



“Holy Transgressors”

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Scripture (CEB):

Matthew 10:34-39

³⁴ “Don’t think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth. I haven’t come to bring peace but a sword. ³⁵ I’ve come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ People’s enemies are members of their own households.^[a]

³⁷ “Those who love father or mother more than me aren’t worthy of me. Those who love son or daughter more than me aren’t worthy of me.³⁸ Those who don’t pick up their crosses and follow me aren’t worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them.

Sermon:

Pastor Andy wanted me to share with you the thesis that I wrote for my Bachelor’s degree in Humanities. It’s 38 pages long, so...get comfortable... (*this sermon includes excerpts, but has been reduced for the sake of brevity*)

- ❖ People have been trying to explain God forever. Our attempts to give words to our beliefs are what we call theology – words about God. One strain of American theology is called Complementarianism.
- ❖ Define complementarianism – read pps 1-2

“Introduction

America is a Christian nation, but not in the way some politicians use that term, nor in the way some religious leaders would like it to be. We know that our Founding Fathers intended to create a more perfect union free from a state-controlled religion, but whether or not our foundational documents are based on a common version of sectarian Christian theology and the popular belief of complementarianism, we can see the effects of this in the

everyday lives of American citizens. Throughout American history we can see how the Christian Church has influenced our society and brought us to the gender-polarized society we have today in America. We are in the grip of the Christian theology of complementarianism, whether, as citizens, we know it or not. Complementarianism is based on an essentialist theory: the idea that men and women are inherently different, but takes it further than the basic scientific theory in teaching that humanity was created by God in two distinct, yet complementary forms, in order to carry out its God-given roles consisting of heterosexually-matched pairs. If we look at the latest polls, we will find that 70.6% percent of Americas claim to be Christian, but it would be difficult, if not impossible, to support that 70% figure based on the overwhelmingly sexist and transphobic, un-Christian behavior we see on social media and TV shows, in popular movies, and in crime rates across the nation (Wormald 2015). Even secular society in America is widely based on complementarianism, a theological view held by some in Christianity which states that men and women have different, but complementary, roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, religious leadership, and elsewhere. It is followed, though unconsciously, by most of the population. Complementarianism is scientifically anachronistic, theologically in dispute, and the way it is played out in American society is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. What will it take to return the practice of Christianity to the gospel of love, forgiveness, and inclusion that Christ instituted during his earthly ministry? How do we stem the tide of complementarianism from swamping another generation of Americans? These are the two questions I hope to answer, or at least pursue, in this paper.

At this point I should explain that while the term “sexes” relates to the biological aspects of being male or female, which is problematic as we will see, “gender” as it will be used throughout this paper, refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that society considers appropriate for men and women. Essentialist theory in biology adheres to the belief that ‘human nature’ - some specific quality such as masculinity and femininity - is an innate and natural ‘essence’ rather than a product of culture.

First, we must discover the theological underpinnings of complementarianism and its roots in essentialism, before we can take that understanding to an exploration of their effects on our culture and society. In Churches that adhere to complementarian theology, even though women may be precluded from certain roles and ministries, they are held to be equal in moral value and status. The phrase used to describe this is 'Ontologically equal, functionally different.' Complementarians assign primary headship roles to men and support roles to women based on their interpretation of certain biblical passages.”

❖ Discuss Genesis 1:26-27 – pps 2-3

“At the heart of the essentialist movement in Christianity, and parts of Judaism as well, is one verse in the Hebrew Bible. The first book of the Hebrew Bible is Genesis, a book of beginnings, as its name implies. The first chapter of Genesis contains a description of the creation of the world, which, in the view of some Christians, should be taken literally. The six-day creation story includes a depiction of the creation of humankind found in Genesis 1, verse 27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Authorized King James Version [AKJV]) Biblical literalists, those

evangelical and fundamentalist Christians who adhere to the exact letter or literal sense of the words, interpret this verse to mean that there are two distinct sexes, male and female, as written. The American Bible Society and the Barna Group, conduct regular studies on religion in America, and in 2016 they estimate only 22% of Americans believe that the Bible is the “actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word.” This percentage is down from 24% in 2011, showing a slow, but fairly steady, downward trend. (Barna 2017) Though this study seems to suggest that essentialism is dying out, still it prevails in the teachings of fundamentalists and many evangelical Christians. As we can see, biblical interpretation is neither universal nor static. There are other ways to understand that text in Genesis.”

