

A Course of Stones

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Abstract: Binary thought and social structures are oppressive to non-heteronormative people. The LGBTQIA faith community finds wisdom in deconstructing binaries and norms, and seeks new ways to encourage dialogue on matters of equality with the heterosexual majority. Difference, rather than being a problem, becomes a vocation. In order to overcome center-and/or-margins ideologies, new moral criteriologies in hermeneutics and provocative juxtapositions of New Testament images of the church can give a new impetus for thinking beyond heterosexism. The image of a house of living stones (1 Peter 2 and Ephesians 2) offers us a way forward in this discussion, and a way to move past a system of domination toward an ethos of alliances and equality. Leadership is then called to discover new ways to embody and address the new ethos.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. – 1 Peter 2:4-5 NRSV

So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. – Ephesians 2:19-22 NRSV

What is otherness *for*? Normativity takes its apparent correctness for granted since it is assumed to be the usual standard by which other things are measured.¹ That is a contestable premise, as we shall see. That assumption is also the genesis of unearned privilege.² It is enough for now to remind ourselves that simply because something is common, that does not make it either right or good. What about otherness, however, especially when otherness manifests itself outside of conceptual abstraction, and arises, say, in the human realm of sexuality and gender? What about non-heteronormative differences among religious leaders? What are they *for*?

The binary trap

Heterosexuality is common. So is the gender binary. Where we get into trouble socially and theologically is when we demand that both norms are essential, that is, the

¹ Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 18-21.

² Blank (2012), 164-166, for a clear-eyed look at “heterosexual privilege.”

outworking of grace and truth. God-ordained and therefore exclusive. Thus arise the “ab-normalization” of differences, and the stigmatization of otherness.³ The culprit here is not heterosexuality *per se*. It is the essentialization of truth as heterosexist identity. For example, when heterosexuality in society dominates all other expressions of human sexuality and then subordinates them in the name of God, church, order, the family, or whatever, a construct of heterosexual domination asserts its alleged right to bring all variations into conformity with itself. We know that dominating construct as *heterosexism*. Since heterosexism contends that all human interactions, gender performances, and relational destinies are essentially, necessarily, and obviously heterosexual, anything and anyone differing from heterosexual and cisgender norms is subordinated as a deviance or a perversion from the normal—*ab-normal*. Further, since the custodians of heterosexism assume that all persons are “naturally” and “essentially” heterosexual, they assume they are justified in bringing all their socio- and theo-political powers to bear in order to bring these wayward variations back into conformity, either passively or actively. Heterosexism is therefore coercive.

Heterosexism is more than an ideology. It is a spiritual malaise. Simply put, heterosexism is idolatrous.⁴ God Godself cannot deviate from the heterosexist norm without suffering trivialization, demotion, demonization, and banishment from the deity club—a club owned and operated by normally unobtrusive heterosexist philosophers and theologians who preserve their patriarchy behind a smoke screen of sanctioned sexual identities and the denigration of the flesh.⁵ God, the source and font of difference and variation, is thus reduced to a sad bit of doggerel: “God is a gentleman through and through, and in all probability a husband, too.”

About the virtually universal status of heterosexism in the very structures of our social intercourse and discourse we could say much more, indeed. Were we to apply the same question to heterosexism we initially put to otherness, “What is heterosexism *for*?” we get a lacuna instead of an answer. Like sin in Christian systems of thought, heterosexism is an oppositional non-entity. It exists to be opposed to what it perceives it is not, and is thus a parasitic idea.⁶ Once the binary upon which it relies is dissolved, a parasitic idea like heterosexism collapses from its own hollowness. Like hell in a religion of grace, it may exist on some plane or other, but it is devoid of interest. Empty.⁷

³ The current struggle in the United Methodist Church over the election of Bishop Karen Oliveto, openly lesbian and married to her spouse, Robin Ridenhour, by the Western Jurisdiction in July of this year, is a case in point for religious leadership. Behind the screen of ecclesial wrangling over the language of the *Book of Discipline*, many believe it is not Bishop Oliveto, but heterosexist elements within the denomination who are on trial. Bishop Oliveto serves the Mountain Sky Area, comprised of Colorado, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, and a church in Idaho. See <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/court-sets-oral-hearing-on-gay-bishop-issue>. Accessed March 16, 2017.

⁴ Patricia Beatty Jung and Ralph F. Smith, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 88.

⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Here I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God,” in Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 99, 106.

⁶ Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33-34.

⁷ On an empty Hell, see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 459-460.

