

Metropolitan Community Church:  
A Perfectly Queer Reading Of The Bible

by

Matthew D. Stewart

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Department of Religious Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Dell De Chant, M.A.  
Carlos Lopez, Ph.D.  
Thomas Williams, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the hermeneutical strategies that Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) has employed in interpreting the Bible. As a new religious movement (NRM) with an outreach to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals MCC interprets the text in light of its membership. The interpretive strategies and methodologies employed are in keeping with other denominations in the Christian tradition. This provides a possible avenue by which MCC can be classified within the Christian tradition.

The interpretation of the biblical text is given in light of the gay people who compose MCC's membership. Gays and lesbians have experienced social and religious stress. Their history, identity, and questions are brought with them as they approach the biblical text. MCC interprets the text to meet the pastoral needs of gay people.

The paper examines how MCC has interpreted specific passages and texts of the Bible. It focuses on the "texts of terror," those texts which have been used to marginalize gays and lesbians. Additionally, it examines texts which highlight meaningful themes for gays and lesbians.

In the end, it is perfectly *queer* that MCC has emerged as an interpretive community, with a specific hermeneutic. MCC has engaged in a similar process of

biblical interpretation as other Christian denominations, making the Bible relevant and meaningful for its membership. The claim that MCC is a Christian denomination can be made by appealing to its interpretation of the biblical canon of Christianity.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

The Rev. Troy Perry founded the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) on October 6, 1968 as a Christian outreach to gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLBT) individuals. MCC had humble beginnings, with its first service taking place in Perry's living room with nine people in attendance.<sup>1</sup> However, MCC has seen rapid growth in its forty year history, with more than a hundred congregations on six continents. The mission of MCC is: "Calling people to new life through the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. Confronting the injustice of poverty, sexism, racism and homophobia through Christian social action. Creating a community of healing and reconciliation through faith, hope and love."<sup>2</sup> The three-pronged Gospel of salvation, community, and Christian social action, with its specific outreach to gay people, has changed the theological outlook of this new religious movement (NRM).

The impetus for Troy Perry to establish MCC was the marginalization within traditional Christian denominations of gay individuals. Christianity has had a hostile relationship with homosexuality, considering it to be one of the gravest of all sins.<sup>3</sup> Perry

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed biography of Troy Perry and the history of MCC can be found in, Troy Perry and Thomas Swicegood, *Don't be Afraid Anymore: The Story of the Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Eastman, "Not a Sin, Not a Sickness: Homosexuality and the Bible," *Metropolitan Community Church*, <http://www.mcccchurch.org> (accessed March 30, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 119-300.

himself was removed from ordained ministry in the Church of God denomination after publicly announcing that he was gay. He was also aware of the often violent treatment that gay people suffered in society and the legal structures which were specifically targeted at gays and lesbians. Gay people suffered both social and religious stress.

Rev. Troy Perry's personal struggle with reconciling his identity as a gay man and a Christian was a motivating factor in forming MCC. The possibility for identity integration was made possible by (re)interpreting the Bible. As a gay man reading the Bible, Perry discovered that "denominations have intentionally misread and misinterpreted their Bibles to please their own personal preference, remembering only verses that suit themselves, forgetting or ignoring many other scriptures."<sup>4</sup> He argued that the traditional presentation of the biblical text was incorrect; it was the product of a specific context driven interpretation. The Bible had been interpreted as a condemnation of both homosexuality and gay people. However, as Perry read the text he found no such condemnation. Thus, for him it was possible to be both gay and Christian, with the Biblical text stating nothing to the contrary. In establishing MCC Perry did not seek to break away from Christianity but rather to maintain lineage with it. Thus, MCC retains the entire biblical canon yet offers a new interpretation that is reflective of being both gay and Christian.

MCC did not simply appropriate the totality of the Christian tradition as it had been previously presented. Rather, it sought to challenge the dominant Christian theological worldview that arose through a specific biblical interpretation and provide an alternative to it. MCC is a reactionary movement in response to what Troy Perry found to

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<sup>4</sup> Perry and Swicegood, *Don't be Afraid Anymore*, 39.

be problematic and troubling with the traditional interpretation of the biblical canon. The Christian tradition had interpreted certain sections of the Bible as both a condemnation of homosexuality, but also of gay people. MCC in maintaining its Christian identity does not abandon the Bible or construct an alternative text, but rather recontextualizes the already existing sacred text in light of the unique composition of its membership. Like many NRM, MCC forms a new interpretation of an already existing Christian scripture that reflects the unique identity and history of its gay and lesbian congregation and the new revelation that Rev. Troy Perry receives.<sup>5</sup>

MCC has faced criticism from those within the Christian tradition and from scholars. These criticisms were somewhat anticipated given that MCC united what has been commonly seen as two diametric opposites in the late 1960s, homosexuality and Christianity. The criticism that MCC initially faced and continues to face is centered around two questions: (1) Is MCC a religion? (2) Is MCC a Christian denomination?