❖ Read Genesis 1:26-27 from The Inclusive Bible

“²⁶Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let them be stewards of the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle the wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.

²⁷ Humankind was created as God’s reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them.”

- You can see the subtle, yet important, differences in the translations. In this inclusive, and true to the original language, it’s not only man who was created in the image of God, but all of humankind.
- But the writer of Genesis didn’t have modern scientific methods so that they could understand human bodies, and the many and varied ways that a human sex characteristics are far more than can be seen with the human eye.

“Stepping back from a word-for-word, literal translation, another hermeneutical model would have us locate the text within the context of the surrounding verses. Rev. Linda Tatro Herzer, writing in *The Bible and the Transgender Experience: How Scripture Supports Gender Variance*, takes on this contextual explanation of this text. “Genesis 1 is such a poetic articulation of creation that I believe the author of Genesis was *not* trying to write a scientific explanation of the creation of all things. (Besides the poetic factor, there is also the fact that the scientific method had not yet been developed.) If I were explaining this to my young library students I would say it was not the author’s intent to give us scientifically true facts and information in Genesis 1.” (Herzer 52) Herzer highlights the other contrasting statements about creation used in this section of scripture: light/darkness, water/land, and plants/animals. Herzer rightly points out that we know there is more to a 24-hour period than the binary ideas of day and night, more to the properties of earth than water and land, and more varieties of life than the two old-school kingdom systems of plants and animals. Speaking again of Genesis 1:27, Herzer summarizes, “Some say that this means God has created *only* male and female. But might there be a dawn and a dusk, a shoreline and a marshland, another classification kingdom in the realm of male and female? The reports of modern medicine answer this question with a resounding ‘yes!’” Herzer makes the point that scientific method had not yet been discovered when Genesis was written, so essentialists are following an antiquated system based on a narrow interpretation of scripture. However, the day did finally dawn when humans began to seek information about ourselves in a new way. Aristotle, the

“father of science” was the first to realize the importance of empirical measurement, believing that knowledge could only be gained by building upon what is already known.”

❖ Discuss scientific findings that deny that there are two, essentially different sexes – pps 5-7

“To understand the latest teachings on sex and gender, I read the work of Sarah S. Richardson, the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University. She is jointly appointed in the Department of the History of Science and the Committee on Degrees in Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Richardson’s research uses the tools of history, philosophy, and social studies of science to analyze how scientists, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, understand sex and gender. Writing in *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome*, Richardson says it this way: “Humans are terrible with twos. Male and female, cat and dog. Macintosh and PC. We tend to order twos into binaries: complementary, opposite, or ranked with respect to one another. When imported into the science of sex, this kind of thinking can distort our reasoning, turning sex differences into commanding sexual dimorphisms.” (Richardson 191)

I met with Dr. Karen Carlberg, Professor Emerita of Biology at Eastern Washington University. Dr. Carlberg’s area of expertise is effects of exercise on female reproductive endocrinology, including effects of exercise during pregnancy on fetal hormone levels and brain development. Dr. Carlberg has written on and researched this topic extensively. When I asked her if gender is divided only into male and female, her answer via email was, “Brain and behavior can be affected both by sex chromosomes and sex hormones. These effects can occur during fetal development of the brain, as well as during pubertal development and adulthood.” She went on to explain that not only does gender not operate as a binary, but that most of human sex and sexuality operates on a spectrum. “A spectrum of femininity/masculinity can be considered for many aspects of brain and behavior: gender identity; sexual orientation; many aspects of cognitive function; childhood choices for play and playmates; grooming and clothing; behavioral responses to other women and men; interest in motherhood; occupational interests; recreational interests; etc. All of these can be affected by both nature and nurture.” Her assessment of sex and gender identity is that they are not so easily separated into binary categories. Her research agrees with that of other scientists who are coming up with the same findings.”