Would to God that LGBTQIA⁸ faith leaders and the people they serve were beyond the apologetic situation minorities of every stripe have had to face since abolitionists spoke out against slavery in the Americas. Sadly, such is not the case. As evidenced by Southern Poverty Law Center statistics of harassment, intimidation, and violence since the presidential election, over eighty incidents have been documented against the LGBTQIA community, and the number is rising. The specter of harm continues to make it dangerous for queer folk to bring their gifts of difference to American life.⁹

The vocation of otherness

Nonetheless, the vocation of LGBTQIA people has not changed. It has only intensified in the face of the current crisis. The vocation of LGBTQIA people has not been to erect a monument to any essentialized identities, straight or gay. Time, culture, and human experiences are too various and fluid for shrines erected to them to last long. The LGBTQIA community by its very nature is a community-of-communities-bonded-together-by-difference. This community which counts members from every social demographic and economic stratum has a vocation to demonstrate that otherness is a gift the whole human family shares. In order to fulfill its vocation, the LGBTQIA community must swim upstream against the normative current of the myth of sameness: that uniformity is “original,” and “birds of a feather flock together.” The heterosexist cornerstone of this myth of sameness is that human survival depends upon group homogeneity, an ideology that incubates all manner of binary in-group/out-group ideas and actions. In order for the message of otherness borne by sexual and gender non-heteronormative communities to gain a hearing among the majority, there must be a deconstruction of the dominant myth, as well as a convincing reconstructive presentation of the benefits of difference for humankind.

Since religion continues to be a source of contention in the human rights struggle of our time, this vocation becomes most critical for LGBTQIA people of faith and their leaders. Retired Bishop of the Episcopal Church V. Gene Robinson ties the trouble queer folk face on an everyday basis to heterosexist assumptions in religion, although there are unmistakable signs of hope. As he said to the Sydney (Australia) Morning Herald:

"I do believe that 95 per cent of all the discrimination that gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have experienced is at the hands of religious people, and it's going to take religious people to undo that damage. I think that it will not be too far in the future that we will see the church, the synagogue, the mosque, apologising for what we have done to gay and lesbian people, the way we apologised for what we did to black people during slavery and for what we've done to women over the ages.

"It's already happening on a local basis in America. We are moving at such

⁸ A note on terminology: LGBTQIA refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and abstaining. This is the alphabetical formula for non-binary cisgender and gender non-conforming people in current parlance. “Gay” is often used to refer to collective issues, with a broader meaning than customarily of gay men.

⁹ See <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/18/update-incidents-hateful-harassment-election-day-now-number-701>. Accessed March 16, 2017.

*a rapid pace, perhaps unprecedented in any civil rights movement.*¹⁰

Two other Episcopal priests, L. William Countryman and M.R. Ritley, concur with Bishop Robinson about the responsibility religious leaders bear so that LGBTQIA Christians may realize their vocational purpose. Rather than being a problem in the church, they contend that non-heteronormative Christians are “gifted by otherness,” and they exhibit a vocation to be “caught in the middle” between the traditional church and the LGBTQIA community. M.R. Ritley writes:

*There lies the central difficulty, it seems: one community waiting while another (which has shown itself to be ignorant or ill-informed at best and hostile at worst) decides its fate and its meaning. Whatever the dominant community’s answer is, the process in itself is both unacceptable and unchristian. It is the right of a community to determine itself, a lesson that the church is only slowly learning in the cases of other minority groups and it has failed to apply to the [LGBTQIA] Christians in its midst.*¹¹

Ritley goes on to argue:

*Whether the church decides at length that [LGBTQIA] people should be here—lay, ordained, single or coupled—we already are here, and what is needed is not simply and passively asking for the church’s acceptance, but creating a gay spiritual understructure powerful enough to reshape the very terms in which the church perceives and understands us.*¹²

There is much about the lives of LGBTQIA Christian leaders, lay and ordained, that is awkward and uncomfortable for all parties involved. Queer folk do not need very much imagination to perceive that they should be deeply suspicious of a set of doctrines and practices that have wrought havoc with the lives and relationships of non-heteronormative people. On the dominant religionists’ side, opinions range from counting queer folk and their families unworthy and anathema, to irritation at the obduracy of these troublesome lay people and ordained leaders coupled with a wish that they would simply leave well enough alone and disappear from the church. Of course, there are also a growing number of heterosexual Christians who feel stuck in the muddy middle, caught between tolerance for, or rejection of their queer co-religionists whom they acknowledge profess the same faith they do. Countryman and Ritley say that God is calling LGBTQIA Christians to minister to them all, queer and straight alike, as well as to themselves. Countryman writes:

¹⁰ Jill Stark, “On a dangerous mission to end discrimination: The world’s first openly gay bishop has laid bigotry at the door of religion,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 19, 2013. <http://www.smh.com.au/national/on-a-dangerous-mission-to-end-discrimination-20130518-2jtnng.html>. Accessed March 16, 2017.

