

THE EVOLUTION OF A CHRISTIAN ALLY:
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE
BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD GAYS AND LESBIANS

BY

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Policy Studies
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

Plasticity has been defined as a capacity that involves interaction between the brain and the environment. It is not fixed, but rather can be learned or improved with practice and experience (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2011, p. 63). Much of the research in the area of plasticity centers on neurological, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of adult development. One study describes cultural plasticity as how biology and culture shape the mind and behavior (Li, 2003).

This study uses basic qualitative research methodology to examine attitudinal plasticity, specifically how Christian attitudes and beliefs toward homosexuality change or evolve. Interviews were conducted face to face, by phone, Skype, or email with 26 people who attended a particular church during all or a portion of 1981 to 1996. In 1996, the pastor left to take another position. Shortly after, he came out as gay. Participants in the study were asked about any gay friends, relatives, or colleagues they may have had, both before and after 1996; their understanding of what the Bible says about homosexuality; and their political affiliation. They were also asked to select from a list of five descriptions of ways to interpret scripture the one that best describes their position.

The interviews revealed that those who hold a literal interpretation of the Bible (that it is without error even in matters of science and history) categorize homosexuality as sinful. They also describe themselves as predominantly Republican/conservative and have had fewer close relationships with gays and lesbians. Those who are accepting of homosexuality predominantly hold a less literal view of scripture, describe their political views as Democratic/liberal, and have friends or relatives who are gay. These findings are in agreement with other research on conservative Christians and their beliefs on homosexuality (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992;

Herek & Glunt, 1993; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012; McFarland, 1989; Trevino, 2012; Whitehead, 2010).

One unexpected finding was that many of the more conservative Christian participants who maintain a literal interpretation of the Bible also expressed compassion toward homosexuals; some either admitted to being conflicted about their beliefs or distinguished between the homosexual person and homosexual behaviors. When an exchange of scripture passages regarding homosexuality becomes merely argumentative and unproductive, such points of uncertainty may provide an inroad toward positive dialogue and discussion and keep the conversation moving forward. This may be particularly true for those who say that they cannot reconcile what they believe with what they know from experience.

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Timothy, and my sons, Stephen and Jonathan.
Love, support, and encouragement aren't big enough words to express what I received from them throughout this journey.

Acknowledgments

There are many people I wish to thank who contributed to this project in a wide variety of ways. My advisor and committee chair, Dr. Cris Mayo, gave me confidence, encouragement, and insightful guidance, both as a professor in class and as a mentor throughout the research and writing of this thesis. She affirmed my plans and more than once pointed me in a better direction. I am in debt. My thesis committee members, Drs. Ramona Faith Oswald and Cameron R. McCarthy, graciously sacrificed time from their busy lives to provide me with valuable feedback. Liesel Wildhagen offered tea and friendship, often on rather short notice. Molly Bentsen provided me with her copyediting expertise, and Heather Crump patiently answered my questions and steered me through the university's requirements. At the very beginning of my graduate studies, Ross Wantland helped me to explore new ways to think and talk about social justice issues and how to engage others in productive dialogues about difficult topics. The 26 members and former members of Long Grove Church who were willing to candidly share their personal experiences and beliefs with me ultimately give this paper a voice. And finally, I am especially grateful to the pastor who unknowingly started me on a remarkable path of personal and theological understanding when he summoned the courage to come out, and then years later gave me his permission and blessing to use his story as the catalyst for this research project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the mid-1990s, the American Medical Association declared that homosexuality was no longer to be described as an illness, but the official policy for gays in the military was still “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” During that same decade in American history, President William Jefferson Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, defining marriage as between one man and one woman. Clinton was also the first U.S. president to select openly gay persons for administrative positions. Singer Melissa Etheridge and actress/comedian Ellen DeGeneres both came out publicly.

These examples from the national arena set the stage for a coming-out story that may not be historically significant or appear on any LGBT timeline but nonetheless left a lasting impression on members of a small congregation in a midwestern college town. Ray Blanchard¹ was the pastor of Long Grove Christian Church, part of a small conservative Protestant denomination. Ray was a talented musician with a passion for social justice. He had both a scholarly and theologically challenging approach to scripture. Utilizing a skillful, literary style of exegesis, Ray could expound extemporaneously on a single passage for half an hour with ease. He regularly pushed the envelope in his biblical interpretation, sometimes beyond the comfort level of some people in the congregation. After serving at Long Grove for a decade and a half, he accepted a call to a church in another city. The congregation hosted a farewell party to celebrate the years Ray had shepherded them. Many former members traveled great distances to share their best wishes at the big sendoff for him, his wife, and their two teenage children. A few

¹ All names, locations, and other distinguishing characteristics have been changed to pseudonyms.

months later, members of Long Grove learned that Ray was divorcing his wife and that he had come out as gay.

In the mid-'90s, like many other Protestant denominations at that time, Long Grove's congregation had only recently voted to allow women to serve in church leadership positions. The church had not begun to even acknowledge the existence of gay and lesbian Christians. At the time of Ray's coming out, the official position of the Christian Congregation² denomination, articulated in 1973, was that homosexuality is a sin. Recognizing, though, that there are Christians who are also homosexual, the denomination decided to form a committee to study the question of "what to do about" its homosexual members. Despite this action, however, a pastor in the Christian Congregation could certainly not be openly gay.

As a member of Long Grove Church in the 1990s, I was hit hard by Ray's coming out, as I thought would be true for any other politically and theologically conservative Christian. For me, it was an incongruous reality, one that I was rather suddenly forced to think about more deeply than ever before. It became the catalyst for years of study and analysis, and ultimately for a change in my beliefs about and understanding of homosexuality and what the Bible says about it.

Fast-forward to the year 2013. While Long Grove's denomination upheld its 1973 stance on homosexuality and continues to study the issue, I have evolved into a Christian ally. Looking back on my own journey, I began to ascribe a self-imposed theory to my evolution of attitudes and beliefs. I describe it in terms of three straightforward steps:

² This denominational assignment is also a pseudonym because revealing Long Grove's true affiliation would expose its identity as well.

Step one: An encounter. The initial shock of learning that my former pastor was gay provided me with an impetus for inquiry. It catapulted me into a new state of questioning, looking for answers to how this reality could be true.

Step two: Education. In the quest to understand, I studied scripture, read books, and talked with others about Christianity's response to homosexuality.

Step three: Experience over time. I became more enlightened and comfortable with my new understanding of homosexuality. Newfound friendships with gays and lesbians, many of whom were also professing Christians, solidified and reinforced my evolution as an ally.

The word “evolution”³ is typically used to describe changes or adaptations in the physical world over time, but in this research I use it to describe the flexibility or plasticity of beliefs and attitudes as a Christian becomes an LGBT ally. In research on adult development the term “plasticity” describes the capacity of human skills and behaviors to improve, primarily in areas such as memory and response time. For example, Colcombe and Kramer (2003) demonstrated that the cognitive functions of adults improve following exercise, which could be interpreted as an example of cognitive plasticity in the adult-development use of the term.

Plasticity has been defined as a capacity that is not fixed but rather can be learned or improved with practice and that “involves the interaction between the brain and the environment and is mostly used to describe the effects of experience” (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2011, p. 63). Much of the research in the area of plasticity revolves around neurological, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of adult development, perhaps because characteristics such as these are more easily measured and quantified in an experimental setting. Li (2003) studied how biology and

³ Using the word “evolution” alongside the word “Christian” is a little word play, as some Christians who maintain a literal interpretation of the creation story in Genesis 1 also reject the concept of evolution of the human species.

culture shape the mind and behavior; she refers to “cultural plasticity.” But Li focused more on examples in which human discoveries have influenced culture and its plasticity, not how culture, the environment, experience, or education have influenced change in individuals. One of Li’s examples is that new technologies such as the Internet have influenced the way we communicate, shop, and manage our finances (Li, 2003). Attitudes and beliefs, on the other hand, don’t improve—but they can change, or evolve.

I no longer attend Long Grove Christian Church, but I still keep in touch with many current and former members. I have never discussed Ray’s sexuality with any other members but my spouse, but I have wondered: Did Ray’s coming out have a profound effect on them, too? Had facing the new reality about his sexuality resulted in a similar trajectory of change in attitude and belief for others who attended Long Grove Church during any of Ray’s ministry years there? Had they evolved into Christian allies, too?

This master’s thesis takes up this question. How did this incident, and other occurrences in life, change the congregation members’ attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality? If change had occurred, what factors contributed to it? Did Ray’s coming out cause them to think more about homosexuality, study the Bible passages in depth, read other commentaries and books on the subject, or view documentaries on related topics? Did they have gay friends or relatives now or during the past 17 years who influenced their beliefs and attitudes? Had they been supportive of relatives who have come out since then, or kept in touch with Ray? But perhaps they were already allies before learning of Ray’s sexual orientation. Having never had a conversation about the topic with any of them, I didn’t know their positions then or now. I realize that although Ray’s coming out was pivotal for me, it may have made little or no difference for others. Still, regardless of the depth of impact, that incident was something we all held in common. It was a

reference point, providing a natural entry to engage in conversation with each of them about homosexuality and their beliefs and attitudes as a Christian.

One in Christ, Diverse in Doctrine

I had at least two things in common with the 26 people I interviewed for this qualitative research project: One, Ray had been our pastor, and two, we are professing Christians. And although the latter provides a common bond, proving the basis for a common identity as an in-group (Allport, 1954),⁴ specific beliefs of individual Christians can be very different—even among Christians within the same denomination⁵ and the same congregation. This becomes abundantly clear in the following chapters as the interviewees share some of their own interpretations of scripture passages that have been associated with homosexuality. The participants may be familiar with the same scripture, whether having studied it in depth or merely heard a sermon on the subject, but their understandings of its meaning are greatly influenced by their views on how the Bible should be interpreted. In fact, the beliefs within this research sample of 26 people who attended the same church are representative of almost every one of five points on a Biblical Interpretation Continuum⁶ (Appendix E). They may have

⁴ In the 1954 book entitled *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon W. Allport approaches prejudice from just about every angle, beginning with why we identify with in-groups and reference groups and our resulting need for naming an out-group.

⁵ The 26 people who were interviewed cited backgrounds in six denominations: United Church of Christ, Methodist, Bible/Evangelical Free/Fundamental, Christian Reformed, Brethren in Christ, and Presbyterian. The person's specific church background did not appear to play a significant role in his or her interpretation of scripture and beliefs about homosexuality.

⁶ The Biblical Interpretation Continuum was adapted from a questionnaire that was developed by Tim Larson for use in an adult Bible study class to demonstrate to that group the breadth of opinion found even among Christians who belong to the same congregation.

worshipped in the same sanctuary and even recited aloud together the same creeds,⁷ but they interpret scripture along a vast range. And those different approaches to the interpretation of scripture are tied to how they view homosexuality.

On the interpretation continuum, positions 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate more flexibility or ambiguity by using such words as “merely” in position 1, “some . . . may not be” in position 2, and “and at the same time” in position 3. These fall in line with what is considered to be more theologically liberal. Religious liberalism, sometimes called modernism or neo-Protestantism, grew out of the desire of German philosophers in the early 1800s to be more in step with the science of the times (Harrison, 1960).

Positions 4 and 5 on the continuum both use more definitive, inflexible terms to describe how scripture should be interpreted, such as “controlled by the Holy Spirit . . . trustworthy” in position 4 and “without error in all it teaches” in position 5. These two positions might be described as conservative, traditional, or belonging to fundamental theology. Fundamentalism was a reaction to modernism in the early 1900s and an effort to uphold truths viewed as unwavering, such as the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture (Harrison, 1960), and so tends toward a more literal interpretation.

It is important to remember that Christians who hold to liberal or conservative interpretations of scripture are not restricted to a particular church or denomination. The people interviewed for this research all attended Long Grove for a period of years in their adult life, but many of them had childhood backgrounds in other Protestant denominations, and many left Long Grove to join churches in other denominations. Consequently, this paper is concerned not so

⁷ Beliefs in many mainline Protestant denominations are recited as creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. The creeds define points of church doctrine, such as the triune God and the divinity of Christ, but they do not address specific practices or behaviors.

much with the specific beliefs of a particular denomination but rather with how liberal and conservative approaches to the interpretation of scripture may be predictive of or may play a role in an individual's beliefs about homosexuality.

The spectrum of individual beliefs within denominations is also important to remember when examining the history of the Protestant church and how it has dealt with minorities or stigmatized groups throughout the centuries—slaves, women, gays and lesbians. The tension created between liberal and conservative interpretations of scripture has led to schism, such as the recent division in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and subsequent birth of the North American Lutheran Church.

Literal Interpretation, and a Brief History of Stigmatized Groups, and the Church

Throughout the history of the Protestant church, a literal interpretation of scripture has been used to support beliefs about African Americans, women, and gays and lesbians, and it has contributed to racial, gender, and sexual identity discrimination, barring membership, and denying the opportunity to serve in positions of leadership in the church. In the case of African American slaves, Christians have changed their minds. On the subject of women holding church leadership roles, Protestant denominations are still split, with the more conservative churches that adhere to a literal interpretation of scripture maintaining all-male leadership.

The Christian Church (and other religious groups) functions as a subculture within society, with its own doctrines, creeds, and codes of behavior based on the 66 books that make up the canon of the Bible. How the Bible has been interpreted throughout the ages has afforded the Church tremendous influence on society and its individual members and has contributed to

shaping opinions. Because of this far-reaching influence, it is important to look at how the Church has dealt with stigmatized groups in the past and used scripture as proof texts along the way.

Ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda means “the church, reformed and always reforming.” These words were the motto of the Christian Reformation that took place just shy of 500 years ago on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. In the history of the Protestant church, Luther was a catalyst for massive change. Although his initial goal was to reform the Catholic Church’s beliefs and behaviors about offering indulgences, his action instead sparked the Protestant Reformation, spawning by one estimation 1,600 Protestant denominations in the United States alone, 800 of which have formed in the last 25 years (Machacek, 2003). Many of these denominational spinoffs have occurred when societal reforms, new interpretations of scripture, and a modern understanding of science and humanity have clashed with traditional, conservative, or fundamental doctrinal beliefs and practices that hold to a literal interpretation of scripture.

African Americans and Slavery

Modern biblical scholars interpret the early chapters of the book of Genesis as allegory, with the stories being humankind’s early attempt to explain the world and how God loves and interacts with creation. Those who interpret scripture as inerrant consider these early chapters not as allegory but as historically and scientifically accurate—that the Earth was created in six 24-hour days, for example. Likewise, the Genesis account of Noah and his family, whom God saved from the flood, is linked to an explanation of how the unique human races became established. Early biblical scholars projected onto the reference to Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and

Japheth (Genesis 6:10) today's human races, associated with Europe, Asia, and Africa. From this they extrapolated a three-son, three-continent view. Ham became the father of Canaan, later identified with the African race and so assumed to be black (Haynes, 2002). In the biblical story, Ham entered a tent to find Noah drunk and naked. When Ham saw his father naked, Noah cursed him, saying, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (KJV,⁸ Genesis 9:25). This isolated incident became a proof text to justify slavery in society. A modern interpretation might question how each of Noah's sons, born of the same mother, is a different race.