Ronald Enroth and Gerald Jamison in their book, *The Gay Church*, engaged the first question pertaining to MCC's legitimacy as a religion.<sup>6</sup> These scholars have objected to the classification of MCC as a religion because it is rooted within the gay subculture and has a strongly developed social element. The thesis of their work is that "MCC and other gay religious groups are merely an extension of the gay-lifestyle clothed in religiosity."<sup>7</sup> Putting on the religious coat, so to say, helps to legitimize the homophile community. Enroth and Jamison state: "The only real difference between the gay world of the homosexual church and secular gay world is that the former includes a religious or

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<sup>5</sup> Information regarding Rev. Troy Perry's revelatory experience can be found in, Perry and Swicegood, *Don't be Afraid Anymore*.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Enroth and Gerald Jamison, *The Gay Church* (New York: Eerdmans, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 106.

spiritual dimension that often appears to be tacked on in an attempt at securing moral legitimacy for homosexual behavior.”<sup>8</sup> MCC for the authors is heavily rooted in the gay subculture and the religious dimensions of it are an afterthought.

Additional scholars, however, one can note Eric Lybeck,<sup>9</sup> positioned MCC as a religion using a broader definition of religion than the one posed by Enroth and Jamison. Lybeck employs a definition of religion, “using a methodology adapted and developed by Richard Wenz from the work of Joachim Wach. This methodology understands religion as the expression of ultimate order and meaning verbally, practically, and socially.”<sup>10</sup> The importance of this definition is that it looks at verbal, practical and social expressions of religion. Employing a definition of religion that moves beyond the verbal (e.g. doctrine and theology) is helpful in examining religions that are less doctrinal and produce less or limited theology. As noted, MCC is a religion that produces little doctrine or theology. A more comprehensive definition of religion, one that doesn’t focus solely on verbal expressions, allows for inclusion of MCC.

However, there is a current lack of scholarly material that has engaged the second question, is MCC a Christian denomination? Scholars have either outright rejected the claim that MCC is continuous with Christianity or favored the insider’s point-of-view, which claims that it is. In order to fill in the current scholarly gap there is a need to evaluate, through an accepted scholarly means, if MCC, as it claims, preserves lineage with Christianity. An avenue to assess the claim is through an examination of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Lybeck, “The Social Expression of Religiousness: The Case of Metropolitan Community Church,” MA Thesis, Arizona State University, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, iii.

employment, understanding and interpretation of the Bible in MCC. My thesis explores the biblical hermeneutic of Metropolitan Community Church.

There is evidence of biblical interpretation within internal periodicals (e.g. magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets), autobiographies, educational materials, sermons and organizational documents (e.g. bylaws and clergy manual). MCC has produced a myriad of internal publications, almost from the outset, that suggests how the community interprets scriptural passages. Additionally, Nancy Wilson, now moderator of MCC,<sup>11</sup> expounds upon the biblical interpretive method of MCC in, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus and the Bible*.<sup>12</sup> These internal materials illuminate for the scholar how the Bible is interpreted in MCC.

MCC gives serious attention to the biblical texts that have been used to marginalize gay people, they have coined these the ‘texts of terror’ or ‘clobber passages.’ These texts with their traditional interpretation are of central concern to MCC because they have led to the exclusion of gays and lesbians within Christianity. These texts are often cited as biblical evidence that God hates homosexuals, with the same application being made to gay people. MCC, in maintaining lineage with the larger tradition, offers a new interpretation of the ‘texts of terror.’ MCC first deconstructs the traditional interpretation before proceeding to offer a new interpretation. The interpretation of the Bible within MCC is colored by the social history of gay individuals in the US and the hostile relationship they have had with Christianity. The (re)interpretation or ‘stamping’ of the text is an element common to many NRM, such as the Black Church and Women-

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<sup>11</sup> A moderator heads MCC’s hieratical structure.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

Church Movement, as they emerge from a larger tradition and must position themselves as being continuous with it.