¹¹ L. William Countryman and M.R. Ritley, *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 3.

¹² Countryman and Ritley (2001), 4. Emphasis in the original.

From the perspective of Christian faith, this awkward business of living on the boundary looks very much like a vocation—a call from God. When you answer such a call, you discover the meaning of your own life. God has drawn us to this difficult place in order to reveal God’s grace to us and in us and through us. The boundary where we’re living, however inconvenient, is a place rich in spiritual discovery—which means, of course, that it is also largely uncharted territory.¹³

The LGBTQIA Christian community, then, has a vocation to carry on the reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ through the very difference they manifest to the whole church. How these queer Christians realize their vocation in the body of Christ, the church, has significant ramifications for the field of religious leadership. Who leads, and how they lead matters. The ministry of reconciliation in the church is nothing new. The Pauline mission in Corinth and Galatia, the Deutero-Pauline work of reconciliation among Jews and Gentiles in the Ephesian community, and the Petrine efforts to bring about something similar in Acts testify that God’s reconciling purposes are theologically foundational and are linked to the reconciliation of differences—not by dissolving these differences. “*For [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us*” (Ephesians 2:14 NRSV).

The “uncharted territory” Ritley and Countryman speak about relates to how the LGBTQIA Christian community may energize the gift of otherness in the imagination and practice of the church’s life. The community does so by appropriating the resources of Christian faith in ways that are authentic to itself, without apology.¹⁴ These resources include Scripture and hermeneutics, the story of the faith community and its traditions for the last two thousand years, and the situational savvy that impels Christians to express their *raison d’être* in every age. The differences the LGBTQIA community of faith brings to the church are at the core of their vocation to church and society.

The tenacity and vocational clarity with which LGBTQIA faith leaders approach their ministries despite adversity betokens the power of the gifts they bring to church and society. The witness of two ordained queer leaders bring out this point in sharp relief.

Michal Anne Pepper, who identifies as a lesbian, holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Her spiritual roots go deep into the Southern Baptist tradition. She now expresses her faith through the Episcopal priesthood. Her conviction as a Christian leader is passionate and compelling. She writes:

Christian discipleship is the foundation of our lives. Our sexual orientation is an important part of who we are. Our intimate relationships are significant components of our lives. Sometimes as we struggle to

¹³ Countryman and Ritley (2001), 6.

¹⁴ Countryman and Ritley (2001), 7-8.

be authentic persons in a culture this is hostile to us and to those we love, the oppression and abuse we endure every day seems to define our lives. The systemic evil of discrimination appears to be the primary force shaping our lives. But God is more powerful than any discrimination, and God is more powerful than any human institution. Christ lives in us and we live in him. Christ shapes us in his image even though we live in an oppressive world. The good news of Jesus Christ is powerful enough to free us from the life-destroying urges we imbibe from the rampant homophobia in our churches and in our culture.¹⁵

Roger Wedell, an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with a Ph.D. in theology and the arts, here looks back over a lifetime of ministry as a gay man of faith. Recently honored by his divinity school, he claims his vocation of difference with the humor and pathos so familiar to transgender, bisexual, lesbian, and gay Christians who exercise their ministries no matter the petty or profound rejections issued them by the institutional church. Here is an excerpt of his remarks in response to the distinguished minister award he received in February 2017:

In the Year Book of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), all clergy in good standing are listed alphabetically, along with a code designation of their ministry setting. For the majority of my ministry, my code was Other. Whether specialized or other, those of us engaged in ministry in non-traditional settings work a little harder to remain in community with our peers and with the church. Many simply give up. Those of us who are also “other” in sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, work even harder to remain in communities of faith. Many simply give up. I grieve for those and for the church at the loss we all suffer; the gifts left behind. . . .

In the common vocabulary of the day, many would say that I have been bi-vocational. I suggest that I have had only one vocation—minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—in multiple occupational settings; sometimes more than one-at-a-time. As the church is transformed by the Holy Spirit into something new so that we can continue to be prophet and priest in a changing world that still needs both, our understanding of what it means to be a minister will need to be expanded. We will need to develop new codes. Or, perhaps fewer.¹⁶

There are thousands of brave and wise stories just like these two awaiting the right moment to share the hard won lessons of queer community with a church that has often

¹⁵ Michal Anne Pepper, *Reconciling Journey: A Devotional Workbook for Gay and Lesbian Christians* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), viii.