During the antebellum period in the United States, Christian abolitionists were more common in the northern states, while in the southern state of Carolina, Presbyterian minister Henley Thornwell claimed that slavery was the "good and merciful" way to organize "labor which Providence has given us" (Noll, 2006). For most Christians, it seems, owning blacks as servants was the natural class order of the world and not to be questioned.

Interestingly, although men such as Thornwell condoned slavery, there was a desire that slaves would no longer be heathen but become Christian. One popular early method used for learning Bible lessons, which is still used in some churches, was the memorization and recitation of simple questions and answers called catechisms.⁹ In keeping with this long-standing practice, a catechism was written specifically for slaves (Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States, 1862) so that they could recite lessons on creation, God's nature, sin, salvation, and obedience. The questions and answers are kept short and simple so they could be easily learned by rote; the master-slave hierarchy is not challenged but assumed.

⁸ Scripture references are from the *New International Version* and the *King James Version* accessed at BibleGateway.com. This reference is from the King James Version of the Bible.

⁹ In some Christian churches, such as the Christian Reformed Church, catechism questions are read aloud by the minister in worship and the congregation responds orally with the answer.

Q. What do you mean by doing no bad things, such things as the devil tempts you to do?

A. I mean that I must not hurt anybody; must not disobey my parents [nor disobey my master] nor disobey God.

Q. But can you not disobey your parents [and your master] without their knowing it?

A. Yes; but God knows it; for God always sees me. (Protestant Episcopal Church of the Confederate States, 1862)

Nineteenth-century Christians wanted their slaves to be followers of Christ rather than pagans, but not to enjoy the full benefits of Christianity. Slaves could be free from sin and eternal damnation in the spiritual sense while remaining obedient servants to their earthly masters within God's natural order of humankind. Reverend Thornwell spoke of slavery as "regulated liberty." In Thornwell's mind, the abolitionists were just another test of the righteous, who saw themselves pitted against a modern society of atheists, socialists, and communists. And the Church needed to fight against such challenges to maintain purity.

Other references in the Bible used as a platform for maintaining slavery, however, were also used to teach the responsibility of the Christian slave owner to treat slaves kindly. For example, the Apostle Paul sent an escaped slave, Onesimus, back to his master, Philemon, telling Philemon, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— to treat him no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (NIV,¹⁰ Philemon 1:16). Christians interpreted this verse as confirming that Paul condoned slavery, since he did not recommend that Philemon free Onesimus, but instead treat him as a brother. Christians interpreted this account as giving them license to maintain the status

¹⁰ New International Version.

quo guilt-free. And, in fact, by 1860 Presbyterians in the southern states owned a disproportionate number of slaves (Farmer, 1986).

But in both this reference in Philemon and in a letter to the Colossians, Paul says that as followers of Jesus we should love and respect each other. A modern, nonliteral interpretation would contend that these verses are not to be read as proof texts that uphold slavery, but as examples of real-life scenarios of how we should love and serve those around us.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (NIV, Colossians 3:22-24)

Paul's order that slaves obey their earthly masters could be interpreted as being not about slavery at all, but about behaving with the same righteous character when no one is watching as when they are. The modern interpretation is that whatever our position in life, we should love and serve others as if we are serving Christ himself.

The Role of Women

In the biblical allegory of creation and the fall of humanity from God's grace in the Garden of Eden, Eve was duped by the serpent, sinned, then convinced Adam to sin as well. In response, God cursed the woman with pain in childbirth and said, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (NIV, Genesis 3:16). For those who interpret scripture literally, this statement clearly dictates a natural order of women in subordination to men. This

belief is in keeping with the male-dominant society in which the Bible was written and has remained true for many in relatively recent history.

In the early days of the Christian church, the Apostle Paul perpetuated the submission of women in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (NIV, I Corinthians 14:34-35)

Looking back at the culture of the first-century Christian church, we find that Hebrew men were educated and taught the scriptures, while Hebrew women were not. In the Corinthian church, Greek women were being particularly bold, and Paul wanted to make sure they were not creating a commotion in worship services.

Two other minor references say that women are more beautiful when they are submissive to their husbands, “like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master” (NIV, I Peter 1:6), and that husbands have the responsibility to protect their wives “and treat them with respect as the weaker partner” (NIV, I Peter 3:7). Again, these are examples of how women in those times were perceived. Women were possessions, not equal partners in the marketplace, the home, or the synagogue.

In Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, he used marriage as a metaphor for how Christ relates to the body of believers known as the Church.¹¹

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (NIV, Ephesians 5:23-24)

¹¹ *Church* with a capital “C” is used to refer to Christians of all denominations worldwide.

Within the context of the culture of the first century, this metaphor of authority and headship made sense. But in a 21st-century United States that offers equal rights and education to both women and men, are Paul's hierarchical views still valid in the Church? Does the male-dominated society of the early Church dictate the future forever? Or must Paul's words be interpreted within the framework of what he understood in his own society and subsequently reinterpreted within the framework of today's modern world? Today, we might interpret the Ephesians passage not as a manual for proper hierarchy, with Christ at the top, men below Christ, and women below men, but rather as a model of how individuals in the Church should love each other, much like people within a healthy family love and respect each other.

In a letter to Timothy, Paul defined the qualifications for leadership in the Church (I Timothy 3:1-12). When the lengthy list is interpreted literally, the verses include the admonition that a leader should be "faithful to his wife" (NIV) or "the husband of one wife" (KJV). But the society in which this was written had no examples of educated women in leadership roles. It would appear to the modern reader that Paul is setting out not eternal absolutes but guidelines for moral and upright leadership. "Husband of one wife" doesn't necessarily exclude "woman of one husband," or the general command to be faithful to your spouse. The phrase could be interpreted as a guideline describing the characteristics of a faithful spouse in a monogamous relationship as opposed to a man with many wives. Other attributes listed in these verses would apply to both men and women leaders – "above reproach, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money (NIV, I Timothy 3: 2-3). When the passage is taken as a whole, being male seems secondary to these other character traits.

In the 1800s, although women were becoming more educated, it was still predominantly a man's world. Not surprisingly, the manual for ruling elders in the church in 1832 makes no mention of women, likely because it was assumed, even in that century, that women were ineligible for leadership. "Elders are honest, grave, pious men, chosen out of the whole congregation that they may act as guardians of all the rest" (Miller, 1832).

In secular society, it was not until 1893 that Colorado became the first state to grant women the right to vote. By 1918, fifteen more states had followed Colorado's lead. Lagging behind society at large by a generation, Protestant denominations have slowly afforded more and more privileges to women once reserved exclusively for men.

In the Presbyterian Church women have been allowed to be ordained since 1958, but not in all branches of the denomination. The Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) still does not ordain women to the position of elder or pastor. Strangely, women in the PCA can attend seminary and become theologians, but they cannot be ordained as clergy or lay leaders. In 2004, 35 percent of PCA seminary graduates were women.

The PCA has not determined what to do with its female theologians. And the women themselves ask why the secular workplace values their skills and expertise, while the church does not. Women who graduate with degrees in divinity want to make a serious contribution in the church. One attorney with years of experience practicing law asked why her offer to assist the church with legal issues was not accepted; rather, she was drafted to the domestic task of decorating tables for the church dinner (James, 2011).

In contrast with the Church's history of dragging its feet behind society as changes occur, Jesus demonstrated a radical response to the worldview of his time by shifting the religious emphasis from following rules and regulations to showing compassion. He broke the holiness

laws of the Jewish faith, such as not working on the Sabbath, in order to prove the point (Mark 3:2-4) that he had come to shake things up and abolish the Law as Jews knew it. With that in mind, when looking at any contemporary issue, why wouldn't the lens of "What would Jesus do?" be worn? How would Jesus respond in today's society, in which women can become educated and hold jobs in authority over men?

Ironically, although the Apostle Paul at times puts women on a lower level than men, he has also stated that for those who follow the teachings of Jesus, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, any slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV, Galatians 3:28). This would appear to contradict his statements about women's voice and role in the Church.

Gays and Lesbians

In the 1980s and '90s, churches in Protestant denominations in the United States debated the role of women in the church, with a typical outcome of disagreement being a schism with some leaving to unite with a more like-minded denomination or to spin off and establish an entirely new one. In the decades since, the internal debate has shifted toward gay and lesbian believers. While in society, LGBT individuals are getting married, raising children, teaching, volunteering, and being successful in every secular career you can name, Protestant denominations continue to debate whether gays and lesbians should be allowed to be ordained as pastors or even to serve in church leadership positions. But if a denomination's leaders eventually change its official stance on homosexuality, will those views be embraced by its members?

In government, Supreme Court justices create arguments with which the general public may not always agree. For example, in the 2003 case of *Lawrence v. Texas*,¹² the decision that private homosexual behaviors are protected under the Constitution, individual justices thought deeply about the issues involved and how those issues relate to the U.S. Constitution, which ultimately led then to make a change in the law. The justices worked through the questions, were personally invested in the argument, and arrived at a conclusion. And although the final decision was communicated to the public, it is not experienced in the same depth by individual citizens and may not be embraced by all of them. This phenomenon has been playing out repeatedly in recent years as some state legislatures¹³ have voted to ban same-sex marriage, supported by a majority of voting citizens, while at the same time some courts have decided that a ban on same-sex marriage is unconstitutional.

Similarly, in the Christian Church, decisions made at the denominational level do not always trickle down to agreement in the pews. Issues of sexuality are currently being hotly debated at the denominational level among Presbyterians and Lutherans, but the decisions made at national meetings among a select group of church leaders are not always embraced by the individuals in a congregation. Some mainline Christian denominations, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, are making changes in how they interpret scripture concerning sexuality. With those changes has come, not surprisingly, the establishment of new, more conservative denominations, such as the North American Lutheran Church.

¹² *Lawrence v. Texas* – 539 U.S. 558 (2003). Retrieved from <http://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/539/558/case.html>.

¹³ In California, the popular vote banned same-sex marriage and was later overturned by the state's Supreme Court. In other states, such as Maine and Maryland, the people drove the decision to allow same-sex marriage.

All of this is not to say that reform has not happened or is not continuing. One very interesting reform occurred in the Presbyterian Church USA. Rather than debate whether homosexuality is a sin, would-be reformers, in a sort of backdoor strategy, focused on the wording of qualifications for the ordination of elders and pastors. If the words that restricted one ordination requirement—to “either live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness”¹⁴—were eliminated, the obstacle to ordaining gays and lesbians to church leadership would fall. In the eyes of conservative Presbyterians, eliminating the wording was a backhanded message that condoned homosexuality. If gays and lesbians could be ordained as leaders, then homosexuality must not be sinful.

At the national level, the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to allow regional groups of congregations called presbyteries to decide for themselves whether to adopt new wording that speaks more to the spiritual character of the candidate for ordination than to their sexuality or marital status. The new wording states that “Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life”¹⁵. In February 2011, the presbytery to which my congregation belongs voted in favor of the new wording. To my knowledge, the only formal response to the vote was a single Saturday morning workshop held for the church elders in spring of 2011 which was intended to help them understand the new wording and how it might be implemented should a homosexual member wish to become ordained.

¹⁴ Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order 2009-2011. Retrieved from <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/publications/2009-2011-boo.pdf>.

¹⁵ Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order 2013-2015. Retrieved from <http://www.mission-presbytery.org/documents/BookofOrder2013-2015pdf.pdf>.

The Importance of This Study

Today's young adults, people with no religious affiliation, and people who are more highly educated have been shown to be less homophobic (Loftus, 2001; Scott, 1998). Where does that reality leave Christianity? Church attendance is down, particularly among young people. If Christianity is to grow and continue to spread what I believe to be an important message to the world, it must open its doors to new interpretations of scripture in light of what we have learned in the past 2,000 years—much like Martin Luther accomplished 500 years ago. Becoming more flexible could be effective in reaching a younger, more tolerant audience of people who want to dialogue about difficult topics.

What is the future for Christianity if many in the faith are unable to evolve and change their beliefs and attitudes toward sexuality? Some research in the field of intergroup separation, which looks at how people with common beliefs form and maintain their cohesiveness as a group, suggests that without dialogue, the continued intergroup separation—will result in conservative Christian groups circling the wagons against change, reinforcing their prejudices, and becoming increasingly isolated. Just as bullies are unlikely to attend anti-bullying workshops, Christians who are intolerant of gays and lesbians are unlikely to seek out opportunities to mingle and develop relationships with them (Hodson & Busseri, 2012). Another possibility is that younger, less prejudiced Christians will outlive their intolerant elders. Younger generations have already been shown to be less homophobic than older generations (Besen & Zicklin, 2007;¹⁶ Abdel-Moneim & Simon, 2011¹⁷), so perhaps younger conservative Christians

¹⁶ Besen and Zicklin, using data from Pew Research surveys, looked at young men ages 18 to 24. They found among them higher levels of support on issues such as gay marriage, gay adoption, and gay people serving in the military.

will be able to shift their own beliefs through encounters, education, and experience with gays and lesbians. This may leave the group of older, inflexible, intolerant Christians to change by attrition—that is, as the older, more conservative Christian cohort dies off, the younger, more tolerant cohort will become dominant. Surveys show that older cohorts are more opposed to civil unions, with 63% of those under 50 and 69% of those under 30 saying that homosexuality should be accepted, while only 52% of those older than 50 agree (“Most Say Homosexuality Should Be Accepted By Society,” 2011). With one-fifth of all Americans and one-third of American adults under the age of 30 claiming to be religiously unaffiliated, this does not bode well for the future of Christianity. About two-thirds of Americans say they are spiritual and believe in God but do not want to associate themselves with a religious institution.

It is also hoped that this study will result in ideas for moving genuine conversation forward between gay Christians and allies and conservative Christians, that rather than encounters ending in shouting matches punctuated with quotations from a few scripture verses, it might help pave the way toward reconciliation, or at least keep the door open for further discussion. Gay Christians who feel that their own church has abandoned them may benefit from understanding the basis for a conservative Christian’s approach to scripture and from hearing the voices of straight Christians who do not read scripture with the same rigidity.

The next chapter (Chapter 2) will describe some of the thinking and structure behind this research project, including how qualitative research methodology has illuminated areas that required caution, distance, neutrality, and reflexivity. I will describe what makes this research unique, partly the result of my personal connection to the participants, which also made the

¹⁷ Abdel-Moneim and Simon analyzed data from Pew Research Center surveys on opinions toward various groups (Muslims, Jews, and gays and lesbians) and topics (evolution, abortion, immigration, stem cell research). They found that age matters with regard to a number of issues concerning gays and lesbians.

research possible. Rather than devote a separate chapter to a literature review, I have woven references to related research on attitudinal plasticity and attributes of conservative Christians toward homosexuals throughout the following chapters.

Chapter 3 begins with an analysis breaking down some of the repeated phrases and concepts that arose from the interviews—elements that seemed, surprisingly, to categorize the statements made by participants based on their political affiliation, their position on the biblical interpretation continuum, and whether they have gay friends or relatives.