In their more recent history MCC has moved beyond the ‘texts of terror’ to an examination of additional passages. MCC has highlighted texts within the Bible that are congruent with its view that one can be gay and Christian. It focuses on biblical texts where there are instances of same-sex relationships and eunuchs, the predecessors of gays and lesbians. MCC is able to highlight passages in the Bible that are reflective of its theology, passages which other denominations may not find so important. This process of dealing with the ‘texts of joy’ shows the progressive development present within MCC, its ability to progress as a new religious movement.

While the entire Bible is held as canonical, select passages within the overall text take on heightened significance given that they resonate with gays and lesbians. MCC does not construct an alternative or rival text to the Bible, holding it as the sole source of spiritual authority. Rather, MCC works with the already existing text and interprets it in light of its worldview and theology. MCC brings attention to certain passages within the overall biblical canon that are of relevance to gays and lesbians. These highlighted texts, referred to as a subcanon in this work, are texts that are of importance to MCC.

Examination of the specific manner and methodological tools by which MCC interprets the Bible is important for the biblical hermeneutic of this NRM. MCC arrives at a new understanding of a pre-existing historical text and stamps it with its own interpretation. However, MCC uses tools and methods that some other Christian denominations have already employed, and relies on pre-existing scholarship. What is

new within MCC is the interpretive community, the interpretation and meaning of the text, and a message that is crafted so as to be relevant for gay people.

My thesis explores the biblical hermeneutic of Metropolitan Community Church. The first chapter will examine the context in which MCC emerges. It will explore how external factors, specifically the gay rights movement and the marginalization of GLBT individuals in traditional Christianity, have led to the development of MCC as a new religious movement. The second chapter will examine how Christian traditions have interpreted the Bible. It will show that denominations have a wide range of interpretations of the same text. Additionally, it will explore how denominations highlight certain texts within the larger biblical canon and how these texts are reflective of the denomination's theology and worldview. The third chapter will center on the 'texts of terror,' and the new interpretation that is brought forth by MCC. The last chapter will focus on the 'texts of joy,' showing MCC's evolving and developing hermeneutic. Chapters three and four show the hermeneutic of MCC, how the text is interpreted. Lastly, the paper will evaluate whether MCC is continuous with Christianity given its interpretive method. This final section will, additionally, propose a set of questions that should be asked in an evaluation of NRMs that claim lineage with Christianity based upon their scriptural interpretation.

The conclusion of the paper will validate biblical interpretation as an avenue to determine if MCC is a Christian denomination. The interpretation of the Bible within MCC employs current and established biblical methodologies and is in keeping with other denominations that have (re)interpreted Christian scriptures in order to reflect the unique composition of their community and their theology. While MCC challenges the

dominant Christian world-view it does not stray from what other Christian denominations, that preceded it, have already done. What is truly new about MCC is not what it does with the Bible, but rather the interpretive community. MCC has engaged, as many others before it, in a (re)interpretation of scripture in order to support its unique mission, theology, and pastoral needs.

## Chapter Two

### MCC in its Social and Religious Context

This chapter examines the context in which MCC formed as a NRM. Attention will be given to experiences of gay and lesbian individuals, because they largely comprise MCC's membership. Gay people have faced a set of circumstances, have a history, and moved from being silent to openly calling for equality. The contextual situation of gay people directly bears upon the manner in which MCC interprets the text. Understanding the context of gays and lesbians is imperative given that MCC creates a message that is reflective of their experiences, questions, and history.

Metropolitan Community Church, using Robert Ellwood's typological classification for new religious movements,<sup>13</sup> can be understood as a reactive movement. MCC emerges in response to the social and religious stresses that gay people encountered in the United States in the mid to late 1960s. The social context for homosexuals and gays during this period and the time leading up to it was one of social rejection, criminal persecution, stigmatization, and invisibility. Within the religious sphere, especially in the Christian context, they were labeled as sinners, demonized, denied the sacraments and rites, and rejected from participation in Christian congregations. The social and religious stress gays experienced influenced the emergence of a 'gay subculture.' Homosexual and gay people's experiences were also the impetus for the emergence of a new religious movement that could respond to the needs and questions raised within this subculture.

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<sup>13</sup> Robert S Ellwood, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, (New York, Prentice Hall, 1999).