¹⁶ Roger Wedell, personal remarks delivered upon the reception of the Distinguished Minister Award for Specialized Ministries at the Brite Divinity School Luncheon for Ministers Week, February 21, 2017. Used by permission of the author.

preferred not to hear them.¹⁷ In an era in which organized religion is in statistical decline, queer Christians can share how faith communities may succeed and prosper even in apathetic and hostile environments—lore it seems the institutional church could use to good advantage. Though intimate relationships and families are failing at alarming rates throughout the culture, queer Christians demonstrate that even in situations with no encouragement or external support, families and enduring relationships of love and commitment can be formed and flourish despite all the odds. In a world where physical and emotional violence besets so many individuals and faith communities, the experience of how LGBTQIA folk respond to opposition with endurance, advocacy, graciousness, networking, and amazing resilience is available for the asking to those willing to learn from them. And lessons of courage and forgiveness abound among gender non-conforming and transgender Christians who are ready and willing to impart their wisdom to others who, like them, have been broken on the wheel of life. Perhaps most significant of all, queer Christians are living laboratories about the transformative powers of love, human and divine. The spiritual development of ordained and lay LGBTQIA people, revealed in their coming out stories,¹⁸ are on a par with the great spiritual journeys of every age. Throughout the myriad situations of everyday life, the queer faith community is on a quest to love God and be the church. There are other quests, indeed. But LGBTQIA Christians are convicted that they are called to be pioneers on the frontier of love. The ways of love and desire, gender expression and identity, and a perennial hope for a better world have been their bread in the wilderness. These, they believe, are the mysteries they are called to explore on behalf of themselves and the whole people of God. These are their “gifts of the magi,” brought to Christ and to the church from the far distance of an exile they did not choose for themselves.

But these gifts that come from people of difference are only available on a non-coercive basis, and in freedom alone. The parties involved in dismantling heterosexism must build trust, a slow process that depends upon mutuality and accountability, and the willing persistence of the church to seek forgiveness of the marginalized people of faith they have harmed for so many generations, however deliberately or inadvertently. The majority can and must learn from the minority for this gift exchange to work, in a fashion that does not seek to remove the agency of queer folk and does not subordinate, denigrate, or dominate them any longer. By means of a long term, transformative relationship among people of faith, it might just be possible to catch a glimpse of what Paul called the new creation.

Building upon a true foundation

¹⁷ See two provocative accounts of the gifts LGBTQIA people of faith have to give the contemporary church: Elizabeth Stuart, Tim Morrison, and John McMahon, *Religion is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), and Cody J. Sanders, *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow: What All Christians Can Learn from LGBTQ Lives* (Macon, GA: Faithlab, 2013).

¹⁸ For new style LGBTQIA coming out stories, see Dan Savage and Terry Miller, eds., *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

A critical step toward this new creation relationship,¹⁹ is a renewal of how the church conceives of itself at this particular time in salvation history. We believe this may be achieved by bringing images of the church in the New Testament into reconfigured relationships with each other, sparked by the gift of a queer imagination. When LGBTQIA people queer imagination, they do so as an act of solidarity with those who have suffered discrimination, and as a term of resistance to their oppression. But “queer” is also a powerful tool in hermeneutics, as Baptist pastoral theologian Cody J. Sanders reminds us. “*Queer is a word of invitation to move beyond—beyond practices of division and devaluation of human life, beyond overly simple categories for understanding human difference, and beyond the limited set of questions that we typically found asking about queer lives.*”²⁰ Old conversations can be reset by renewed imaginations. The commonly trod New Testament debates about church, world, and the world to come, can find new paths leading to new treasuries of wisdom for how to love God and be the church.

The New Testament has an array of over eighty major and minor images for the church, as Paul S. Minear’s comprehensive study for the Theological Commission on Christ and the Church of the World Council of Churches shows. While the image of the body of Christ sits in the center of a major configuration of analogies and designations for Christian community in the New Testament²¹ as the dominant image for the church in our age, we propose a new strategy: to bring the dominant image into a new interaction with the image of a building of living stones. We propose the edification image, a house built of living stones, as a means of highlighting the significance of reconciliation for today’s community of faith. We liken this process to the trade of bricklaying or stonemasonry; that is, laying a course of living stones for a new house of God.

