must continue to wrestle with the sins of church with humility and transparency. To do so is to practice a politics of ecclesiological failure oriented towards those the church has othered. Yet, by the gift of God's grace the church is also rescued. By grace some return to the ship, bringing gifts from their travels. The church would do well to listen to the stories of those who have returned. Drawing again on Sara Ahmed's work, to return to the ship is to be on the diagonal, to be practicing church on the 'slant.' The presence, stories, and lives of queer Christians may be disorienting, it may make the whole ship wobble. Yet this wobble offers glimpses, moments, and practices for the church to again be faithful to its own becoming. This becoming is who we are as

Christians; it is our pilgrimage back to an incomprehensible God, the one in whom we live, move and have our being. May it be so for us, and for all communities who call themselves church.[463]

[463] Acts 17:28

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