The formation of Metropolitan Community Church was the direct result of the anxiety and stress that the gay subculture of the late 1960's felt and their need to reconcile their gay identity and Christian faith. MCC provided a faith community and message that appealed "to the susceptibilities of the homophile community, created by their need for a meaning in life that will remove the instability of the anxiety brought about by living and working in a predominantly heterosexual world in which they are 'labeled' as deviant."<sup>14</sup> In contrast to traditional Christian congregations, MCC is predominantly comprised of gays and lesbians, making them a majority in which they would otherwise be a sound minority. A gay majority congregation allowed for MCC to proclaim a message that directly met the needs of gays and lesbians and spoke to their contextual situation. Additionally, MCC opened up the possibility for gays, "to be open in their church life, to appreciate all the things that their straight [non-gay] friends took for granted: going to church with your loved one, celebrating your relationship in the eyes of your God and your community, and knowing that the same community will be there for you when the time finally comes to mourn him or her."<sup>15</sup> The attraction of MCC for many gay people was that it provided what had been previously "denied, not in offering something new."<sup>16</sup> MCC made it possible for gay people to completely open in a Christian Church, unheard of before. The central message of MCC is that one could be both gay and Christian, a message that ran counter to the dominant Christian theology. This message was expressed in a reengagement with the already existing biblical canon.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Bauer, "The Homosexual Subculture at Worship: A Participant Observation Study," *Pastoral Psychology*, 25:2 (1976): 117.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Hartman, *Congregations in Conflict: The Battle Over Homosexuality* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 101.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing: Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay People within Organized Religion* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 74.

The problematic nature between the use of gay and homosexual should be cleared-up before proceeding to elaborate upon the social and religious conditions experienced by gays and lesbians.<sup>17</sup> It is somewhat common to use homosexual and gay interchangeably, leading to equating one with the other. However, such use is incorrect, given that each word connotes something different. MCC identifies itself as an outreach to gay people, not as an outreach to homosexual people; thus, differentiating between homosexual and gay leads to a proper understanding of MCC.

Homosexual, as a descriptive term, refers to those individuals who engage in same-sex sex, making it a term that is applicable to both men and women. Homosexuality, however, “is so diverse, the variety of psychological and social and sexual correlates so enormous, that the word homosexuality, used as a kind of umbrella term is both meaningless and misleading.”<sup>18</sup> However, the term holds relevance in so far as it helps the reader differentiate between what is meant between homosexuality and gay. It is a modern pathological term coined in the nineteenth century to designate a minority group. The term refers exclusively to sexual activity, with ‘sex’ being defined as “those feelings and actions that, in any given culture, would-unless interrupted by interdiction-normally lead to physical engagement to the point of orgasm for at least one of the parties involved.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, a married man who engages in secret sexual acts with another man is engaging in a homosexual act. This man who is on the ‘down low,’ however, would most likely not self-identify as gay.

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<sup>17</sup> A detailed discussion on the difference between gay and homosexual can be found in, Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, 41-46.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Bell, ‘Homosexuality an Overview,’ in Harold Twiss, ed., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: A Symposium*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1978), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald E. Long, *Men, Homosexuality, and the Gods* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 11.

The term gay, on the other hand, refers to men or women who accept their same-sex sexual orientation and self-identify as gay. John Boswell notes that gay applies to those who are “conscious of erotic inclination toward their own gender as a distinguishing characteristic” of themselves.<sup>20</sup> Gay, in opposition to homosexual, refers to identity, a self-identity. This definition rejects the common held belief that the distinguishing characteristic of gay people is their sexuality. It is possible for one to be gay and not engage in any sexual activity; those who have chosen celibacy (e.g. monks, nuns, and priests) and those who have not yet had any sexual experiences (e.g. teenagers) can be gay. Gay and homosexual each designate something different from the other. Gay carries with it specific cultural experiences that are unique and contribute to a gay identity. Common experiences that shape a gay identity include ‘coming out’ to family friends, sensitivity to persons living with AIDS, and a struggle for equality, to name a few. These common experiences assist in the formation of a gay subculture and identity.