Comparing a master interpreter of Scripture to an artificer in brick and stone has a rich heritage in the Scriptural record. Brick and stonemasons were well respected in the biblical world. The Tyrians sent to work for the Israelite Kings David and Solomon by King Hiram were able architects and worked stone with precision.²² Lying behind New Testament texts like 1 Corinthians 3:10, 1 Peter 2:4-5, and Ephesians 2:19-22 is the collective experience of the Hebrew people, who in all probability learned the masonry and building trades as slaves from their Egyptian oppressors.²³

Minear takes pains to remind his readers that the original ways images were received and interacted in the ancient communal mind remain elusive to us. From our side of the biblical critical field, after two hundred fifty years and more of scholarship, our perceptions of these images have to do with our own worldview and the state of our imaginations, just as the first communities’ worldviews unavoidably conditioned and shaped their own interpretive choices. Minear cautions us, “*What makes a genuine recovery of Biblical images so difficult is the fact that the church’s powers of creating*

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

²⁰ Cody J. Sanders (2013), xv.

²¹ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 173.

²² 1 Kings 5 and 2 Samuel 5, for example.

²³ Exodus 1:11-14.

and using such images must be restored before the picture language of another century begins to make sense. This fact holds true especially for New Testament images of the church.”²⁴ Perhaps the word “difficult” is too soft a term for such a task. While daunting work like this is not out of the question, it requires scholarly rigor and humility. Minear continues:

*It is not enough for the historian to state their meaning, always an impossible task because the image is the meaning; only when Christian imagination is active in the use of the image does the image come alive. The very discussion of the intrinsic meaning of an image indicates that rigor mortis has set in, and that full rapport between the eye and the picture has been lost.*²⁵

Among the trenchant points Minear makes for contemporary interpreters of biblical images of the church are two we take to be most helpful. They are, first, the necessity of rethinking not simply a single dominant image of the church, but the whole stock of them to guard against self-deluded interpretations. Second, Minear argues that these images are deeply relevant to a critical self-understanding of the church. He writes:

*Therefore, the church must perennially open its imagination to the wide panorama of New Testament imagery and especially to those images which may have temporarily lost their potency. At the very least the church should have constant recourse to the dominant pictures in the New Testament, not to use them as tools for rhetorical ingenuity or as mirrors of self-preening, or as weapons in ecclesiastical warfare but as modes of perceiving afresh that mystery of eternal life which God shares with his people, and as reminders of the neglected roles as the body of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*²⁶

Any biblical interpreter can run afoul of the problems Minear raises, of course, gay or straight. Nonetheless, we believe that the tendency of heterosexism to blind dominant actors to their assumed privilege and their (unintended) rhetorical aggressions against marginalized people is so great that it can foreclose on any meaningful dialogue. Minority groups must be assured that their dialogue partners from dominant points of view understand these problems and self-critically guard against them.

Beyond matters of self-delusion, any naïveté concerning reasonable and rational biblical interpretation with opponents vanishes quickly when dealing with deeply embedded theological issues, like those surrounding anything or anyone non-heteronormative. Peter J. Gomes, lately of Harvard, said that his encounter with campus and clergy critics of his sexual orientation had taught him that any biblical discussion of race or sexuality had to deal with racism and homophobia before any word from God could be heard at all. As an African American gay man who had been, in his own words “nourished” by Protestant

²⁴ Minear (1960), 17.

²⁵ Minear (1960), 17-18.

²⁶ Minear (1960), 25-26.

evangelical religion others used to attack him, Gomes experienced firsthand the way that his detractors' misguided religious convictions served as little more than a "moral fig leaf that covered [their] naked prejudice." In order to get behind these distortions and beyond them, he concluded, "more rather than less attention must be given to how we read the scriptures, what we bring to the text, what we find in the text, and what we take from the text."²⁷

Caveats like Minear's and Gomes's must be taken to heart especially by dominant group conversation partners, and incorporated into how they do their interpretive work in order for any possibility of genuinely collaborative relationships to exist in the church. How else may the still, small whisper of the Holy Spirit be heard as it arises from a minoritized group emerging from their recent exile as strangers and aliens?

A moral criteriology and a new dialogue among images of the church

How, then, are we to interpret biblical texts that have sometimes been employed to divide and disempower? As the church critically reconceives of itself, is there a useful template, a moral paradigm, for how hermeneutics is to be done in our age, so that the living stones we lay will be on bead and plumb? Leo G. Perdue offers a way forward with a "criteriology for a moral paradigm" of interpretation.²⁸ Two of Perdue's criteria are particularly helpful as we bring images of the church into new dialogues with one another in new human situations.

Perdue writes:

*In the interactions between the teachings and the taught, equal weight, at the very least, must be given to the interpreter's critical appropriation or rejection. In other words, to appropriate a biblical teaching in the contemporary world requires the interpreter be familiar not only with the world and discourse of the Bible but also with the reality and ethical conversation of contemporary community of faith.*²⁹

Perdue then insists that interpreters employ a "hermeneutics of suspicion" to biblical texts that have a stake in marginalizing communities:

A "hermeneutics of suspicion" must be added in the mix, especially in legitimating for the interpreter the role of critical engagement of biblical texts. This role takes note of the presence of biblical texts that subvert the patriarchy of some canonical literature and recognizes

²⁷ Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 165-166.