❖ Discuss how trans, GNC, and intersex folks queer the binary. – pps 8-9

“Modern American society is based on the gender binary model and our cultural history is based in this essentialist theory. Pushing back against that understanding, even with solid medical and scientific research, is an uphill task. One bridge over this great divide lies in the transgender community. Trans folks, including for the sake of this paper, Gender Non-Conforming (GNC) and Intersex people, give lie to the claim that there are only two sexes, though it costs them dearly to speak up. Leslie Feinberg discusses this in her article, “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come.” Written over 20 years ago, this treatise on GNC lives attempts to explain the struggle against the binary that trans folks take

on every day they fail to comply with American society's gender norms.

Feinberg explains the beginnings of the struggle for gender rights on this continent goes back to the exposure of Europeans into Native American societies that pre-date European rule. Though it is well documented that Native Americans embraced "two-spirit" or GNC individuals, (called *berdache* by the immigrant Europeans) "the missionaries and colonialist military reacted to the Native berdache in this hemisphere with murderous hostility" (Feinberg). The European settlers brought with them a Puritan understanding of gender, a binary code that had been formalized into their Christianity, and forced it upon the Natives who lacked the means to fight back. Not only did the white interlopers attempt to eradicate the berdache, they also effectively erased the mere thought of gender as non-binary.

"The main problem with a strong dichotomy is that there are intermediate cases that push the limits and ask us to figure out exactly where the dividing line is between males and females," biology sex expert Arthur Arnold at the University of California, Los Angeles, told *Nature*. "And that's often a very difficult problem, because sex can be defined a number of ways." (Olsen) The problem with essentialism is that, from the standpoint of biology, it is untenable.

How we see ourselves is based in large part on the way our society says we should be, based on its historical/cultural values. The particular construction of gender currently at work in American society developed over time, but when we dig down to the roots to find the ideology at the unseen foundation of expected gender performance, we find an empiricist belief in the essential difference between males and females. This illegitimate pairing of scientific method and religious belief has brought us to our current attitude that gender is locked in binary stasis. In our society, gender performance is hierarchical, patriarchal, and rigidly enforced by both society, at large, and the dominant religion. In our society, for example, Christianity. Though science has determined that gender is not binary, but rather exists along a spectrum, institutional power structures that control our lives continue to ignore this truth. Unfortunately, the Christian Church in almost all its sects, is one of the power structures that perpetuates the false dichotomy of the gender binary."

So how do we break the binary? How do we unravel our society's adherence to complementarian theology?

Jesus just told us how, by fighting back. "I came not to bring peace, but a sword."

Jesus' life and teachings were inherently divisive. He said and did things that made the authorities blood boil. Jesus stood up to the authorities of his day and said, "Stop it!" Jesus changed theology. **Jesus was a Holy Transgressor, and he calls his followers to be Holy Transgressors too.**

❖ Give examples from thesis – pps27-32

"Theology Can Evolve

Theology, our human attempt to explain God, is not static--it is an ever-changing, ever-evolving set of beliefs and understandings. Over the millennia there have been seemingly concrete, foundational beliefs that were ardently adhered to, but that were eventually re-

understood in the light of new revelation. A few examples of how theology has made giant strides along its route to our current Christian beliefs include our understanding of purity laws, baptism, and salvation. These three areas of theology are arguably foundational to what it means to be a believer, and yet all three have undergone massive changes in orthodox thought. Orthodox means “right thought” and yet, over time, and through often painful circumstances, our so-called orthodox beliefs have changed.