Chapter 4 is a discussion that includes additional context from related research on attitude change, plasticity, and how relationships with a member of an out group can affect beliefs and attitudes. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on hindrances to attitude change and suggestions for how to keep the conversation between LGBT allies and conservative Christians moving forward.

Chapter 2: Methods

Why Qualitative Research?

When I originally conceived the topic of this master's thesis, I planned to use a grounded theory approach. I sought to demonstrate how a Christian ally evolves. For me, the life-altering ally-evolving encounter began when my former pastor came out. I was certain that the news must have had a similar effect on many of the others who had also attended or were still attending Long Grove Church and experienced Ray's coming out. Although the research would utilize interviews, the work would be grounded theory, that is, systematically gathered and analyzed data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews would be not open-ended but direct, including point-blank yes/no questions such as "Has your attitude toward gays and lesbians changed since you learned about Ray's sexuality?"

But as I began to develop interview questions, it became clear that the grounded theory approach would be too limiting to this project, not sufficiently naive or open to discover what the participants would tell me if the interview were not orchestrated with a specific crescendo in mind. There would be no room for the kind of insight that can come only by accident (Kirk & Miller, 1986). In the effort to prove a theory, opportunities to listen might be missed, and if a substantial number of participants had not undergone a similar ally evolution, the project would become more about disproving a theory and less about learning something new about how this experience plays out in individual lives. Although there would be demographic/quantifiable details (political affiliation and position on the biblical interpretation continuum), they would be overlaid onto participants' interview answers. Ultimately, the work would be primarily basic

qualitative research—extracting categories, patterns, and themes from interviews with intentional questioning but allowing for open-ended answers (Patton, 1990).

Shiva's circle of constructivist inquiry (Figure 1, Crabtree & Miller, 1992) provides an excellent paradigm for this qualitative research project. The abandoned theory based on my own evolution as an ally and the subsequent modifications fit with Explanation/Theory on the circle; Experience/Anomaly coincides with the common denominator of Ray's coming out; Invention/Design rose out of the desire to learn whether some or many of the Christians who experienced Ray's coming out experienced attitude change; Discovery/Data Collection is the interview process; Interpretation/Analysis represents the intensive phase in which the interviews are processed, dissected, and scrutinized for common themes and divergence; and the original expectations are reexamined in the final step. This journey in a circular diagram follows a path similar to the four phases of qualitative research, defined as invention, discovery, interpretation, and explanation (Kirk & Miller, 1986).

Replicable and Measurable

Although the circumstances from which this research originally arose would likely differ, the project¹⁸ could be replicated using participants from a different Christian church. They could be asked identical questions about political affiliation, how literally they interpret scripture, and whether they have homosexual friends or relatives. Questions about a pastor's coming out could be asked hypothetically. The quantitative elements, such as political affiliation and how scripture is interpreted, may even be in alignment in a more general Christian sample. However, it is

¹⁸I conducted a small pilot study for a class project in the spring of 2012 to test the interview questions that I had begun to develop. For that paper, I interviewed one individual who had no connection with Long Grove Church.

unlikely that the findings would include the surprising elements of empathy and compassion that came out of this study, because those feelings would presumably be more difficult to manufacture from a hypothetical question about a hypothetical pastor.

When working with human subjects, I learned that even some of the measurable descriptors can be fuzzy. In this study, some participants had an easy time declaring what political affiliation they most closely held, while others preferred to be more loosely associated, saying, for example, “I typically vote Democratic.” Many participants had difficulty choosing which biblical interpretation position they most closely held; some talked through the options aloud while I waited for their response (“Position 5 sounds good, but I could make a case for 4 or even 3”). One participant created her own position—number 6—because position 5 did not include “unique divine inspiration.”

In the end, the flexibility that basic qualitative research methodology affords was the best approach for this study. Using guided questions allowed for an open-ended conversation that elicited colorful and thoughtful responses, providing an opportunity to listen and understand. In fact, it took only one interview for me to see that listening would be the most productive component of this qualitative research project and one of the foundations of basic qualitative research (Merriam, 2009).

Listening without following a strict script¹⁹ allowed me to find recurring patterns in what people said, common phrases that expressed beliefs about homosexual behavior in light of a heterosexual worldview, about the trustworthiness of scripture, and about something I didn’t anticipate hearing at all—an underlying theme of compassion. In fact, this discovery of

¹⁹ Interview questions, approved by the Institutional Review Board, were asked in different sequences depending upon the natural direction of each conversation.

compassion changed the focus of my research. The goal became less about pinpointing how conservative Christians think and more about changing the words I say so that the dialogue can continue. As posited by Michael Quinn Patton (1990), human beings are different from plants and nuclear particles. In keeping with the doctrine of *verstehen*, Patton asserts that we must understand human beings in a special way because of their nature and ability to make plans, develop cultures, and hold values that affect their behavior. This concept along with the ability to empathize is actively at work in this line of qualitative inquiry and analysis.

Reflexivity and Neutrality

Qualitative research methods such as reflexivity and neutrality played a definite and pervasive role throughout this project (Dowling, 2008). Although my role was that of a researcher, my personal connection cannot be ignored. Having been a member of Long Grove Church for 19 years, including the entire 15 years that Ray was pastor, gave me a unique perspective. I had an answer for each of the questions that I asked the participants. My association also gave me entrée to this select group of individuals.

As a researcher-participant I could not check my experience at the door; I brought it with me to every interview. The interviews, however, remained remarkably one-sided. I found that somewhat startling. Weren't participants even curious about my own investment in the research? For whatever reason, this one-sidedness worked to my benefit. The participants were not shy about expressing their beliefs. Perhaps because I did not divulge my own perspective or opinion, they shared their beliefs honestly, presumably without fear of insulting me. Those who were accepting of gay Christians and believe homosexuality is not a sin were not timid to tell me so. Conversely, those who believe homosexuality is sinful unabashedly expressed that belief. Even

those who could not cite or recite specific scripture on the topic had no problem telling me what they believed that the Bible said about homosexuality. And even after the recorder was turned off and the interview had ended, only one person shined the light back at me and asked about my beliefs. Maintaining the stance of a neutral listener elicited the participants' candid responses. Not one of them attempted to sugarcoat his or her words or qualify an answer with such observations as "I know this isn't the politically correct answer, but . . ."

Many of the participants I interviewed are people whom I consider friends and with whom I have regular contact. They are people with whom I have worshipped, studied the Bible in small group settings, done committee work, and socialized. Some agreed to participate in the project because they wanted to help me achieve my goal to obtain a master's degree. Several people expressed a desire to participate because they wanted to work through some of their past feelings about Ray's coming out in order to understand it better themselves. Whatever their motivation for participating, my motivation needed to remain merely listening to them—not to convince them of my opinion, pressure them to examine their beliefs, or inflict guilt if they had not been affected at all by Ray's coming out. These are old and current friends with whom I hope to continue to have amicable relationships. Likewise, Ray and his family are real people who endured real pain. Their story is not something that should be exploited or manipulated.

An additional layer to the sensitivity of this study is the very nature of the topic. Divorce, rejection, integrity, trust in a pastor, sexuality, and faith are not the stuff of casual parking-lot conversations. I was entering into a social contract with those I interviewed, and I wanted to keep my end of the bargain. In my original request to interview them, I clearly stated that I was not looking for a theological debate on the subject, so they could come to the table knowing that they would not be made to feel uncomfortable.

Conducting qualitative research on a topic that has specific and personal meaning may raise suspicions about a researcher's ability to analyze the data while maintaining an unbiased, unemotional, and professional filter (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). In this study, it would admittedly have been easy when coding the interview responses to select those that I preferred to hear and discard others. When a researcher is working independently, there is no one else there to question her judgment.

It may also be tempting when conducting qualitative research to modify participants' quotes slightly. This was something I had to be particularly mindful of when I began analyzing participants' answers to the question about their understanding about what scripture says concerning homosexuality. In an effort to be nonconfrontational, and in compliance with the Institutional Review Board stipulations, I asked how participants "understood scripture" rather than bluntly asking for a yes or no answer to the question "Do you believe homosexuality is a sin?" I was hoping to learn where they stood concerning the sinfulness of homosexuality. Their answers generally fell neatly into two categories of sinful and not sinful, except for Margaret and Sandra, each of whom appeared to be saying that she believed homosexuality was not a sin, but also included a tiny bit of doubt about how she reconciles her social ideology about homosexuality with what she understands scripture to be saying. Margaret answered the question this way:

You know what? I have not reconciled any of that. The denomination is just on their old thing about showing compassion but "this is what the Word says," so you can't get ordained, and they expect celibacy of course. I can't reconcile that. I'm still [a member of that denomination] but I've given up on that. I say maybe

we'll understand that stuff when we get to heaven and maybe lots of people will have a big surprise. If God's a loving God, I can't bring it together.

Sandra said,

I'm not sure what I think. I think the Bible should always be read in context with references to the original language. It's also hard for me to think God did not want homosexuals to live normal lives. But the Bible seems to contradict me. I am conflicted.

Margaret is politically liberal and theologically liberal, having chosen 2 on the biblical interpretation continuum, which would seem to have made it easy to place her in the "homosexuality is not a sin" category. Similarly, looking only at Sandra's conservative position on the biblical interpretation continuum, it would have been easy to ignore her last few words and include her with the homosexuality-is-a-sin group. This would have made the findings more concise and dramatic, but it would not have reflected the results accurately. In the end, integrity as a qualitative researcher is more important than a clean chart. And because people are much more complex than a mere list of descriptors, it is vital to listen carefully for the nuances in an interview and to analyze honestly.

Participant Recruitment and Interview Process

Individuals who attended Long Grove Church for one or more of the years that Ray was pastor were contacted via a personal email or a private Facebook message (Appendix D). For 28

of the 36²⁰ people contacted, their snail mail or email addresses were already known by me, or I had already become friends with them on Facebook. For the other 8, their contact information was obtained through a mutual acquaintance or by searching for them on Facebook. One of the participants said that her daughter would also like to participate, but because her daughter was not yet even a preteen when she attended Long Grove, her knowledge of scripture and understanding of sexuality at the time would not have been comparable with the participants who were adults then. Because of the nature of the topic, it made sense to only interview people in the sample who were 18 or older during the year that Ray came out. Although the highest level of education was not a demographic that I factored into the research, all of those who participated in the study had college degrees by the time of the interviews, and the majority held advanced degrees.²¹ Only 1 participant was nonwhite.

Only 5 of the 26 people I interviewed are currently still members of Long Grove. The Long Grove congregation is quite transient due to its historical mission as a campus ministry. Many participants joined the church when they were undergraduate or graduate students at a nearby university and left anywhere from 4 to 10 years later when they finished their degree programs. Still others in the sample were young professionals in the mid-1990s and left the community to advance their careers.

Other than having attended the church during at least a portion of the years that Ray served as pastor, the only other criterion for selection was that I knew someone at least well enough that her or his receiving an email from me would not be unheard of. I did not search old

²⁰ The scope of the study in terms of the number of subjects may be small, but it is actually a large percentage, considering the entire population of an estimated 285 to 300 unique individuals who attended Long Grove during the 15 years that Ray was the pastor.

²¹ The complete breakdown of the 26 participants in the highest-education descriptor is 2 B.A., 13 M.A., 2 J.D., 1 M.D., and 8 Ph.D.

church directories for names of people with whom I had little contact while attending Long Grove Church. Initially contacting potential participants through a private Facebook or email message gave each a convenient, nonconfrontational method to accept or decline to participate (or in some cases, to ignore my request entirely). In addition, participants were given the option to conduct an interview in person, over the phone, or by Skype or to write down answers to a list of questions and return them to me by post or email.

Each person was contacted only once. If someone did not respond, it was assumed that he or she did not want to participate, and I did not send a followup request. This was true even for two individuals who told me that their spouses would like to participate in the study. The spouses, though invited, were not contacted a second time.

Of the 36 individuals who were contacted, 26 agreed to participate, 6 did not respond at all, 1 agreed to be interviewed “if you still need more people,” and 3 declined but offered reasons why (“I prefer not to participate”; “I don’t participate in this sort of thing”; “I’m too busy to put the needed thought into this”).

Of the 26 individuals who agreed to participate, 1 interview was conducted by phone, 2 were by Skype, and 11 were either in person at the participant’s home or at a café. Twelve participants answered the questions by email.

The interviews were transcribed completely and uploaded to qualitative research software at www.dedoose.com. The demographics of the participants were entered, including gender, current age, age in 1996, number of years at Long Grove, number of years at Long Grove that overlapped with Ray, highest level of education, political affiliation, and denominational church background.

Participants were also asked to select from a list of five positions the one that best describes how they interpret scripture (Appendix E). The positions range from position 1, that the Bible is merely a human book, to position 5, that the Bible is the infallible word of God. The chosen position number was entered into the demographic data for analysis and comparison with the coded statements from the interviews.

The questions for the interview were designed to be nonargumentative. For example, I did not ask participants why they believed something, just what they believed. No one was asked for an in-depth analysis or apologetic of scripture concerning homosexuality. Based on how someone answered the question about what scripture says about homosexuality, I ascertained whether the person's beliefs were more in line with defining homosexuality as a sin or not and added a descriptor category for acceptance. As previously discussed, when carefully analyzing their answers, I ultimately added a category for two participants who said that they were not sure what they believed.

Remaining Unbiased as a Researcher/Participant

Although I am friends with many of the participants in this study, I cannot recall ever discussing the topic of homosexuality with any of them. I do remember a few very short conversations immediately after Ray's coming out, at the level of "can you believe it?" as opposed to substantively discussing the broader topic. This is important, because although I have personally thought a great deal about Christianity, the Church, and attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality, I had never had conversations on the subject with those I interviewed, with the exception of one person. Having the common experience of having attended Long Grove Church and having Ray as a pastor gave me the entrée to discuss the topic with participants, but I was in

no way prepared for what their answers to my questions would be. In fact, in almost every conversation, one or more answers took me by surprise.

The surprise on my part is an example of the impartiality I brought to the process of developing a list of people whom I would approach to participate in the study. I did not attempt to stack the deck in favor of my own opinions and beliefs by inviting people I thought would agree with me. Because, as I said, I had really never talked with them about homosexuality and had not had regular contact with most participants for at least 12 years, I could not know their responses or experiences and could not have predicted their answers to my interview questions. The few speculations I made prior to conducting interviews were often completely wrong.

Although several themes arose from those conversations that became the focus of this research, the unanticipated histories and responses from each individual confirm that qualitative research is extremely complex—as complex as the individuals themselves. Indeed, what I found was that although all of those I interviewed and I had experienced the same life event—Ray’s coming out—each of us had come to that point in time from different places and life experiences. Consequently, the event had varying degrees of importance and impact for each person. For some people Ray’s coming out was surprising and disappointing but did not change their views on homosexuality. For others it was the impetus for in-depth Bible study, the development of a new social consciousness, and eventually dramatic changes of beliefs and attitudes. For a few, it brought no change because they were already allies.