²⁸ Leo G. Perdue, "Household, Theology, and Contemporary Hermeneutics," in Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 246-249.

²⁹ Perdue in Perdue et al (1997), 249.

*the ideological caste of writings that seek to enforce submission to power and to enslave rather than, in the fashion of the God of the exodus, to liberate from oppressive structures of state and male power.*³⁰

A critical hermeneutical paradigm is particularly necessary when interpreting texts often employed by insiders, arbiters of inclusion, or guardians of purity. Gomes, for example, points out that popular religious movements intent on rooting out heresy, such as the Spanish Inquisition and the New England witch craze, cashiered their victims in the name of God and justified their persecutions by appeals to the Bible.³¹

When the interpretation of the body of Christ image³² is uncoupled from a hermeneutics of suspicion, it can all too easily sit at the center of an exclusionary standard that marginalizes all who do not conform. The disease allusion of the body image is uncomfortably close to the therapeutic pruning aspect of the true vine and branches image³³ found in John 15:3-8; in particular, v. 6: “*Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned*” (NRSV). The surgical amputation of diseased members of the body, or the application of a prophylaxis that holds viral elements at bay in order to preserve the health of the body is only a whisker away from the pruning of useless or disease-ridden branches from the true vine that leads to the burning of faggots on the pyre.

Minear would be horrified at the distortion of the body of Christ image illustrated in this discussion. He labored time and again to bring medleys of major and minor images into polychromatic relationships with each other.³⁴ Yet fashions of interpretation come and go, and in certain cultural contexts, biblical images of the church become as hackneyed as clichés. The body of Christ image has been associated so closely with institutional and denominational church bodies that the Pauline syntax of the image has been all but lost to us. The insider-outsider binary is as usual an accompaniment to the body image as whether someone is a bona fide member of a particular congregation or group, or not. If outsiders are deemed non-conformist or even independently minded, then *they do not belong*.

For the managers of the club, or for the border patrol that protects the boundaries of the political state, such interpretive moves are as usual as the status reports to the board they must regularly make. The first two casualties of assumed normativity, in hermeneutics as in anything else as Perdue suggests, are social self-criticism and moral plausibility. If we are to reclaim the pluralistic mystery of an image like the body of Christ, Minear says that we have considerable creative work to do. He writes, “*If we would comprehend the same reality, we should make full use of the body image, but we should supplement it with*

³⁰ Perdue in Perdue et al (1997), 249.

³¹ Gomes (1996), 165, 255.

³² There are many texts directly using the phrase “the body of Christ,” or a variation of it, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 4:4; Colossians 1:18. For Minear’s treatment of the body of Christ image, see Minear (1960), 173-220.

³³ Minear (1960), 42-43, 47-48.

³⁴ Minear (1960), 221-249.

many other images, and we should perceive the whole mystery of God's purpose in Christ before using either the term 'body' or 'church.'"³⁵

To use the term “church” in such a way that the binary trap is avoided and the spiritual mystery of God in everyone is accentuated implies an invitation *to all* to cross boundaries, transgress borders, and construct that reality from the foundation up. We believe that the image of a temple built up of living stones (1 Peter 2:4-5 and Ephesians 2:19-22) must come to the fore in this era in order for a new dialogue on the faith community to take place. “Whosoever will” is the invitation to faith and action in this age, not whosoever qualifies. Edification is a concept suffused with hope, a participatory and collaborative hope in a new creation.³⁶ A whole set of new relationships among the laborers accompanies the notion of “upbuilding.” Cooperation is a preceding virtue of the image, cooperation with God and among all those who volunteer for the work. There is something messy about this image, something growing, active, and not passively awaiting permission to get on with the constructive tasks at hand.³⁷ Something the current inflexible connotations of the body image cannot contain or tame—something obstetric and justice seeking. There is something fresh and animating about it, like the dawning of a social revolution for our time akin to the vision that animated members of all sorts of early Christian communities in theirs.

The struggle for steadfast, loving justice is like mortar in construction—it is the binding agent that holds both the work and the workers together in a common holy purpose. The heterosexist structures of the past that labeled some “natives” and others “strangers” and “aliens” must be overcome by the constant interrogation of a moral criteriology of steadfast love (*hesed*) for all parties involved.³⁸ All God's people belong to the construction crew, or none do. Spiritual stonemasons of all backgrounds *already belong* in the constructive dialogue of community building, laying courses of living stone upon the foundation of God's purpose to reconcile the whole world (*oikoumene*) to Godself. None of the laborers have the authority to include or exclude any other or believe they should be favored, though some may belong to the original construction gang, and have been on the construction site throughout the heat of the day (see Matthew 20:1-16).