As gay people experienced alienation and social separation from larger society, they formed their own subculture. A subculture exists in relation to a larger dominant culture. Gay individuals, while part of a minority subculture, live their everyday lives within the larger culture which they are participants in. Subcultures share common values (e.g. sexual autonomy, social pluralism), artifacts (e.g. publications, buttons, flags), and interests (e.g. opposition to homophobia). The gay subculture, like numerous other subcultures “has its own language, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions.”<sup>21</sup> However, gay subculture is not homogeneous, with gay people varying in their participation in

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<sup>20</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Woods, *Another Kind of Love: Homosexuality and Spirituality*, (Ft. Wayne: Knoll Publishing, 1988), 64.

aspects of gay subculture. One of the main tenants within the gay subculture is that the oppressive behavior that gay people experienced was unnecessary and discriminatory, leading to an ethos in the gay community of full acceptance.

In the 1960s, homosexuals and gay people underwent persecution from the larger culture in the United States. This persecution resulted from “the idea that a person’s sexual preferences tell us something deep and important about that person ... [specifically] the nature of that person.”<sup>22</sup> Hence, homosexuality revealed not only one’s sexual preference but also one’s character and disposition. This line of reasoning allowed people to form a stance against homosexuality, given the fact that engaging in homosexual activity was tied to a host of other undesirable qualities. Those who participated in sex with members of the same sex were commonly viewed as being pedophiles, morally degenerate, and mentally unstable. The intolerance towards homosexuality, “translates into repression; repression encourages invisibility; invisibility and stereotypes go together.”<sup>23</sup> This fostered the growth of societal structures and behaviors that were openly hostile to homosexuality.

The Stonewall Riots, June 27-30, 1969, spawned the mantra of full acceptance, which would become the anthem for the gay rights movement. An uprising in a gay bar marked a point in time when gays “rejected the notion that they were sick or sinful, claimed equality with heterosexuals, and banded together to protest second-class citizenship, created a subculture, and came out in large numbers.”<sup>24</sup> Gay people were no longer content to remain a quiet, invisible, or shameful, but were rather proud of who

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<sup>22</sup> Gareth Moore, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality*, (New York: Continuum, 2003), 47.

<sup>23</sup> John Harrison, “The Dynamics of Sexual Anxiety,” in Harold Twiss, ed., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: A Symposium*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1978), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

they were. The emergence of gay pride signaled a turn in history whereby gays, became visibly present within society, shunning shame and invisibility. Gay and lesbians sought to overturn religious and societal structures that had arisen to oppose their full acceptance and equality. Gay people began to visibly protest and call for change.

The Christian Church, in its varied forms, was one of the primary sources of oppression from which gays desired to be liberated from. Through a specific reading of the Bible, the Church,

has historically perpetrated the myth that homosexual people are inherently sinful because of their sexuality. The sexual expression of gay love has been condemned because it is deemed to be 'unnatural'. It is said to be contrary to God's will because it does not serve the procreative function. It has been made criminal because the church continues to give credence to the manufactured belief that homosexuality has something to do with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Gay people are thought to be incapable of love, slaves to lust, and abandoned by God and rightfully spurned by the church.<sup>25</sup>

Gays and lesbians saw the Church to be oppressive because it perpetuated a worldview and theology in which homosexuality was incompatible with Christianity. Rev. Troy Perry, founder of MCC, expresses this point when he writes:

The church will have to stop oppressing us. I mean every sect, every parish, every congregation, every synagogue, and anywhere that people need to worship. Why? Because organized religion is the source of the most vicious oppression of the homosexuals throughout history; and especially in this country.<sup>26</sup>

The Church was a place that gay people that felt they should be accepted, yet all they faced was rejection.

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Johnson, 'The Good News of Gay Liberation,' in Sally Gearhart and William Johnson, eds., *Loving Women / Loving Men: Gay Liberation and the Church* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1974), 104.

<sup>26</sup> Troy Perry, *The Lord is My Sheppard and He Knows I'm Gay* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1972), 221.

The context in which gays lived in the United States opened the possibility for raising new questions for those who identified as both gay and Christian. Gay people felt, “that the church more than any other institution in society should accept and understand him; yet the church holds up a mirror that reflects only an image of perversion.”<sup>27</sup> One who is both gay and Christian is faced with the question of reconciling two identities. The Christian message preached from the pulpit and the doctrines of the faith left no room for homosexuality and gays.<sup>28</sup> How does God speak to a group that is currently undergoing persecution and discrimination? Does God hate gay people? The AIDS epidemic raised even more questions concerning the nature of God, to which Christianity did not speak. Those who identified as both gay and Christian were faced with new questions and had to seek new answers.