Take for example the first-century Christian understanding surrounding what foods can and cannot be eaten. Remembering that Jesus, and all twelve of his first disciples, were Jewish; their understanding was that to remain pure before the Lord, certain foods must never be eaten. These rules are spelled out in the Book of Leviticus in the Hebrew scriptures. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, when the disciples began to act as leaders in the fledgling new faith that was first called, The Way, they brought to this new religion their beliefs from their old faith tradition, Judaism. Having received no new instructions from the leader, Jesus, during his time with them, the disciples, now called apostles, went on keeping to the traditional laws regarding pure and impure foods, until one spiritual experience that brought their understanding of purity into question.

The apostle Peter, the leader of the nascent religion called Christianity, was traveling throughout Judea and the surrounding areas, preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. The story, found in the Book of Acts, chapter 10, begins by introducing us to Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Romans were not Jewish, and therefore did not adhere to the Jewish purity laws. This made their houses off limits for Jews, as entering them would render the Jewish person unclean and unable to worship in the temple until purification rites had been undergone. Cornelius is told to send for Peter, so he dispatches three men to go get Peter and bring him back. Peter, meanwhile, is journeying toward Caesarea, where Cornelius lives. While in prayer, Peter has a vision, and in this vision, he is told to eat impure foods. Peter argues with the vision, and so it is repeated three times. Peter has received a revelation; the ancient purity laws regarding food are no longer binding, and not only is he allowed to eat these foods, he is also allowed to enter Gentile’s (non-Jewish) homes and eat with them. This contradicts everything Peter has ever been taught, and yet he obeys. He goes to Cornelius’ house, and what he finds there are devout, God-fearing people who wish to hear all Peter has to say. While Peter is telling them about Jesus and his ministry, the story tells us that the Holy Spirit descended on all present. Peter responds by baptizing the whole household into the Christian faith. Peter’s rationale for this illicit action is found in verses 34-35, “Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” and 46-47, “Peter asked, ‘These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?’ (Common English Bible, Acts 10)” Well, there were some people who would have stopped the baptism, if they could. The rest of the apostles, presiding over the Church in Jerusalem, heard about what Peter had done, and called him back to Jerusalem to be disciplined. Peter returns to Jerusalem, relates all that has happened, and the elders there believe his story and change the theology of the Church regarding, not only baptism, but also salvation, saying in Acts chapter 11, verse 18, “So then, God has granted even

the Gentiles repentance unto eternal life” (Common English Bible, Acts 11.18). It is easy to read these biblical stories through a historical telescope that minimizes the importance of the decisions taken in those days, we must overcome this tendency so that we can understand the paradigm shift that had occurred. The official stance surrounding pure and impure foods, who may be baptized, and therefore saved, have all been changed.

A similarly momentous event is related in Acts Chapter 15, where we read of the “sharp dispute” between leaders of the Church over the issue of circumcision. Again, we see where theological debate arises over whether to adhere to traditional beliefs or follow the leading of the Holy Spirit into a new way of believing. Paul’s statement to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, those who held the power on doctrinal issues, contains these words in verses 7-11:

Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. God, who knows people’s deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we, nor our ancestors, could bear? On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus. (Common English Bible, Acts 15:7-11)

This story shows us that seemingly renegade behavior can, in fact, be the path to a new discovery in theology. Perhaps the best example of transgressive behavior becoming an integral part of Christianity is found in the Protestant Reformation. Though Martin Luther is often credited as the sole actor in that religious drama, it is helpful to remember that he was one of many characters in that story.