Each person has beliefs and attitudes that are developed throughout life’s experiences, influenced by many factors, including gender and age, physical and cultural location, education and professional experiences, and political and religious background. All of the factors that

contribute to who people are and what they believe “play an active role in shaping their lives by the way they handle or fail to handle the events or problems they encounter, and their action/interactions/emotional responses based, of course, on their perceptions of those events” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 88). This concept became increasingly powerful to me as I progressed through the analysis of the participant’s responses, because although the reference point for this study was a specific event in time that they had all experienced, their reactions to that event were unpredictable.

Chapter 3: Research Observations

It would be accurate to say that the result of interviewing 26 unique individuals was 26 unique conversations, and although the entire sample was composed of Protestant Christians, with some points of intersection, there were 26 very different voices as well. Despite that uniqueness, there were also several common themes, and some interesting exceptions. The categories or groupings suggested in this chapter are in no way intended to diminish the unique attitudes and beliefs of the individual participants, but rather to find ways to better understand how political and theological ideology may affect attitudinal plasticity.

That being said, I did observe an association between participants' political affiliation and how literally participants interpret scripture. The position they selected on the biblical continuum and their thoughts on scripture verses that relate to sexuality contributed to whether or not they believe that homosexuality is a sin (Table 1).

By grouping positions 1, 2, and 3 on the biblical interpretation continuum as representative of more liberal theology and positions 4 and 5 as more conservative, the two resulting categories could be aligned with the two corresponding political affiliations—Republican/conservative and Democrat/liberal. The data (Figure 2) show a slight correlation between Democrats having a more liberal theology and Republicans a more conservative one. Although the number of participants in this study is small, this political correlation is in alignment with studies having much larger numbers of participants that have found a relationship between political/theological

conservatism and prejudice (Sibley, Harding, Perry, Asbrock, & Duckitt, 2010;²² Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992²³).

Theologically/Politically Liberal

None of the 26 participants selected position 1 on the biblical interpretation continuum, and only Margaret, Matt, Steve, and Donna selected position 2. All four of them identify as Democrat/liberal. Matt, Steve, and Donna believe that homosexuality is not sinful; Margaret was unsure. Each had had close relationships with gays and lesbians over the years. Steve, Matt, and Donna currently have family members who are gay. For both Matt and Margaret, Ray was their first close encounter with anyone gay, and Ray's coming out served as a catalyst for them to learn more about homosexuality and ultimately become more accepting. As Margaret explained, "It's only when someone close to you is in this situation that you begin to give it thought and to examine your own views."

In an early effort to understand Ray's sexuality, Margaret and her husband (who was not a participant in the study) attended a Christian conference on homosexuality. Margaret's growing acceptance of Ray's sexuality seemed to be primarily motivated by the very touching and personal stories she heard at the conference.

There were gay parents there, some gay teenagers, all telling their stories. I remember a pastor was there, a very conservative guy, and he made some awful

²² The study conducted by Sibley et al. included 454 participants linking social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and derogated group prejudice.

²³ The Altemeyer and Hunsberger study included 698 participants linking fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism, and prejudice toward a wide variety of minority groups, including homosexuals.

statements. It was very emotional because you were hearing all of these people's personal stories, and it was having a great effect on us, and I think by that time we were very sympathetic to Ray already. And our thinking on all of this was really getting molded. Listening to those stories, your heart just went out to people.

There was a teacher who had a teenage son that was gay, and they were being ostracized by friends and people in the church, and their teenager wanted to commit suicide. I remember a lesbian woman saying, "If God created us to have a loving relationship with someone else why would he deny us the opportunity for us to do that?" There were so many things from that conference that added up to change our thinking. (Margaret)

In Matt's case, Ray's coming out jettisoned him into intensive study about what the Bible really says about homosexuality. Matt searched the Bible for answers to what seemed to him at the time to be a theological oxymoron—that someone could be both a Christian and gay.

Ray's coming out was a kind of watershed that provided a theological basis for the legitimacy for homosexuality in our culture. I didn't buy it at first. I needed for him and others to convince me of that. But [they] did. Over the years I've seen many examples like Ray—a close family member, other friends of mine, many, many people who clearly have the spirit of God in them, and it's not ours to say that it's not in them. It's the church's failure to dishonor God's spirit, which is clearly seen in [gay Christians]. To me, it's similar to the way the early church judged non-circumcised Gentiles. That's what I see. I see the spirit of God in [gay

Christians] and that trumps Leviticus²⁴ in my mind. It trumped it for Peter and Paul and James. And if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me. It's not just that one verse about 'who are you to call unclean what I call clean.'

There's a whole thread that goes through the conclusion of the council at Jerusalem on that topic and that is the main theme—that we see God clearly working in Gentiles without [their] having to become Jewish. Their conclusion was that we don't need to make them Jewish. Clearly I see God's spirit working in homosexual men and women. Therefore I don't see why we need to make them be heterosexual or to act heterosexually in order for them to be considered legitimate Christians. (Matt)

Donna referred to her conservative church community as “ground zero of the right-wing evangelical movement.” Both Steve and Donna were raised in conservative Christian homes, but their attitudes and beliefs had already begun changing prior to learning about Ray's sexuality, primarily because as young adults they had had close relationships with gays and lesbians. In one survey conducted to learn more about what influences heterosexuals to become allies, a team of researchers found several recurring themes in the subjects' mind-changing development, namely “early role models, an evolving recognition and understanding of privilege and oppression, and

²⁴ The book of Leviticus is a collection of laws known as the Holiness Code, given to the Israelites to help them define their religious, civic, and cultural identity. The word *holy* in this context meant to be set apart for a religious purpose; one could say “segregated.” Among Christians today, most of the holiness laws of Leviticus are dismissed as historical, pertaining to the ancient Israelites' need to separate themselves from the polytheists, and not applicable to modern Christianity—except for the laws that forbid homosexual activity. Some modern Bible scholars interpret the holiness laws against homosexual activity as having less to do with what we understand today as a mutual, loving relationship, and more to do with a society which understood sex as a symbol of male dominance and for the purpose of populating the Earth.

conflict between an awareness of sexual prejudice and deeply held values of justice and equality” (Duhigg, 2010²⁵). Although Steve and Donna were in the minority among my 26 study participants, having had previous relationships with gays and lesbians, many of the others spoke about how difficult coming out would be for Ray. Some mentioned that the Church had been harsh toward him and homosexuals in general, demonstrating that they understood discrimination. Others, such as Kurt and Patty, made comments about the sexual act being wrong but also had observed how gays and lesbians are mistreated and did not want to deny them their civil rights.

Steve said that as a young person, his views about homosexuality were “pretty crude and insensitive.” But as he got older, he learned that some of his best friends were gay, and he has maintained close relationships with them over the years.

I began to realize that being gay did not make one less of a person, and that a tremendous injustice was being done to gay people—particularly by Christians. Many of my [gay] friends left the church largely because they felt unwelcome and that they were carrying around a dreadful secret. My wife had many similar experiences with people she found out were gay. Both individually and as a couple, we have had numerous relationships and associations with gay people. All of these experiences began to radically change the way that I perceived and felt about gay people. For instance, already in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, I was comfortable with gay marriage. Additionally, I came to believe that gays should

²⁵ In this study, 12 heterosexuals termed “ally exemplars” were identified as allies by virtue of their involvement in some type of LGBT activism. Although religion didn’t play a large role in this study, it was noted that of the exemplars, 8 said that they were religious, 3 said they were not, and 1 wasn’t sure.

have the same rights and opportunities in all phases of society—including the church. In recent years, we left our church because of its teachings on gays and gay relationships. My oldest daughter has also come out, which has obviously had an impact on our thinking on these issues. (Steve)

Since graduating from high school, Donna has had several relatives come out as lesbian, which she said has been traumatic for some people in her family, but her own response has been supportive.

Once I started working in the public sector . . . I came to know many gay/lesbian people, some of whom had very negative views of Christians, a group they viewed as monolithic. I now work with and go to church with lesbians/gays. I vote whenever I can for their full civil rights. (Donna)

Theologically Liberal/Politically Conservative

Of the 8 participants who chose position 3 on the biblical interpretation continuum, six described themselves as Democrat/liberal. The only Republican/conservative participants who selected position 3 are Shane and Mike, which puts their cases somewhat outside of the common thread in the data analysis. Mike said that he has numerous colleagues/acquaintances who are gay, but no friends or relatives. About his understanding of what the Bible says on the subject, Mike said,

I would say that I'm naive about the scripture's stance on homosexuality. There are some passages that make it seem like it's a huge problem, like something

that's bad and other general passages that say it accepts all people, all tribes, all nations—everybody is all part of the Kingdom. (Mike)

When asked whether his views about homosexuality have changed since Ray's coming out, Mike said that they had but that he believes that his change of attitude has coincided with societal changes occurring since the mid-1990s.

I didn't have any views before [Ray came out]. I was living in a world where I didn't even think about [homosexuality] as a potential thing. And now that there are a lot of people I would say that I know are homosexual or might be, I think of it as not that big of a deal. People have all kinds of ideas about all kinds of things, and this is just another one. So I would say that I'm kind of neutral on the subject in general. (Mike)

Shane, who identifies with an extremely conservative political camp, expressed strong beliefs about homosexuality, saying, "It is not what God intended for sex. It is also a symptom/result of idolatry in a society, according to Romans 1."²⁶ When he was in college, Shane had a lesbian neighbor whom he spent a lot of time with and considered a friend. He also expressed a willingness to continue the dialogue about the Bible and homosexuality, which is perhaps why he was able to choose position 3 rather than the more conservative position 4 in the continuum of biblical interpretation.

²⁶ The first chapter of the book of Romans, also written by Paul, is about idolatry. As is true of all of the other references in the Bible, the term homosexuality is never used. Instead the verses in Romans refer to women and men abandoning their natural relations for unnatural ones. Some translations use the words "shameful lusts" and "indecent acts of perversion." This passage is the most confusing; certainly not clear enough to condemn gays and lesbians.

I understand there is controversy in how to interpret some of these things, that perhaps these passages don't really refer to modern-day committed homosexual relationships. I am willing to be convinced of that, but so far I don't find the arguments convincing. Practicing homosexual acts are sinful, but not particularly more so than other sexual sin. (Shane)

The fact that Shane is willing to dialogue is a topic that will be discussed further in the chapter on conclusions.

Theologically/Politically Conservative

Of those participants who selected a more conservative theological position, 4 participants selected position 5. All four of them believe that homosexual behavior is unacceptable; three are Republican, and only one a Democrat (Figure 3).

The 10 participants who selected position 4 are fairly evenly split politically—4 Democrats and 6 Republicans—and are also split in terms of acceptance, with 7 participants believing homosexuality is unacceptable, 2 believing it is acceptable, and 1 being unsure.

Most interesting and slightly out of trend in this group of more theologically conservative participants are Louise and Natalie, who both identify as Democrat/liberal and are accepting of gays and lesbians. Both have had some gay friends or colleagues, and both have a more matter-of-fact attitude toward scripture. Louise said about scripture that

I think the Bible is pretty clear that a lot of homosexuality is shown in a very bad light. It's always "wicked blahblahblah," but being a homosexual isn't one of the

10 Commandments, but committing adultery is. I just think [homosexuality] is the least of our worries. (Louise)

About how relationships influenced her attitudes, Louise said,

At that point in my life [the mid-1990s] my husband and I had a gay friend here in town who we were really close with and really liked. And it hit me that it's easy to be anti-gay until you have somebody who's gay as a close friend. Just like, back in the day, it was easy to be a racist unless you had a friend who was black. So I've always been fairly open-minded about that. (Louise)

When Natalie, who was raised to be theologically conservative, was asked what she believes the Bible teaches about homosexuality, she said,

I don't think a lot about theological issues because it's just not my thing. I like thinking more about political issues and economic issues and things like that. So then all of a sudden this sort of drift [in my theology] has occurred, and I'm not quite sure how it occurred. . . . At this moment in time, I would not declare [homosexuality] to be a matter of faith—that it's either don't cut your hair or believe in the resurrection. [Cutting hair] would be things I put under cultural conditions rather than the essentials, the core of the Faith. (Natalie)

Natalie's relationships with gays and lesbians over the years were not as close as Louise's, but in the relationships she did have, sexuality was not an issue.

I know more gay people. A former student of mine lives in my block, and she and her partner have a cute little kid that they've adopted. Someone who I would call

a friend is on the board of a not-for-profit that I work with. She never talks about it. We've gone to conferences together, but I would call her a friend. I had done a lot with [a woman at work] and I felt like I would have been friends with her had she stayed in town longer. She introduced me to her wife. And I thought, Oh! That was maybe 8 or 10 years ago. I think it does make a difference when you have a relationship with someone who is someone who you respect. Then it's no longer this mythology. (Natalie)

Of the other 7 participants who selected position 4, six are Republican/conservative and all believe homosexuality is sinful.

The Effect of Relationships on Conservatives

Several people who described relationships with gays and lesbians at work or in various community activities spoke about them in neutral/tolerant language. For example, Bev described herself as Republican, selected position 5, and said that homosexual behavior, "When acted on deliberately and without remorse represents disobedience to God's commands." But Bev also spoke of her strong relationships.

I've had quite a few friends come out to me—a good friend and fellow student from my days [in college], a good friend from my home area, four other good friends in a quartet with which I played for six years, and other musicians whom I've met along the way. For the most part, these are individuals whom I respect and enjoy being with, and our friendship doesn't hinge on their sexual orientation. (Bev)

Like Bev, Gail also has lots of gay friends. She is a Republican and selected position 4, but she uses a similar tone of tolerance in describing her beliefs.

I think my opinion about that changed from having a lot of gay friends and getting to know them. It's been gradual for sure. It's been 30 years. And I'm sure that cultural acceptance plays into it as well. As with anything, you see more of it, you get used to it. It takes the edges off, like with fashion. When something first comes out you say 'Oh, that's horrible,' and a year later, you're wearing it. It's a slippery slope, in that sense. You get used to it. (Gail)

That sense of wanting to appear to be accepting was also observed in Jeff's comments. Jeff, who is Republican, selected position 4, and said homosexuality is "not what God intended," described wanting to be accepted by his daughter's gay roommate on the one hand and disgust toward same-sex behaviors on the other.

I've tried to be really friendly with him and outgoing and invited him to come to stuff with her. He seems uncomfortable with me, but I don't know why. I don't know if I'm sending those signals. I don't think I am, I ask him questions and joke around with him just like I would anybody else. So I'm not sure why that is. . . . My daughter's roommate being gay really disturbed me at first. One thought was that I hope he's not being promiscuous and doing that in the same apartment as she is, and that kind of creeped me out. I don't think he is fortunately. (Jeff)

Many of Jeff's comments seemed contradictory; in his attempts to bend over backward to sound tolerant, he instead ended up sounding backhandedly condemning.