These questions, which flowed out of the context in which gay people lived, coupled with a desire to be included within Christianity led to the reevaluation of the biblical canon. The Christian tradition, through its use of specific texts, had created a worldview that was hostile to homosexuality, which spilt over into societal structures (i.e. laws). If gay people were to gain the inclusion they desired, they would need to engage the texts that justified a homophobic Christian theology. Additionally, a return to the Bible was needed given that gays and lesbians approached the Bible as part of a subculture, that carried with it a set of experiences to which the traditional presentation of

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<sup>27</sup> Donald Kuhn, ‘The Church and the Homosexual’ in Sally Gearhart and William Johnson, eds., *Loving Women / Loving Men: Gay Liberation and the Church*, 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> For detailed information on identity integration see, E. Rodriguez, E. and S. C. Quellette, S.C., “Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participation of a Gay-Positive Church,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39:3, (2000): 333-348.

the text did not speak to. They wanted to know, what does the Bible have to say to gay people?

As a new religious movement, MCC, sought to relieve the anxiety and stress that gays and lesbians felt within society and Christian Churches. Gays were subjected to persecution, derogatory remarks and prejudice, leading to isolation, low self-esteem, and insecurity. They were in reality an invisible minority, with the exception of when they were called out as sinners, criminals, or mentally ill. The perpetrator of this was seen to be the Christian tradition, which helped to legitimize and perpetuate societal structures that acted against homosexuality. The Christian tradition itself was opposed to homosexuality and actively discouraged the participation of openly gay individuals in its congregations. MCC emerged as a new religious movement that reacted against this societal and religious stress, creating an environment in which one could be both gay and Christian. In order to accomplish this MCC had to engage an already existing canon of scripture and (re)interpret it so that it would reflect its primarily gay membership.

## Chapter Three

### MCC as an Interpretive Community

This chapter explores how MCC engages in a unique interpretation of the Bible. The two goals for this chapter are: first, to explore the general nature and formation of the biblical canon and second, to examine how Christian denominations have established a ‘canon within a canon,’ referred to in this work as an interpretive subcanon. The second goal will examine the Black Church<sup>29</sup> and the Women-Church Movement as two examples of how membership composition reflects in the interpretation of the Bible and the formation of a subcanon. Through examination of both of these, commonly recognized to be Christian, one can see that MCC partakes in a practice that is already ongoing within Christianity.

Metropolitan Community Church assumes the sacred scriptures of Christianity, strengthening MCC’s claim that it is continuous with Christianity. However, MCC is a reactive moment, in part to traditional Christian theology, it reinterprets the scriptures. This new interpretation is reflective of the membership, theology, and worldview of MCC. Through its own internal action MCC has decided how to read and interpret the Bible, given that nothing internal to the text demands that it be read in one manner over another. Denominations within Christianity interpret the Bible in a myriad of ways, opening the possibility for MCC to craft its own interpretation. The decisions that MCC

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<sup>29</sup> Black Church is an overarching term which refers to seven denominations: American Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, National Baptist Convention, USA, National Baptist Convention of America, Progressive National Baptist Convention, and Church of God in Christ.

makes in regards to interpretation of the Bible define its theology, making it truly a *new* religious movement.

A canon is “a corpus of texts which is attributed absolute authority and which functions as the ultimate reference for all thought and practice.”<sup>30</sup> A canon within any religious tradition is the reference point for belief and practice, holding value for an adherent within that tradition. It is an overarching term taking in religious texts, sacred scriptures, doctrines, and official decrees. A canon is held to be authoritative and serves the function of conveying “a sense of reality and a standard of truth.”<sup>31</sup> Because canons are composed of written texts, religious truth is “more dependent upon the text than are other insights and truths.”<sup>32</sup> Access to religious truth is in part gained through the reading of canonical texts.

Christianity shares a common scriptural canon, with small noticeable differences between larger denominations (e.g. Catholicism, Protestantism, and Greek Orthodoxy). The Bible is the scriptural canon for Christianity, the source of ‘absolute authority.’ It is a closed canon, nothing can be added or subtracted from the Bible. It is the source of religious truth for Christians, conveying the ‘Word of God.’ Through the biblical canon Christians have access to religious truth, “truth which cannot be learned any other way than through those specific writings.”<sup>33</sup> The Bible preserves the religious truth of Christianity, making it possible for each successive generation to have access to it.

However, given that denominations within Christianity interpret the Bible in various

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<sup>30</sup> C. Cornille, “Canon Formation in New Religious Moments the Case of the Japanese New Religions,” in A. Van Der Kooij and K. Van Der Toorn, eds., *Canon and Decanonization* (New York: Brill, 1998), 279.