What we now call the Protestant Reformation was a centuries-long set of studies and writings on the part of many theologians beginning as far back as the twelfth century. Generally, when we talk about The Reformation, (from [Latin](#) *reformatio*, literally "restoration, renewal"), we refer to the Protestant Reformation, also called the European Reformation. This major upset in Christianity was a [schism](#) from the [Roman Catholic Church](#), at the time, the sole authoritative body in the faith. Though we often think that [Martin Luther](#) initiated all reform ideas, there had been significant earlier attempts to reform the Roman Catholic Church before Luther – such as those of Jan Hus, Peter Waldo, and John Wycliffe, and continued after Luther by [John Calvin](#), [Huldrych Zwingli](#), and other early [Protestant Reformers](#). Martin Luther, however, is credited with the start of the Reformation with his 1517 work *The Ninety-Five Theses*.

Luther’s *Ninety-five Theses* advance Luther’s positions against what he saw as abusive practices by Roman Catholic preachers selling plenary indulgences, which were certificates believed to reduce the punishment for sins. In the *Theses*, Luther claimed that the repentance required by Christ for sins to be forgiven involves inner spiritual repentance rather than merely external sacramental confession. He argued that indulgences lead Christians to avoid true repentance and sorrow for sin, believing that they can forgo it by purchasing an indulgence. Though the *Theses* were the impetus for what we now call the Protestant Reformation, Luther did not consider indulgences to be as important as other theological matters which would

divide the Church, such as justification by faith and free will (Ninety Five Theses). Again, time diminishes the import of the reformer's actions, but we should not forget that Peter Waldo died in exile after excommunication, Jan Hus was burned at the stake, and Martin Luther only survived because of the protection of his elector, Prince Frederick III of Saxony. Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X on 3 January 1521, but went into exile until it was safe for him to return to his home. When placed on trial by the secular authority at the Edict of Worms that same year, Luther refused to recant his writings. The Emperor presented the final decision of that trial declaring Luther an outlaw, banning his literature, and requiring his arrest: "We want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic." It also made it a crime for anyone in Germany to give Luther food or shelter. It permitted anyone to kill Luther without legal consequence (Martin Luther). Luther lost his pulpit as a Roman Catholic priest by defying Church law, was put on trial and condemned a heretic by the Church, and then was prosecuted and declared a criminal by a civilian court. Such was the punishment for disagreeing with traditional Church teachings. In the relay race of faith, the baton of theological understanding is passed along from one runner to the next, from Peter, to Paul, to Hus, to Luther, each in his proper time and place. And though the race never seems to end, each one does their part, carrying the baton as far as they are able. Luther had questions, questions he was compelled to find an answer for. Perhaps transgression is just questioning, but transgressors are still punished because in their day and time they are just that, transgressors – those who go against the religious authorities. Though we focus on the voice or name of the one with the new ideas, there are often others who assist them, though their names are often lost to history. Prince Frederick III, a man of privilege and power, helped Luther's theology become normalized simply by paying the bills and providing a platform, literally a pulpit for Luther to preach from, and protection when Luther needed it. The nature of this transgressive behavior is often portrayed by the majority, or authoritarian regime, as heretical, but it is only such in their eyes. The conservative voices, those who strive to conserve the traditional beliefs and forms of practice, see all innovative or progressive voices and thoughts as heretical, antiestablishment, and in religious terms, sin, but in the eyes and minds of the enlightened one espousing the modern idea or theology, they are simply truth. Luther put it this way in his defense at Worms, "It might be heresy, but it's still the truth" (Martin Luther)"

❖ Summary

So...how do we know what to believe? Do we believe every new voice that comes along? Is every new idea to be accepted as new theology, new truth?

I think if we do our best to faithfully follow God's call to love - as the United Church of Christ says it, God's Extravagant love for all - if our intent is to love, we won't get too far off the narrow way.

And when we see God's children being excluded and abused, then our call is clear – we must stand on the side of what's right and true and good, even if it means that our family and friends may not understand. We may be vilified, even called heretics, and yet if that's what it takes to bring the kingdom of God to earth, then so be it. We must be Holy Transgressors.