Sympathetic Response

One unanticipated finding was the answers people gave when asked how they felt when they first heard that Ray was gay. Not one person expressed disgust or hatred toward him or toward homosexuals in general. No one said that he was going to hell. Three people who chose position 4 and one who chose position 5 on the biblical interpretation continuum said that they were not surprised when they heard. But more commonly expressed was a reaction of sadness for Ray or for his wife and family, not just from those who were sympathetic and accepting, but even from those who chose position 4 or 5 and described homosexuality as “not what God intended,” such as Don. He is a Republican, chose position 4, and said about homosexuality that “The act is a sexual sin. Romans 1:26 and following is especially explicit along with other passages (Leviticus 20, I Corinthians. 6, I Timothy 1²⁷, etc.).” But when asked about his reaction to hearing that Ray was gay, Don said,

The first thing I thought was selfish—Does this affect my marriage? Ray married my wife and me. I quickly realized that it was a stupid thought. Right after that I felt pity and concern for his wife and their children. How hard must it be for them! (Don)

Only one person said that she didn’t take the news very seriously. The predominant responses were compassion, concern, or sorrow. People expressed sadness for Ray’s career in the

²⁷ In Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth and to Timothy, he includes homosexuality in a list of vices along with being thieves, drunkards, swindlers, idolaters, adulterers, and others who will not inherit the kingdom of God, but the Greek word he uses for homosexuality has several meanings (I Corinthians 6:9-17; I Timothy 1: 3-13). In both references, the Greek word *arsenokoitai* is translated as “homosexual.” *Arsenokoitai* is a compound word that means “male bed,” and biblical scholars think it could refer to any number of sexual exploitations, such as prostitution or rape. The interpretation is not conclusive, but Paul may not be referring to the same type of relationship we understand today as homosexuality. It is certainly not conclusive enough to condemn an entire minority group.

ministry, for his wife and their long marriage, and for their children. Because the sample was composed of Christians, who by their very definition as followers of Christ are called to be compassionate to others, it could be that this allegiance creates an expectation that they should use language of compassion. That is a possibility this study does not address. Still, it was interesting that so many responded gently rather than angrily. After all, for some conservative Christian groups, their attitude of hatred has become synonymous with their name. Members of Westboro Baptist Church, for example, are known for their extreme views toward gays and flaunt it openly on their website (www.godhatesfags) with the subtitle “. . . therefore I abhorred them. Lev. 20:23.” The Westboro extremism that some people attribute to Christians in general was definitely not expressed by the participants in this study.

Natalie had a complicated and unique perspective because she had friends who attended the church to which Ray had transferred from Long Grove.

[My friend] was on Council at the time, and that was just a real gut-wrenching experience for their church. So my perception may be sort of impacted by that, and I may have inherited some of their feelings, which primarily was one of betrayal because it was hidden from them. They felt like it was this deception [when Ray interviewed and was called by them as pastor] that set them up for this really difficult situation. . . . At the time, we were having struggles at our church [because of the transition from Ray leaving and calling a new pastor], and I remember wondering at the time if this could be something that would somehow be helpful for unity at Long Grove Church. Now it's sort of convoluted to me as to how I thought that might be helpful, but what I thought at the time is that you have this really big thing happening, can't we be more unified in terms of

what I perceived to be smaller issues of style and personality. Because at the time I thought, Ooh—this is a big issue! (Natalie)

Louise was the only person in the entire sample who expressed anger, but she explained that it was not because of Ray's sexuality but largely because she was going through personal difficulties in her own marriage at the time.

I thought, Aha. This makes sense. Not only because of his musical proclivities and his manners of presenting himself—the gaydar goes up, right?—I was also at a very vulnerable point. . . . I just remember being really, really angry [for his wife's sake—how Ray's sexuality may have played out in her life]. I had been severely depressed myself for years at that point. There were so many mixed emotions at that time. . . . I don't think the fact that he was gay and a minister upset me as much as the personal end of it. . . . It didn't surprise me or upset me in regards to the church because I didn't have real strong feelings like 'This is wrong. He shouldn't be in the ministry. He shouldn't be gay. He shouldn't be acting on it.' (Louise)

Patty remembered a conversation with another member of Long Grove who did have a strong emotional reaction, and although Patty believes that homosexuality is wrong, she also expressed compassion toward Ray as a friend.

There was one couple that he married and she got really upset thinking that their marriage wasn't legal or something because he had married them, and I don't know where that came from. That was a pretty weird line of thinking. But the only people I've ever talked to about it were Margaret and her husband. We didn't

discuss the topic [of homosexuality]. What we did discuss was what Ray would do after this. He was trying to stay and be called to another church. Our conversations had to do with how Ray could move on from this; how his wife was doing with her difficulties, her health, and [other issues she was dealing with]. Our conversation wasn't about the governance or position of the church, it had to do with the two people. We had really hoped that Ray could stay in the denomination and be called to [another] church. But he wasn't called, and eventually his credentials were taken. That was sad. (Patty)

Patty is an example of someone who votes Democratic, had contact years ago with a distant gay relative, selected position 5 on the biblical interpretation continuum, and believes the “[homo]sexual act is wrong,” and yet remarkably, perhaps because of her close relationship to Ray, expressed compassion.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusions

A number of themes arose from the research based on interviews with 26 Christians. The first three themes would appear to hinder the evolution of a Christian ally. Particularly for Christians who are politically and theologically conservative, 1) the belief in the infallibility of scripture, 2) a heterosexual perspective, and 3) the tendency to be more inflexible in thinking and the inability to contemplate ambiguity are characteristics that may hinder the ability to change one's beliefs and attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

Two themes that arose that may contribute positively to a conservative Christian's evolution as an ally are 1) having close relationships with gays and lesbians and 2) having a sense of compassion.

Scripture Is Infallible

There have been numerous studies illustrating the relationship between fundamentalism and discrimination (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012; McFarland, 1989; Trevino, 2012; Whitehead, 2010). Sam McFarland (1989) conducted an extensive project, administering a questionnaire to 247 students in a variety of undergraduate classes at Western Kentucky University. His work analyzed religious and social attitudes from a variety of religious characteristics identified by previous research, including intrinsic religion (something central to your life), extrinsic religion (religion as a means to status), and quest religion (religion that is more concerned with seeking the truth). Some questions were directed at exposing fundamentalist views, such as the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, the need to follow God's word in life, and purity in the face of worldliness. In order to uncover the more tolerant quest religion beliefs, questions were added about what role doubt plays in shaping and maturing

religious beliefs. The results of the study showed that fundamentalists, who fell into the extrinsic religion category, were discriminatory toward homosexuals.

Theologically conservative Christians (in this study, those who chose position 4 or 5) believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. Although in this study those participants differ on its inerrancy in matters of science and history, they believe that the Bible is trustworthy in matters of theology and ethics. With that in mind, it's not surprising that, for them, gays and lesbians are outside of what God intended for human sexual expression. As the Christian Church has reformed through the centuries, fundamentalists have maintained this conviction. There's not a lot of room for alternative interpretation or argument when the actual words of scripture are believed to be infallible and God-breathed (II Timothy 3:16). Infallibility also means that biblical truths cannot be adapted as culture changes or new scientific proof is presented. Despite conservative Christians' conviction that the Bible is without error, they have altered their interpretation of some scripture passages. Beliefs concerning slavery (I Timothy 6:1) and divorce (Matthew 19:8) have changed among conservative Christians over time, while to date, beliefs toward homosexuality have remained firm and they continue to use inerrancy and infallibility as reasons. Theologian-philosopher Hans Küng (1978) speaks to this practice of using the Bible to defend one's own beliefs:

There could now be observed in the formal aspects of theology a new effort to build up the logical-rational structure of proofs (retaining, however, the medieval syllogistic or disputation form), to gain greater exactitude in terminology (but with a rigidity not found in Aquinas), to suppress biblical-theological discussions (as contained even in the *Summa Theologiae*) in favor of one's own speculations,

for which the Bible had to serve as a quarry for digging out quotations (*locus theologicus*). (p. 23)

The use of scripture to support arguments against homosexuality is mirrored in the earlier conflict in American Christendom about slavery. Historian Mark Noll (2006) describes this concept of a commonsensical understanding of scripture as a prominent pitfall.

On the eve of the Civil War, interpretations of the Bible that made the most sense to the broadest public were those that incorporated the defining experiences of America into the hermeneutics used for interpreting what the infallible text actually meant. In this effort, those who like James Henley Thornwell defended the legitimacy of slavery in the Bible had the easiest task. The procedure, which by 1860 had been repeated countless times, was uncomplicated. First, open the Scriptures and read, at say Leviticus 25:45,²⁸ or even better, at I Corinthians 7:2-21.²⁹ Second, decide for yourself what these passages mean. Don't wait for a bishop or a king or a president or a meddling Yankee to tell you what the passage means, but decide for yourself. Third, if anyone tries to convince you that you are not interpreting such passages in the natural, commonsensical, ordinary meaning of the words, look hard at what such a one believes with respect to other biblical doctrines. If you find in what he or she says about such doctrines the least hint of unorthodoxy, as inevitably you will, then you may rest assured that you are being asked to give up not only the plain meaning of Scripture, but also the entire trust in the Bible that made the country into such a great Christian civilization. (p. 50)

²⁸ "Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession." (KJV)

²⁹ "Art thou called being a servant? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather." (KJV)

Doctrinal rigidity reduces Christianity to a dangerous absolutism—a list of rules, which, ironically, Christians claim that Jesus came to fulfill and free humanity from—that results in spending an inordinate amount of time arguing and defeats the purposes in being Christian. As Søren Kierkegaard wrote, “The problem is to bring forward all of the abuses of orthodox theologians, with their quarrels over such and such a point, while existence remains perfectly unchanged” (cited in Colette, 1968, p. 104).

All of those interviewed who chose 5 on the biblical interpretation continuum (that the Bible is without error) made statements that associated homosexuality with sin, although some added a distinction between being gay and practicing gay behavior and added that God forgives homosexuals.

Scripture describes the act as sinful, but also certainly forgivable. The apostle Paul describes some of the Corinthians as having been living in sexual sins of various sorts, and later as being forgiven and living for God’s glory instead. It is no different than other sexual sins (of which there are many) described in the Bible. (Don)

Sean offered a much more elaborate discussion of how homosexuality fits in a theology of sin and God’s forgiveness.

Here’s what I think. A person is not the sum of all of their sin tendencies. I don’t want to be known as the person who seethes with anger on the inside even though I don’t express it on the outside, or whatever. That’s sinful behavior that goes with me to the foot of the cross. Did Ray have other options? I don’t feel like I have another option about liking peanut butter, for example. There are all kinds of

stuff where we process what it is we like and don't like. What can we do except thank God for every breath, every accompaniment of normal human life and express regret at the times we fail? God created humans in His image, sin has marred the image of God in every last person who takes a breath and yet Jesus is the ultimate image of God in human flesh and He, by His spirit is turning people into people who pine to be like Him even at the expense of their own physical selves, is to be like Christ. And of course what Christ is like fundamentally, is obeying God's will as revealed in scripture. And I think scripture is unequivocal on the matter of sexual behavior. What people wind up liking in life is complicated. Obviously, God could fix this in an instant. He chooses not to. When the Bible gives a list of instructions on how to live, then that's what it is. The scriptures believe in heterosexual practice. They believe homosexual practice is not allowed. That's the uniform teaching of scripture and the Church ever since the Church was the Church. And I would recommend pastoral care for anything else. Nothing anyone has done puts them outside of grace. We all know that we have something that God didn't make us to do or be. (Sean)

Had the interview been allowed to become more confrontational, follow-up questions might have challenged Sean to elaborate on his description of an unchanging Church and the seeming contradiction of changing views toward divorce or women keeping their heads uncovered when in church (contrary to New Testament instruction).

Some conservative Christians make a distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament and the relative importance of each to us today. They discount much of the book of Leviticus as belonging to the holiness codes designed to separate the Hebrews as God's chosen

people. At the same time, however, they continue to teach their children the Ten Commandments as if it is the only set of rules needed and quote Leviticus in order to make a point about homosexuality. Those who are more liberal theologically, such as Donna, find the broader strokes of interpretation even in the Old Testament. “I interpret what the Old Testament says about homosexuality as denunciation of sexual promiscuity and wanton hedonism. I do not interpret what the Old Testament says as completely outlawing homosexual relationships” (Donna).

Those who believe the Bible is infallible, and as such have a “high view” of scripture, do not challenge or dissect it. As a more theologically liberal Christian, Rachel approaches scripture with a modern lens of skepticism and her own contemporary self-projection:

God cares more about love and commitment than he does sex. Look at the 10 Commandments: the only one that mentions sex at all is actually referring to adultery—the breaking of a promise and being deceitful. References in the Old Testament about ‘laying with another man’ are included with a huge list of other ‘sins’ and laws that we do not see as sins at all, let alone perceive them as laws for anyone but Orthodox Jews to follow. The Old Testament does condemn the sexual penetration of male hostages taken in battle, but that is rape, not consensual love. In the New Testament Paul is condemning the practice in Rome of older, wealthy men, under the guise of [being] mentors, making consorts of young male students. And, I think I am correct in stating that nowhere in the Bible does it speak of female-with-female sex. But I do wonder if some physical affection went on between women among Solomon’s 600-plus wives. He surely wasn’t giving each one much attention! (Rachel)

Conservative Christians who hold to all of the Bible's being divinely inspired are left to justify each and every statement by citing scripture, while less conservative Christians, including those who selected position 2 or 3 in this study, may hold some portions of scripture in higher regard than others. They not only interpret some scripture as allegory, poetry, or inaccurate historically and scientifically, but they consider some scriptural teachings to be out of harmony with what Jesus taught or with the rest of scripture. Take Gill's thoughts on the Apostle Paul's teachings in his book to the Romans:

There're some days when you go, you know what, Paul, you really need to relax. . . .

What Paul is really condemning is cult practices, right? Yeah, that might be, but you know what—and I don't happen to be a minister so I can say this—but why don't you just say that Paul was wrong? And just say that on that he just wasn't the sharpest pencil in the box. I'm not sure he was heterosexual. He's so over the top on some of this stuff that you wonder, well, why are you being that loud? We'll find out [if Paul was gay or straight] when we get to heaven. (Gill)

Heterosexual Perspective

Although participants were not asked about their own sexual orientation, many comments revealed a heterosexual bias, not only from the theologically conservative, but also from those who believed homosexuality was not a sin. Those who were more theologically liberal demonstrated a heterosexual perspective by commenting that Ray's marriage meant he was probably heterosexual or that he "chose to live the life of a heterosexual." After all, being heterosexual is the norm for the majority of people.

By extension, if humankind is indeed made in God's image, then God must also be heterosexual. Projecting their own (presumed) heterosexuality on God was a common theme among those who declared having a more conservative interpretation of the Bible. Conservative participants made statements about God's hopes for humankind, such as when Jeff said, "As far as gay marriage, I don't want them to be deprived. I don't have a problem with civil unions, but marriage, that's just not what God intended." Many projected their own hetero-centric worldview onto God, sometimes using the story of Adam and Eve as a proof text.