God's mysterious mercy initiates the collaborative work of building a new and different community among the communities of earth. The gratitude of the writer of 1 Peter is a sign that no human group or institution establishes God's new community. No human quality or lineage entitles this group or that to labor on a “spiritual house” which embraces the whole human family with steadfast love and justice. Only divine mercy can do that. “Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:10 NRSV). In 1 Peter, God alone lays the Christ-cornerstone and mercifully bids all to come together to “be built into

³⁵ Minear (1960), 249.

³⁶ Minear (1960), 164-165.

³⁷ Minear (1960), 97.

³⁸ For a non-heterosexist anthropology and the way *hesed* is defined and employed within it, see Emily Askew and O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 20-23, and 33-35.

a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood” in and through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5). The Ephesian writer announces the same divine initiative, mysteriously building this new community through the agency of Jesus Christ. Christ, both the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20) keystone (v. 21) that ties the whole structure together, transforms the merciful, steadfast love of God into “our peace,” banishing hostility, and therefore ensuring that no one is an alien or a stranger any longer (vv. 14-18).

Minear drives home the point that the divine initiative suffuses the New Testament images of a new community of reconciliation. Since God calls this new community together, it does not rely on any political, economic, or cultural “cement” that commonly binds other groups together in national, moral, or other forms of self-sufficient pride. While the constituent groups of this new community “retain their own discrete unity” and have no need to submit to arbitrary uniformity, God’s reconciling purpose and gracious choice mark it as different from all other communities. He writes: “*Therefore, to identify a particular society as the people of God is immediately to set it over against all other peoples. This people and this people alone has been constituted in a special way by God’s action.*”³⁹

But God’s merciful action does establish a border or boundary between this new community and self-aggrandizing communities in a way that is every bit as unexpected and innovative as the gracious mystery that calls it into being. As Minear observes:

*The line between this people and other peoples is thus drawn in a unique manner. God alone draws this boundary, and therefore the boundary remains at least partially intangible, because it is constantly being redrawn by the mysterious movement of grace. A double consequence must be noted: the definition of this people by its Lord permanently prevents it from finalizing or absolutizing its own map of the boundaries that divide it from those who are not his people. Such a definition also prevents us from treating this category “the people of God” in naturalistic terms. Its theological quotient is the primary factor in the complex of meanings. . . . In some respects this people [or, we may say, this royal priesthood that constitutes a temple of living stones] is like other peoples. Yet in other respects, and in respects intrinsic to its character, it is unlike any other people.*⁴⁰

A new theological anthropology is what we are working toward here, new in the sense that it is God’s mercy and justice that call this new “building” or “temple” into being. It is established by divine reconciliation among peoples brought together from the far distance of hostility and naturalistic divisions into a sacred alliance of purpose and mutuality (Ephesians 2:13-18). Rather than the static, institutionally encrusted issues today’s spiritual seekers find so problematic with the contemporary, churchly “body of Christ,” the constructive image of a new community without permanent boundaries is indeed

³⁹ Minear (1960), 68.

⁴⁰ Minear (1960), 70.

provocative. But it is so much more than that. It is spiritually attractive to seekers hoping to find a home where differences are welcome as gifts, and otherness is an asset. The numbers of church dropouts across the ecclesiastical spectrum show how timely a new creation anthropology that reconciles heterosexual and non-heteronormative people is. One-third of American Millennials under the age of thirty-four have left American churches because they are seen as hostile to differences the youth of our culture count as spiritually valuable: sexual orientation, gender fluidity, gender expression, and binary-free living.⁴¹

A spiritual community of hope and wholeness where hostilities are transformed into mutual hospitality, where insider privilege belongs to no one because divine mercy has granted it to everyone, has great power. It can transform a biblical construction site into a dynamic meeting ground where gifts of difference are appreciated and shared. The construction of a dwelling place for God made up of human “living stones” mandates that no one gets to sit in an exalted center point and command the margins to move submissively toward it. Rather, necessarily intrinsic to the image is the imperative *that everyone must to move from where they are* to take their place in the courses of living stones as they are laid plumb and square. Divine mercy bids all to move from where they are to situate themselves upon a new foundation. All have to accept a new relationship with one another for the building to be securely constructed in conjunction with Christ the cornerstone. Minear says this is an image that is vibrant and full of life.