<sup>31</sup> H.M. Vos, “The Canon as a Straightjacket,” in A. Van Der Kooij and K. Van Der Toorn, eds., *Canon and Decanonization* (New York: Brill, 1998), 357.

<sup>32</sup> Vos, “The Canon as a Straightjacket,” 354.

<sup>33</sup> Vos, “The Canon as a Straightjacket,” 356.

ways, the religious truth of the tradition is shaped within each denomination. Hence, each denomination appeals to the Bible, a source of authority, to substantiate their theology.

An interpretive subcanon refers to those passages or texts within the Bible that are given greater attention or take on heightened significance for a particular community. These texts do not supplant the biblical canon, but rather are passages that speak and resonate with the particular denomination or group in which they are read. While the Bible as whole is meaningful, specific meaning is given to select passages; however, not to the detriment of the entire biblical canon. In contrast to canon, a subcanon is not closed or sealed. Rather, passages can be important at one time and have less significance at another, with other passages replacing them.

An interpretive subcanon supports a denomination's particular worldview and theology. A denomination is able to bring attention to a particular biblical passage, interpret it, and then highlight a theme. These texts resonate within a particular community and take on heightened meaning for members of the denomination. A denomination is able to appeal to the selected interpreted passages to support its theology, showing biblical evidence. This allows a denomination to ignore texts which conflict or contradict other passages in its subcanon. An interpretive subcanon relies on interpretation, hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is a theory and methodology of interpretation concerned with understanding and meaning of a text. It is largely focused on the study and interpretation of religious texts. Interpretation is a deliberate act, with hermeneutics concerning itself with that act. Hermeneutics is interested with understanding the rules or theories that are

followed to arrive at an interpretation of the text. Its aim is to illuminate the guidelines that have been followed to arrive at the specific meaning of the text.

The hermeneutic circle centers on the world of the author, world of the text, and world of the reader. All three provide insight into the interpretation of the text, allowing an individual or group to make the text meaningful. There can be greater in emphasize in the interpretation of the text on the world of the text, author, or reader, allowing one world to dominate over the others. The world of the author concerns itself with understanding the meaning that the author had in the writing the text, understanding his worldview and context. This assumes that the author had a specific point or intention in his writing. The world of the text seeks to understand the text apart from the author and the reader, an arduous if not impossible task. The world of the reader seeks to understand how the reader him/herself contributes to the meaning of the text. The reader brings their worldview and context to the text, influencing the meaning of the text.

An interpretive community can be defined a group of readers. Each interpretive community approaches the Bible within a specific context and with a unique history, identity, and questions. In the encounter between the biblical text and the interpretive community meaning is brought forth, with *new* meanings arising “as a result of the interaction of texts with the multiple, changing contexts of their reception.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, the community’s life experiences inform the interpretive community’s dialogue with the Bible.<sup>35</sup> The interpretive community is visible in the interpretation and meaning given to the Bible, showing the community’s presence in the text. Thus, a reading of a Christian

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<sup>34</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Scripture as a Popular Text,” in *Modern Theology*, 14:2, April 1998: 283.

<sup>35</sup> Ibrahim Abraham, “On the Doorstep of the Work: Ricoeurian Hermeneutics, Queer Hermeneutics, and Scripture,” in *Bible and Critical Theory*, 3:1, Feb 2007: 44.

denomination's presentation and interpretation of the Bible reveals its unique identity, theology, and worldview.

Interpretive communities are guided in their interpretation by “communal convictions and the deeply embedded habits that constrain”<sup>36</sup> and guide interpretation. This prevents the interpretation of the text from being a solely personal endeavor within a group. The interpretive methods are a result of the interpretive community's authority, establishing set patterns in how the Bible is to be interpreted. Thus, both the text and reader fall, “under the weight of the interpretive community's authority in which both”<sup>37</sup> are situated. Being attentive to these, “norms and interpretive strategies create the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick formal patterns out – patterns that are said to restrain the reader.”<sup>38</sup> These formal patterns of interpretation reveal an interpretive community's hermeneutic.

There cannot be an objective or *true* reading of the Bible within an interpretive community, because every reading of the text is couched within a community of readers. Each person or group that approaches the Bible to read it does so with their own history and baggage, not abandoning it before reading the text. What arises then are different interpretive communities and subsequently various biblical interpretations. Meaning does not precede the denomination, there must be an interpretive group that reads the text and finds meaning in it. Thus, the Bible and its interpretation, as it appears in each denomination, reflects the individual community and is embedded within it.