Of all of those who selected position 5 on the biblical interpretation continuum, Sean seemed to have studied scripture most extensively or at least may have thought about scripture more deeply than the others. But even he stood firmly behind the heterosexual, male/female model seen most often in Nature, and he extended the model into theology:

God created male and female.³⁰ He made them to be complementary pieces of a two-piece puzzle. So there's deep significance in the whole idea of complementarity. A man and a woman reflect the complementarity that exists between God and people, between Christ and His Church. (Sean)

In a hetero-dominant society, homosexuality is outside of the natural order and by default must be deviant. If heterosexuality is familiar, then homosexuality is unfamiliar or alien, and

³⁰ Marriage between a man and a woman is often legitimized by quoting Jesus's saying that God created male and female and "the two shall become one flesh" (KJV, Matthew 19:4-5). Jesus's point in this particular instance, though, was not to defend marriage as solely between a man and a woman. The Pharisees were trying to catch Jesus in a loophole concerning divorce, and the verses are actually about how those who are vulnerable in society, including (at the time) women, eunuchs, and children, should be treated. In the male-dominated culture of the early Church, it would have made no sense for Jesus to refer to same-sex relationships in his answer to the Pharisees about when it is appropriate for a man to divorce his wife. It would have been just as nonsensical for Jesus to speak to the issue of whether it is sinful to plant genetically modified corn or to travel to the Moon. He does, however, in that same conversation clearly state not once but twice that divorce, for any reason other than infidelity, is considered adultery (Matthew 5:22, 19:9).

thus in the inferior out-group (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 2008). The strong effect of conservative gender roles also bolsters the idea that homophobia is rooted in a conservative value system that rejects gender equality (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012).³¹

Among theological conservatives, scripture is read through the thick lens of this hetero-hegemony. The theory of social cognition is another example of this concept in action (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2011). People tend to make sense of other people's behavior by making comparisons with themselves. As the majority of people in the world are heterosexual, this would lead to the majority of people believing that heterosexuality is normal and correct. Learning someone is gay, then, creates a conflict in the heterosexual's social understanding of the world; questions surface about how to relate to the other's differing sexuality, and rejection is the result. Although many of the participants I interviewed softened their words with phrases such as "not what God intended," their message was still loud and clear: being gay isn't a good thing.

This sense that what is unfamiliar must be wrong was true even for those who chose a more conservative biblical interpretation position but considered themselves to be friends of gays. Gail, for example, said this:

I still watch "Days of Our Lives"; I admit it. They have their first gay couple as of a year or two ago, and—I'm just being honest—it's still hard for me to watch two men kiss. It doesn't make me throw up or anything, but sometimes I'll zip through their love scenes because I do think it's not the way we were intended to be.

(Gail)

³¹ This study used data from a three-year Belgian Political Panel Survey. The study's conclusion that those who already display high levels of homophobia during adolescence are likely to grow even more extreme in their views in the transition to adulthood could suggest that grade school educators develop more intensive diversity programs or facilitate more opportunities for diverse encounters before budding prejudices solidify.

Because God created male and female, the heterocentric conclusion is that same-sex attraction is not a biological determinant but a behavioral choice, and a sinful one (Whitehead, 2010). If homosexuality is something people choose, then they should be just as easily able to choose not to be attracted to the same sex, or at least choose not to act on that attraction, and to remain celibate. The belief that homosexual behavior is sinful comes from a literal interpretation of words of the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome: “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another” (NIV, Romans 1:24). This text appears to make a theological case against homosexuality, but when the verses are viewed in their societal context, they cannot be used as definitive proof against homosexuality. Kurt chose position 4 but left a little more room for debate when asked about how the Bible defines homosexuality:

It’s listed with other sins in the Bible, and the thing that comes to mind is that it’s in a list with greed, and you know if somebody’s greedy we don’t necessarily make a big deal about that, but the Church seems to, as a whole, be a little less tolerant of homosexuality.³² (Kurt)

Rather than outright calling homosexuality a sin, Kurt couched his view in softer terms, saying “it’s less than God’s best for you,” which demonstrates a slightly less-condemning attitude. But like Sean, who put homosexuality on the same plane as what he called “sin tendencies” such as his problem with controlling anger and wanting to eat more peanut butter than was good for him, Kurt associated homosexuality with his ability to control a sin in his own heterosexual life:

³² In the recorded words of Jesus, homosexuality is not mentioned. He does, however, engage a woman in conversation and confronts her with her promiscuous past (she had been with seven men but married to none of them; John 4: 16-18). In other scripture passages, sexual purity is listed alongside much more pedestrian sins such as outbursts of anger, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder (II Corinthians 12:20-21). And biblical scholars don’t even agree on what was meant in the handful of passages that describe something akin to homosexual behavior.

It's similar to me as a single and my sexuality. I'm a heterosexual, but I don't commit adultery, and that's a temptation for me to do, and I'm not practicing. For them it's a little different, because they don't have any hope of getting married and satisfy that, like I could—and [heterosexual marriage] is something acceptable and encouraged. (Kurt)

Another example of how hetero-hegemony silently elbows its way into theology is in the way that sexuality is put on a pedestal. It is perhaps seen as more special and mysterious than other functions of the human body because of its association with creating life. And although men and women continue to have sex long after conception is intended or possible, at least for most women, that factor doesn't seem to affect its status as an exclusively heterosexual activity.

No one in the study used the commonly heard adage "Love the sinner, hate the sin," though Sean distinguished homosexuals with a "proclivity or tendency" from those who are "practicing." Hetero-hegemony makes it unlikely that someone would refer to anyone as having a heterosexual proclivity or orientation. This differing usage of terminology points to the deeper problem that same-sex attraction is not given the same validity as opposite-sex attraction. The heterocentric lens is opaque, blocking the ability to accept any alternate expression of the intimacy described in scripture as taking place between man and woman.

Conversely, Jeremy and Rachel, who are politically and theologically liberal, commented on how Christians tend to overemphasize sexual behaviors.

I've always been uncomfortable with the way Christians single out one sin as being worse than all the rest. And it seems like for conservative Christians, anything that can be construed to be a sin having to do with sex seems to be 10 times worse. (Jeremy)

Rachel, though, believes this tendency to focus on sexuality is human nature:

“Personally, I think people in general, not just fundamental religions, think more about sex than God does.”

Little Room for Ambiguity

Male and female, right and wrong, good and evil are examples of the rigid binaries that conservative Christianity defends. These are established at the very beginning of scripture in the story of how God created the world: “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil], then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (KJV, Genesis 3:5). In the creation story, Adam and Eve did eat from the tree, and their eyes were opened, giving humankind the ability to discern good from evil—a conscience. Discerning good from evil doesn’t welcome ambiguous gray areas that could be open for discussion, or the possibility of more than one right answer. An inability to entertain differing viewpoints, even slightly middle-of-the-road ones, puts the brakes on conversation. Speaking primarily about the Catholic Church, Yip (2003) wrote this:

[I]n many ways, the Churches view themselves as a moral and spiritual institution that transcends cultural and historical relativity. It is committed to moral absolutism. Its self-perceived main function is not to adapt in response to social change or voices of the believers, but to safeguard and defend “truths” and traditions in the face of a lost and “sinful” world. “Truths”, in its view, do not change . . . less amenable . . . to dialogue, because this could open up the possibility for change.” (p. 60)

In her book *Feeling Power*, Megan Boler says that the moral binary is a shortcoming in ethical, and I would add religious, conversations. She asks, “How can one maintain processes of moral and ethical evaluation, while also pushing ethical evaluative systems beyond reductive versions of good and evil?” (Boler, 1999, p. 23).

For the conservative Christian, spiritual, moral, and intellectual wrongness is associated with evil and rightness with good (Schultz, 2010). This concept is communicated in the Bible when the apostle Paul warns of false prophets: “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves” (NIV, II Peter 2:1). For conservative Christians, being wrong about their interpretation of scripture risks destruction, damnation, and potentially an eternity in hell. One would think that with those odds at stake, there would be much greater effort to critically analyze scripture, but the opposite appears to be the case. The need to be right fuels a zeal against those they believe are interpreting scripture incorrectly and possibly even acting as evil false prophets.

Those who selected a more liberal theological position, like John, described a more flexible approach to understanding scripture. He emphasized the need to look at the whole of scripture and its themes rather than arguing over semantics.

I know that I live within the world and I know what the main thrust of the Gospel is its inclusiveness and its call to love and I will go with those principles before I'll get down into some tangle of trying to figure out what a few difficult little passages in a Bible that doesn't say much about [homosexuality] at all mean. And I'm also really suspect of a culture's prejudices and how that influences the reading of texts from the Bible. (John)

The need for stability and order is in conflict with thinking abstractly and leads to prejudice toward those who are outside of the group. It is an example of self-perpetuating homogeneity of opinion created through group isolation and pressure to think alike (Brehm & Festinger, 1957). Such pressure to hold uniform opinions in groups, such as churches, and the lack of exposure to alternative beliefs breed attitudinal sameness. This environment also strengthens prejudice toward gays and lesbians, who self-select by not joining churches that are not open to contemporary interpretation of scripture. One might describe churches as having at their very core a binary foundation for establishing an in-group versus out-group mentality and reality—righteous and unrighteous, us and them.

Relationships Challenge Beliefs

Now I turn to a discussion of the two themes that came out of the interviews that led to positive attitude change. First is the effect of relationships.

Attitudes of prejudice have been shown to change through contact and information (Zimbardo, 1969). Sean, who selected interpretation position 5 and expounded extensively on his theology of sin, did not have any close friends or relatives who are gay. Kurt, on the other hand, selected position 4 but recounted a close friendship with a gay Christian. While dealing with a difficult chapter in his own life, Kurt had joined a Bible study and met another man who was facing similar issues. They struck up a friendship, and one day, sitting across from his friend at a coffee shop, Kurt learned that he was gay.

I think that it made me see that people can be spiritual and have a real connection with God and be spirit-filled and still be gay. This guy, he had prayed for me when I was sick and I had gotten much better, and I knew that he was really

connected with the Lord, but there was also this other part of him, that he was a practicing homosexual. (Kurt)

Kurt was able to weigh the significance of his beliefs in the same way as those who chose more liberal positions on the continuum and to see sexuality as one in a range of Christian issues.

When asked about same-sex marriage, he replied,

I guess I don't have a really strong view. It's wrong, but as a society there are just bigger issues for us, especially as Christians, than to just be anti-[gay]. It tends to alienate people, and I don't think that's the way Jesus's ministry was. I don't think that's the way we should be as his followers. So I don't think the solution to the gay issue is to make their marriages illegal, but to reach out to them with Christ's love, especially when it becomes necessary for them to get benefits. I don't know why as a Christian I would want to prevent somebody from the benefits that the rest of the citizens of the country have. That's not the front that I want to confront them on. (Kurt)

The idea of attitude change fueled by relationships is not new. Studies have shown that people who come into contact with people of a non-hetosexual orientation develop a more tolerant attitude toward sexual diversity (Herek & Glunt,³³ 1993). Strong homophobic attitudes in adolescence were shown to grow overall in a study that tracked 2,815 adults between 18 and 21 years of age (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012). The study investigated whether intergroup contact and conservative values had an impact on homophobia as young people transition to adulthood. Individuals were identified as conservative if they attended more frequent religious services in

³³ In addition to relationships, religiousness, traditional beliefs about family and gender, and having like-minded friends contributed toward heterosexuals' attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

the week. The more conservative they were, the more homophobic they became when compared with those who said they were not religiously active. However, those who had friends with a non-heterosexual orientation were shown to have significantly reduced prejudice, leading to the conclusion that homophobia is related to those who hold conservative values

For conservative Presbyterian theologian Jack Rogers, although education was a compelling force in his journey of attitude and belief change concerning homosexuality, relationships were also influential (Rogers, 2006). His pastor asked that he participate in a 15-member task force to create an educational program about the issue of ordaining gay and lesbian people to church offices. After a year of study, the task force presented a 12-week adult education course, testimonies, videos, and panel discussions. Though the congregation was still uncomfortable with the issue and did not change their opinion, the process did affect Rogers' beliefs, causing him to dig deeper. But his beliefs didn't change with education alone. Over a period of about 13 years, Rogers also became acquainted with many gay and lesbian Christians, which combined with his intense scripture study convinced him to change his mind.

In this study, Kurt likewise described a change of attitude over the years:

I think I'm less black and white about it in terms of that they shouldn't have any rights, they should just repent. That's exaggerating, but now I'm more open to these people, [that they] are human beings and this is an issue not unlike temptations that I have, you know? And so, why would I tell them that they're going to hell because of this and [that] the church has no place for them until they can get their act together. I've come to the conclusion that you can't legislate morality. (Kurt)

Dissonance theory purports that attitude change follows behavior (Festinger, 1957). This could imply that when conservative Christian heterosexuals have relationships with gays and lesbians and develop meaningful friendships, their attitudes toward homosexuality will change, maybe not instantly but perhaps over time. And although the ability for human beings to change their beliefs and attitudes is certainly important on the personal level among family members, neighbors, and colleagues, the broader implications of rigid beliefs take on new dimensions when considering prejudices between groups of people that can result in faith-related crimes against minority groups (Tarrant & Hadert, 2010³⁴).

Exposure to an individual member of a stigmatized group that leads to empathy toward that individual could lead to positive attitudes toward the entire group. It would appear that Kurt's ability to be less black and white on the topic of homosexuality is a result of his having had a close relationship with a gay Christian. As Gill said, "And over time, I think [attitude change] really happens because you know people. Knowing people changes your theology more than reading scripture does."

Sandra, who chose position 4 on the biblical interpretation continuum, had some friends and several relatives who are gay, and she had obviously studied the Bible and given a lot of thought to her beliefs, but she came to the conclusion that she wasn't sure where she stood.

While many biblical passages seem to condemn homosexual behavior pretty clearly, I have read biblical exegesis from both a Christian and Jewish perspective which suggests that things are really much more complex, and some of these passages refer to specific circumstances and places and are not broad sweeping

³⁴ Tarrant and Hadert conducted a study with 120 undergraduates showing that the more empathy participants had toward a member of a stigmatized target group, the more likely they would have positive attitudes toward the target group. This effect extended to a second group when the second group fell into a similar category.

commands. I'm not sure what I think. I think the Bible should always be read in context with references to the original language. It's also hard for me to think God did not want homosexuals to live normal lives. But the Bible seems to contradict me. I am conflicted. (Sandra)

Although Louise also selected position 4 on the continuum, her interpretation of scripture concerning homosexuality was definitely influenced by her experiences with gay friends and consequently with her personal rationale of scripture.

A lot of my friends are much more conservative than we are. I know a lot of them don't understand how you can be gay and be Christian. But my overriding stance is that the primary thing about God is His grace, and if being gay is a sin, well, so is lying, and so is cheating on your wife. I don't think I'm in any position to say if being gay means that you can't be a Christian, or that it's a sin or anything else. (Louise)

Gill also admitted to making sense of scripture based partially on his own experience. Rather than focusing on the literal words, he mentioned looking for larger themes in the Bible. Granted, his liberal interpretation affords him a broader latitude than more conservative ones.