*This image welds together important convictions about the church: the co-operation of God, Christ, the apostles, and all the “living stones”; the integumentation of the community through the daily embodiment of gifts of grace in the works of love; the recognition of both the joy and discipline of shared responsibility; the combination in the total structure of moral and ecclesiastical forces; the preservation of the dynamic and spiritual aspects without the loss of the more stable structural conception.*⁴²

The juxtaposition of the images of the building of living stones with the body of Christ causes important benefits of suppleness and moral integrity to move into a new image matrix. The initiative of God in Christ is made unquestionably integral to this new community where difference is welcome, and all become allies of one another in the sacred task at hand. As Minear labored to teach us, the power of these New Testament images for the church lies in the full array of energies and gifts of otherness they share—images that are dynamic and never static. They are endlessly, creatively opening out onto the mysteries of how God graciously seeks to reconcile all people with Godself and with one another.

⁴¹ Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones, “A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes About Same-Sex Marriage and LGBT Issues,” *Public Religion Research Institute*, 2014. Online: <http://www.pri.org/research/2014-lgbt-survey/>. Accessed March 26, 2017.

⁴² Minear (1960), 165.

There are two final points to draw from this study. First, borrowing from Minear’s provocative vocabulary, new forms of “integumentary leadership” emerge from the interaction of a reconciled and reconciling community of faith. “Integumentation” is a term derived from Latin referring to the process by which the body coats or covers its members with skin.⁴³ As an organism lives and changes, so does its integument. As Minear suggests, the borders or boundaries of the human community with whom God dwells are elastic, growing with the new circumstances that face it and open it to new configurations in the world. The tent must widen, shift, and offer hospitality to the new constellations of peoples who make up this earthly dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:21-22). So, leadership in these situations must become “integumentary”; that is, more adept at welcoming difference, reserving judgment, receiving the gifts of otherness in exemplary fashion with open hands, and ever-ready to widen the tent of meeting with the spirit of steadfast love, for all are made in the image and likeness of God—especially the unlikely.

Second, the experiences of LGBTQIA people—though clouded with the same pathologies that plague the rest of humankind, all the –isms and –phobias that demean and divide people from God and one another—have led this community to locate its distinctiveness in its differences. When it seeks to “same” others by using some particular way of being in the world as a rule or a norm, queer folk get hurt. As has been the case in its history, the present and future of the LGBTQIA community of faith lies in the surprising associations that form when queer folk share life together. As Jay Emerson Johnson writes, the queer faith community has learned to expect surprises.

Divine reality cannot be contained; the risen Jesus disappears before we can grab hold of him; the Spirit blows where it wills; divine eroticism spills over not only the walls of church buildings but also every attempt we make to speak that breach. Queer energy easily dissolves neatly organized systems, synods, and sermons like pinches of salt in a pot of boiling water. Some will fret over those moments; others will see in them the beginning of a delectable stew.⁴⁴

This community of communities, at its best, honors and learns from the differences that give interest and distinctiveness to its amazing variety of persons, this “delectable stew” of otherness. Especially with the emergence of transgender wisdom, the LGBTQIA faith community has found that they must constantly chastise their own tendencies to judge and dominate those whose difference stretches their understanding.⁴⁵ The relationship that honors difference and otherness, and maximizes fellowship and learning in LGBTQIA communities, both faithful and faith-free, is alliance. The “better angels” of

⁴³ *New Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “integument.”

⁴⁴ Jay Emerson Johnson, *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* (New York: Seabury Books, 2014), 219.

⁴⁵ For an example of transgender faith and wisdom, see Christina Beardsley and Michelle O’Brien, eds., *This Is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd Ltd., 2016).

the queer spirit mandate that none need be “orthodox.” Instead, all are encouraged to become allies in the formation of a better society where the American promise of equality under the law might possibly come true for everyone, gay, transgender, and straight alike.

We began this essay with the question, “What is otherness *for*?” Though we may not have arrived at a single straightforward answer, the elements of a faithful one are revealed clearly enough to venture a response. Otherness is about loving God and being the faith community in ever-new configurations. It is about learning the hard, incremental lessons of change—that all change is difficult, but difference is our best tutor in a changing world that needs the message of divine reconciliation so desperately. As strange as it may sound, then, change is our friend. Difference among the human family holds the key to a future of hope. The presence of the LGBTQIA community of faith among the other communities of the earth is a sign of this hope for those with the will to see it. And otherness is at least *for* this: to teach every one of us to become true allies of all the rest—to the end that “us” and “them” are terms that eventually will pass away—until all, *because of their difference*, have become a cherished *us* to every other.