It's probably not theologically very sound, but I think, look, the sins that God cares about are sins of volition. And when it comes right down to it, I think God doesn't care if you're gay or not because that's just who you are. I have plenty of gay friends who have wonderful relationships. So I guess what I do with scripture is I look for a larger principle than those crazy times where St. Paul goes ballistic, right? You could look at those passages and ask are they talking about cult practices or not. Maybe that's a way to do it, but probably what I really do is say,

You know, there are those passages, but the broader theme of scripture is something else, and that's what I'm goin' with. (Gill)

Interviewing these 26 people who had all experienced the same incident that I had was a remarkable experience. It drove home for me how very different people are. Each one of them came to the incident with a past, as did I. We were not blank slates. We had wide ranges of understanding of scripture and of previous relationships with gay and lesbian friends and relatives. And from the time of Ray's coming out to 2013, we each had different experiences and perceptions. The others did not follow the same trajectory of change that I had. The experiences that Matt and Margaret described are probably the closest to how I responded and what I experienced, but even theirs are not identical to mine.

Matt said that "Ray's coming out was a kind of watershed, because when he came out he also provided a theological basis for the legitimacy for homosexuality in our culture." When Margaret was asked if she had ever thought about homosexuality before Ray's coming out, she said, "Oh, my goodness, no! I probably never gave it much thought. It's only when someone close to you is in this situation that you begin to give it thought and examine your own views."

John already had developed strong friendships with gay colleagues, but he admitted that that Ray's coming out "radicalized me. I could no longer go on not thinking about it. It wasn't ok to not deal with it."

As more and more gays and lesbians come out of the closet, particularly gay and lesbian Christians, heterosexual Christians will have more opportunities for developing relationships that will create cognitive dissonance that may challenge them to change (Ross, Lelkes, and Russell, 2012). Natalie said that she could not pinpoint when in her life her attitudes and beliefs had

changed, but she thought it was gradual. She had several relationships with lesbian friends or colleagues and demonstrated a more flexible approach to theology.

I think the challenge is always for a Christian is to try to figure out what are the essentials that you think define what Christianity is and what are the things that are negotiable. (Natalie)

There is also hope for attitude change among conservative Christians such as Shane and Kurt—who are a bit more open-minded and willing to look at alternative interpretations of scripture—that as they adopt a more liberal theology, accept gender equality, and have positive experiences with gays and lesbians, their attitudes may continue to change (Batson et al., 1997; Herek, 1988).

Continuing the Conversation with Conservative Christians

I could not in good conscience leave this research without offering some observations on the barriers discussed in the previous chapter and some suggestions for ways that productive dialogue about scripture and homosexuality can continue.

Some conservative Christians are already trying to elevate the conversation and move forward from harsh debate about a handful of Bible verses. Andrew Marin (2009) realizes that quoting scripture is not likely to sway a conservative Christian's beliefs about homosexuality. Those who interpret scripture literally will not back down or be convinced by a lecture examining the alternative interpretations of Bible verses that mention sexuality.

Another factor that makes conversations difficult is that sexuality, puberty, sexual practices and preferences are intimate and private topics in Western society. As a society, we've moved further in public dialogue on topics such as race (Pratt, 1984), but we're not there yet in

discussions about sexuality. This makes open, public dialogue challenging. And yet, because sexuality is the focus, it must be addressed. In addition, the desire to keep conversations civil can squelch honest, authentic discourse on difficult topics such as sexuality. Unfortunately, when groups of people seek to be civil above all else, the consequences can be silencing the expression of alternative, conflicting ideas, which may result in less diversity (Mayo, 2002).

Identifying Points of Connection

“What do we...stand to gain by engaging in the discomfiting process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions?” (Boler, 1999, p. 176). Although Megan Boler was asking the question in terms of an educational relationship between teachers and students, the same question could be asked of conservative Christians in terms of their cherished beliefs and assumptions about God’s plan for human sexuality. This type of questioning may be one starting point for conversation—to invite conservative Christians to examine whether their current beliefs are working to advance the kingdom of God and his purposes or are proving to be counterproductive by excluding certain populations from the kingdom.

Whether or not something can be reasoned may play the most important part of a conversation, as the “strength of an argument is measured in a given context by the soundness of the reasons . . . to convince the participants in a discourse” (Habermas, 1984). This cannot be applied to a discourse about religion, however. Even conservative Christians will admit that some things cannot be known but must be believed with a leap of faith, as described in the New Testament: “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (NIV, II Corinthians 4:18).

Rather than focusing on doctrinal minutiae, finding the larger points of agreement may be more productive. Perhaps one point of connection in conversations about homosexuality could be acknowledging that compassion is a theme in Christianity and in fact within many world faiths. Every major world religion, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Armstrong, 2000) offers a version of Jesus's golden rule—"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (NIV, Matthew 7:12). Karen Armstrong, a former nun, won the 2008 TED Talk for her stirring lecture encouraging the entire world to band together and sign an agreement that she called the Charter for Compassion (<http://charterforcompassion.org/the-charter>). The effort is both heroic and humble. Rather than trying to find similarities to create community, denying or annihilating our differences, we should have compassion for each other across those differences. That would be a first step in bringing together individuals who lack a common doctrine and shifting the focus to "a 'kinship' based on a recognition of our existential incompleteness and fundamental suffering as subjects constituted in passivity and subjection to the other—the kinship of compassion" (Chinnery, 2006). At the time of this writing, just over 100,000 individuals have signed Armstrong's online petition—far from the global endorsement she sought.

Comfort in Ambiguity

Another connection in conversations about homosexuality and Christianity may be to encourage the value in ambiguity. Rather than focus on the points of difference, as is common in religious dialogue, it is important to realize that there will be aspects that cannot be proven and must remain uncertain. "Man's problem is not only the uncertainty of reason but also the insecurity of human existence as a whole; that man is not only reason but also heart, feeling,

instinct, at bottom even a chimera, a monster, a chaos, a subject of contradiction” (Küng, 1978, p. 382). Might entering into dialogues about the fears of being wrong generate longer and more fruitful discussions? Megan Boler (1999) puts it nicely:

What we are faced with in the course of the most ordinary lifetime is terrifying.

The desire to order chaos through simplified schemas, to ward off the felt dangers of ambiguity, seems perhaps more “human” a characteristic than any other. The educator who endeavors to rattle complacent cages, who attempts to “wrest us anew” from the threat of conformism, undoubtedly faces the treacherous ghosts of the other’s fears and terrors, which in turn evoke one’s own demons. (p. 178)

Facing such fears may help with finding new common ground to stand on and learning to live with ambiguity and uncertainty (Chinnery, 2006). Perhaps that is what a community of compassion looks like—not needing to assimilate others or convince them of our own set of beliefs, but coming to agreement that we cannot truly understand one another, and that that’s ok.

The philosophy of education is said to be in the aesthetic realm and is less frequently addressed in a cognitive realm (Boler, 1999). This may also be true of religion that is trapped between aesthetic and cognitive realms. Worship and prayer may be filled with emotion, while a Bible study may be more focused on the cognitive institutionalized aspects of religion, with its denominational doctrines and bylaws. Conservative Christians hold studying scripture in high regard but at the same time are asked to take a leap of faith, making some elements of their beliefs nearly impossible to explain.

Many Christian colleges and universities, such as Augsburg, Baylor, Biola, Calvin, Concordia, Pepperdine, Villanova, and Wheaton, include in their mottos and student recruitment

literature statements about their institutions' commitments to faith and learning. The idea behind the "Equality Rides" of Soulforce, "an organization devoted to changing the hearts and minds of religious leaders who engage in anti-homosexual campaigns" (<http://www.soulforce.com>), began at Wheaton College, when Soulforce's co-director, Jacob Reitan, met a young gay student who believed the school's anti-LGBT policies were a good thing. The rides continue to make stops at Christian colleges across the country, inviting dialogue, organizing panel discussions, and making class presentations in an effort to create change in school policies. Reitan said, "Churches need to adopt a different model, with different rules of engagement and basis of reasoning. This involves reaching out to pro-change Christians . . . to learn to overcome their 'sex-phobia' in general" (*Windy City Times*, 2006).

Although not strictly defined as Christian fundamentalists, some laypeople in the Catholic Church are working from within for change, saying that their goal is not to defy the beliefs of the Catholic Church concerning sexuality (Dillon, 1999³⁵), but to encourage parishioners to

unpack how specific doctrinal tenets might be given practical interpretation in current times . . . [and to challenge] the church hierarchy and all Catholics to examine the historical underpinnings, theological assumptions, and institutional power relations informing official church teaching and to consider the alternative reasons. (p. 304)

³⁵ Dillon's article is a response to Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action, which states that critically reasoned deliberation should guide social action. Even in this study it was obvious that beliefs and attitudes about sexuality are influenced by much more than just what can be reasonably deliberated.

Dignity/Boston and the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC), both pro-change groups within the Catholic Church, are challenging official church arguments and appealing to the "reasonableness" of the arguments rather than the fact that the original arguments were decided upon by the church hierarchy. It will be interesting to see if there are any changes in the Catholic Church under the reign of Pope Francis, who has already demonstrated a more liberated theology, and whether laypeople will be able to make any inroads.

WWJD?

It would seem to be an obvious suggestion for a group of Bible-believing Christians that focusing on the words and life of Jesus could be a ground rule for discussing sexuality. Jesus was an expert at dialogue. He was not afraid to enter into conversations with authority figures and those who were marginalized in his society—children, lepers, prostitutes, gentiles, and tax collectors, to name a few groups. He wasn't afraid to challenge the status quo or to address difficult questions—and he did both without being argumentative. Sometimes he used silence instead of words, but the examples of Jesus's dialogues given in scripture do not end in shouting matches. Jesus's model of dialogue has relevance for conservative Christians because, after all, it is the personal relationships that they believe they have with Jesus himself that give meaning to their faith. As Soren Kierkegaard (cited in Colette, 1968) said so eloquently,

the person who sets forth Christianity, provided he speaks the truth objectively, cannot be distinguished from Christianity, as he would be in the case of a doctrine. No, Christ did not institute Dozent, but imitators. If Christianity, by the very fact of its not being a doctrine, is not represented in him who sets it forth, then this man does not set forth

Christianity; for Christianity is an existential message, and it is your existence that sets it forth. In short, to exist in it, to express it by existing, [etc.,] is to re-present it. (p. 104)

“Get out of your comfort zone” is a challenge commonly issued from the pulpit as well as in secular classrooms and community outreach groups. Jesus modeled this challenge by eating with tax collectors, among the most unscrupulous of characters in biblical times. For someone to mingle with and serve others who are different, perhaps not from the mingler’s own dominant social group, can create more fear or, more commonly, can create new understanding. Entering into an uncomfortable conversation with the goal of listening rather than winning could be a first step toward developing a “pedagogy of discomfort” that could help conservative Christians see the world from another perspective. In a discussion about homosexuality, that instructive discomfort would arise from beginning to see how one’s heterosexual perspective on the world and interpretation of the Bible may have been shaped by the dominant culture of today (Boler, 1999).

Further research related to Ray’s coming out might be to interview the children of the Long Grove members, now all over the age of 18. It would be interesting to learn if their beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality reflect their parents’ views. But, rather than additional research at this time, my personal goal is to more purposefully continue the conversation about homosexuality with conservative Christians. My hope would be to move them at least a bit further into the gray zone of ambiguity, resulting in more of them evolving into allies.

Epilogue

Since I began this research project in early 2013, there have been some dramatic changes both in society and in the Christian church. On June 26, 2013, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Windsor v. United States* that Section 3 of the so-called Defense of Marriage Act, the 1996 law that denies legally married same-sex couples over 1,100 protections and responsibilities of marriage, is unconstitutional. Change has likewise occurred in many states, with either the state Supreme Court reversing as unconstitutional a ban on same-sex marriage or a popular vote taking place to allow same-sex marriage. At the time of this writing, same-sex couples are able to marry in 16 states: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia. On June 1, 2014, Illinois joins the list.

In the religious subculture there have been two startling statements from Pope Francis, whose papacy began in March 2013. The following July, when asked about gay priests, he replied, “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?” (BBC News, 2013).

In September, in a lengthy interview that covered many topics (Spadaro, 2013), Pope Francis touched on many of the themes that have been addressed in this paper, including a conservative rigidity that is associated with a literal interpretation of scripture and its infallibility; a history of binary thinking in the Church that has led to creating rules about what’s right and what’s wrong; a call to focus on the essentials rather than arguing about minutia; a declaration

that the primary business of the Church should be healing and compassion; and even the need for ambiguity and doubt:

My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems and to be accused of being ultraconservative. I lived in a time of great interior crisis when I was in Cordova. To be sure, I have never been like Blessed Imelda [a goody-goody], but I have never been a right-winger. It was my authoritarian way of making decisions that created problems. . . . I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. And you have to start from the ground up. The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. . . . The view of the church's teaching as a monolith to defend without nuance or different understandings is wrong. . . . If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt.

(www.americanmagazine.org/pope-interview)

This attitude of openness and voice of compassion will keep the conversation moving forward.

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Table and Figures

Pseudonym	Political Affiliation	Biblical Interpretation Position	Belief about Homosexuality
Steve	Democrat/Liberal	2 - Portions may not be inspired	Not sin
Donna	Democrat/Liberal	2 - Portions may not be inspired	Not sin
Margaret	Democrat/Liberal	2 - Portions may not be inspired	Not sure
Matt	Democrat/Liberal	2 - Portions may not be inspired	Not sin
Rachel	Democrat/Liberal	3 - Both inspired & human document	Not sin
Phillip	Democrat/Liberal	3 - Both inspired & human document	Not sin
Joan	Democrat/Liberal	3 - Both inspired & human document	Not sin
Gill	Democrat/Liberal	3 - Both inspired & human document	Not sin
Shane	Republican/Conservative	3 - Both inspired & human document	Sin
Mike	Republican/Conservative	3 - Both inspired & human document	Not sin
Jeremy	Democrat/Liberal	3 - Both inspired & human document	Not sin
John	Democrat/Liberal	3 - Both inspired & human document	Not sin
Alice	Democrat/Liberal	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Sin
Sandra	Democrat/Liberal	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Not sure
Louise	Democrat/Liberal	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Not sin
Gail	Republican/Conservative	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Sin
Don	Republican/Conservative	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Sin
Jill	Republican/Conservative	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Sin
Ron	Republican/Conservative	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Sin
Kurt	Republican/Conservative	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Sin
Jeff	Republican/Conservative	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Sin
Natalie	Democrat/Liberal	4 - Theologically trustworthy, but not science and history	Not sin
Bev	Republican/Conservative	5 - Without error	Sin
Sean	Republican/Conservative	5 - Without error	Sin
Patty	Democrat/Liberal	5 - Without error	Sin
Carrie	Republican/Conservative	5 - Without error	Sin

Table 1. A listing of the 26 participants by pseudonym, political affiliation, Biblical Interpretation Position, and belief about homosexuality.

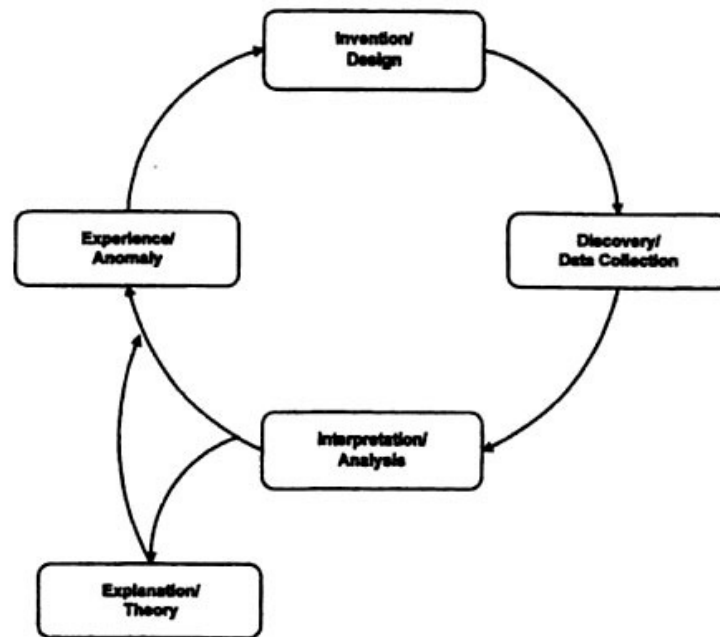
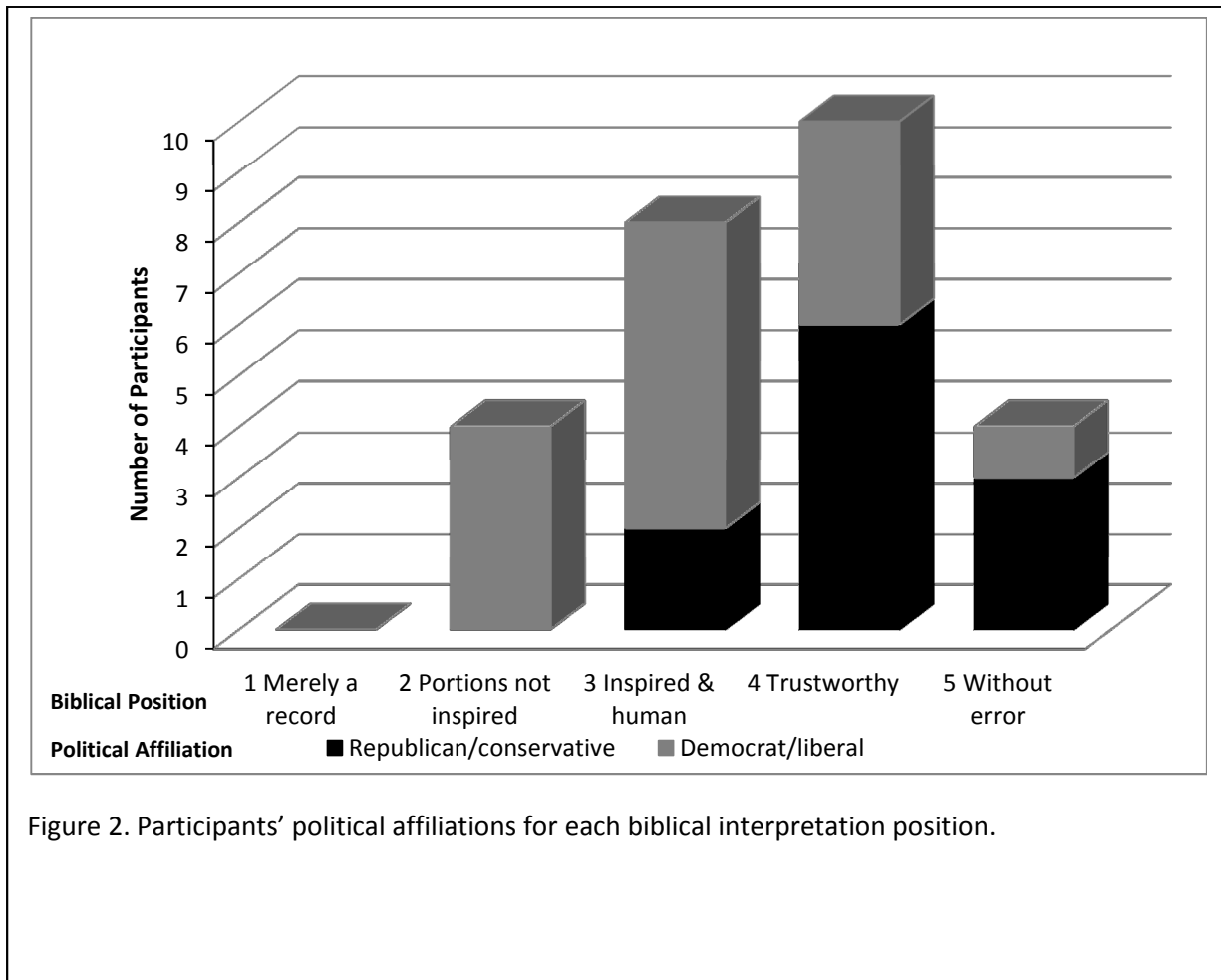


Figure 1. Shiva's circle of constructivist inquiry (Crabtree & Miller, 1992).
Permission to print obtained from SAGE Publications.



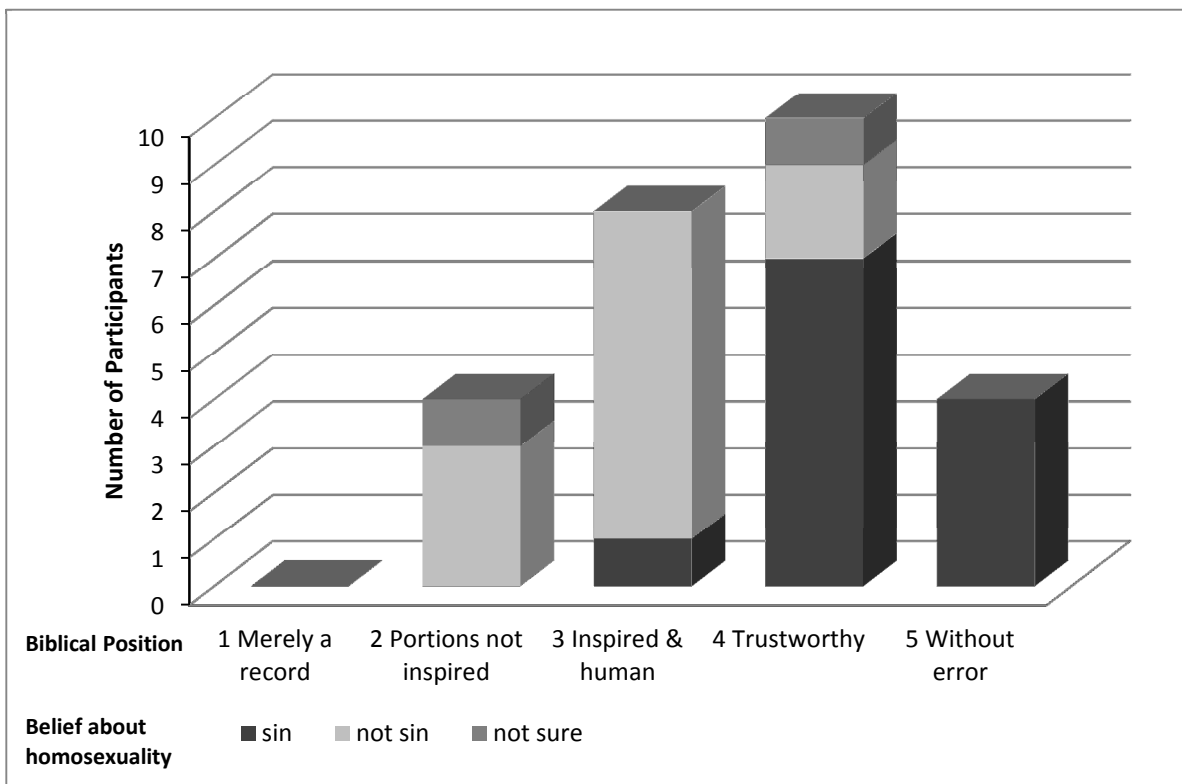


Figure 3. Participants' beliefs about homosexuality within each biblical interpretation position.

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research
Institutional Review Board
528 East Green Street
Suite 203
Champaign, IL 61820



July 7, 2013

Cris Mayo
Ed Organization and Leadership
380 Education Bldg
1310 S Sixth St
MC 798

RE: *The Evolution of a Christian Ally*
IRB Protocol Number: 13063

Dear Mr. Mayo:

Thank you for submitting the completed IRB application form for your project entitled *The Evolution of a Christian Ally*. Your project was assigned Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol Number 13063 and reviewed. It has been determined that the research activities described in this application meet the criteria for exemption at 45CFR46.101(b)(2).

This determination of exemption only applies to the research study as submitted. **Exempt protocols are approved for a maximum of three years.** Please note that additional modifications to your project need to be submitted to the IRB for review and exemption determination or approval before the modifications are initiated.

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to the requirements of human subjects research. If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me or the IRB Office, or visit our website at <http://www.irb.uiuc.edu>.

Sincerely,

Belinda Adamson, Human Subjects Research Coordinator, Institutional Review Board

c: Debra Larson

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter (title revision)

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research
Institutional Review Board
528 East Green Street
Suite 203
Champaign, IL 61820



March 14, 2014

Cris Mayo
Ed Organization and Leadership
380 Education Bldg
1310 S Sixth St
M/C 708

RE: *The Evolution of a Christian Ally: Factors that influence beliefs and attitudes toward gays and lesbians*
IRB Protocol Number: 13855

Dear Dr. Mayo:

Thank you very much for forwarding the modifications to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB) office for your project entitled *The Evolution of a Christian Ally*. I will officially note for the record that the minor modification to the original project, as noted in your correspondence received February 24, 2014, revising title to be the same as your master's thesis, has been approved. It has been determined that the research activities described in this modification still meets the criteria for exemption at 45CFR46.101(b)(2).

This determination of exemption only applies to the research study as submitted. **Exempt protocols are approved for a maximum of three years.** Please note that additional modifications to your project need to be submitted to the IRB for review and exemption determination or approval before the modifications are initiated.

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to the requirements of human subjects research. If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me or the IRB Office, or visit our website at <http://www.irb.illinois.edu>.

Sincerely,

Belinda Adamson, Human Subjects Research Coordinator, Institutional Review Board

c: Debra Larson

Appendix C: Adult Participant Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Debra Levey Larson and is being done under the oversight of Cris Mayo, who is a professor in the College of Education at the University of Illinois.. You are being asked because you attended a church for which a former long-term pastor came out as gay.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to learn more about Christian beliefs and attitudes concerning homosexuality.

PARTICIPATION: Participation in this study would involve a discussion regarding a former pastor, his coming out and your beliefs about homosexuality. The interview will take 45 minutes to an hour of your time.

RISKS & BENEFITS: There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you associated with this study above those you might encounter in daily living. I do expect this research to lead to an increased understanding about Christian beliefs and attitudes concerning homosexuality.

COMPENSATION: You will not be compensated for your participation.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Please understand that participation is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will in no way affect your current or future relationship with me, or the University of Illinois, its faculty, students, or staff. You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason, without penalty.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your individual privacy will be maintained in all publications or presentations resulting from this study. In order to provide anonymity, fictitious names and locations will be used in this study rather than actual names. In order to preserve the confidentiality of your responses, I will be the only person with the ability to link your name with the study and I will delete the audio file of the interview with you when the study is completed.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in the study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you.

I understand the above information and have had all of my questions about participation on this research project answered. I voluntarily consent to participate in this research, including having the audio recorded.

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Printed Name of Participant _____

Signature of Researcher _____

Date _____

Appendix D: Sample Email to Prospective Participants

Hi,

I have been working on a master's degree at the University of Illinois in the College of Education. I've completed all of the course work and am now writing a thesis.

The paper that I want to write is about Christian beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality. Because we both attended [REDACTED] in the mid-1990s and share a common experience—namely, [REDACTED] coming out—I'd like to interview you about how you felt about it and your beliefs on the subject of homosexuality and Christianity.

Note that I'm not looking for a theological debate of any kind, just a conversation about beliefs and attitudes.

I have spoken with [REDACTED] about the thesis and he has given me his blessing to do it. ([REDACTED] will not know the names of anyone I interview for the paper.)

In the paper, I will not use any real names, including [REDACTED], the name of the church, or any other identifiable details. The information will be kept strictly confidential.

Please let me know if you'd be willing to participate. We can meet in person or do the interview via Skype, on the phone, or if you'd prefer, I can send you the questions via email.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Debra

Appendix E: Biblical Interpretation Continuum

Position 1: The Bible is merely a record of the moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians.

Position 2: Portions of the Bible, including some of its theological and ethical positions, may not be the inspired word of God.

Position 3: The entire Bible is the inspired word of God and at the same time a thoroughly human document.

Position 4: The Bible, though written by individuals and reflecting their personalities, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is trustworthy in matters of theology and ethics, but not necessarily in matters of science and history.

Position 5: The Bible, though written by individuals, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is without error in all it teaches in matters of science and history as well as in matters of theology.

Appendix F: Pastor's Permission Email

Larson, Debra Levey

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, June 27, 2013 7:59 AM
To: Larson, Debra Levey
Subject: Re: master's thesis proposal

Debra,

Great to hear from you and to get this request. I am on vacation in [REDACTED] visiting my grand kids. I will try to arrange a conversation when I get back.

Meanwhile, yes, of course! I would be proud to have you use my name and to make reference to the events and reactions around my coming out. It is fine for you to tell anyone you interview that we have talked over these years and that I am glad to be a part of your research.

You can decide later if it is better that names not appear in the dissertation. That probably has more to do with what those you interview need in order to be candid. I do not mind if my name and story are included.

More soon.

I enjoy keeping up a bit via your Facebook posts

[REDACTED]
 Sent from my iPhone

On Jun 26, 2013, at 10:16 AM, "Larson, Debra Levey" <dlarson@illinois.edu> wrote:

Hi [REDACTED]

I don't do a lot of Facebook, but do read your posts and try to follow the links, and check out your grandkids photos! Hope things have been going well for you.

I may have told you, not sure, but I've been working on a master's degree at the University of Illinois in the College of Education. I've completed all of the course work and am now focusing on writing a thesis.

The paper that I want to write is about Christian beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality. Because those of us who were attending [REDACTED] Church in the mid-1990s share a common experience—namely, your coming out—I'd like to contact some of them and interview them about their beliefs and attitudes.

As you know, your coming out started Tim and me on a new journey of understanding that has been life changing! I'm curious if others have been as influenced as we have been.

Although, I'll mention your name when I interview people, I will not use your name, the name of the church, or the interviewees names in the paper. That information will be completely confidential.