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<sup>36</sup> Fulkerson, “Is there a (non-sexist) Bible in this Church?,” 228.

<sup>37</sup> Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict*, 39.

The Bible is able to transcend the time in which it was written. The reader is able to approach the text, enter into dialogue with it, and come away with an interpretation that is meaningful. The Bible has meaning in the current context even though it was written in a previous time, given that its meaning is given from the reader, who lives in the current context. This directly contradicts any idea that the biblical text has a fixed and enduring meaning. This makes it possible for the Bible to have new meanings; it can be read and reread over and over again, yielding ever new meanings.

Interpretive communities are assisted in understanding the world of the author through the use of standardized methodological norms. Within Christianity one can note that numerous denominations use the historical-critical method and biblical criticisms in attempting to interpret and apply meaning to the Bible. Criticism “can be used to refer to any of a variety of descriptive methods of studying literary documents to understand them better.”<sup>39</sup> Christian denominations employ a myriad of criticisms: source, redaction, canonical, textual and form, to name a few.<sup>40</sup> These coupled with the historical critical method seeks to understand the text in the context in which it was written and the way the text exists in its current form. These are norms which Christian denominations employ to construct meaning from the text. The use of these literary tools assists a denomination in applying meaning to the text.

While all denominations of Christianity hold their biblical canon to be closed and final, one should not, however, think of the Bible in static terms. The biblical canon holds and preserves the historic religious truths of Christianity, but yet is relevant to the current context in which a Christian denomination finds itself. The text is not merely an archaic

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<sup>39</sup> Keith Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>40</sup> Detailed information on biblical criticisms see,

piece of history, yet is in a very real way a text which that can encounter over and over again. This constant reencounter with the Bible allows a denomination to derive new meanings from the text, allowing the Bible to speak to the current context of the reader. This allows Christian denominations to speak to a constantly changing context and ensure the texts capability of answering new questions of ultimate concern that arise in successive generations.

Christian denominations have interpreted the biblical text in light of its membership. The interpretation of the text is made relevant to the questions, identity, and concerns of those to whom it is preached and presented to. Texts and passages are highlighted and given a specific meaning that resonates with the denominations specific membership.

The Black Church, an overarching term used to refer to seven denominations, first formed during the last half of the eighteenth century.<sup>41</sup> The Black Church formed primarily as a reaction to societal and religious stress that blacks encountered in the United States since the time of their enslavement, Blacks had been objectified within society, seen evidently in their status as slaves and in their often violent treatment. The inhumane treatment of blacks was the result of a white xenophobic belief that “the Africans’ different color was connected to a different nature that rendered the African ugly and flawed in character.”<sup>42</sup> The dark skin color of blacks was seen as a manifestation of some deeper condition, one which made blacks unequal with whites. They were often characterized as savages, uneducated, immoral, and violent. White Southern Christianity

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<sup>41</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 20.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 4.

often supported and enforced negative behavior towards blacks, by perpetuating a theology and worldview that dehumanized them.

It was on slave plantations that Africans were exposed to Christianity, as it was presented by white American Southern Protestant preachers. “When preachers were allowed to work on plantations, slaves usually received formal instruction that involved an effort to reinforce their status as objects theologically by giving it a quasi-biblical grounding: Africans as the descendents of Canaan are cursed to serve whites.”<sup>43</sup> Selections from the Pauline epistles<sup>44</sup> served the same purpose,<sup>45</sup> to remind slaves to be subservient to their master. Thus, blacks were subjected to a specific Christian worldview that reinforced their societal position as being subservient to whites. The biblical canon from which this message was preached was held to be authoritative; thus, God had ordained the practice of slavery. This interpretation given was possible given the interpretive community, white males, who imposed their interpretation on the text. However, the meaning and interpretation of the Bible was not to go unchallenged by blacks.

Blacks, even before the formation of the Black Church, began to challenge the dominant, white Southern Protestant Christian theology. They turned to the biblical canon, and within their own interpretive community, focused upon texts which had not been previously presented and interpreted texts which previously had been. These texts reflected the black interpretive community, its history, identity and questions. “One story in particular caught their attention and fascinated them with its implications and potential

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<sup>43</sup> Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 83.

<sup>44</sup> The Pauline epistles encompass all the letters that are attributed to Paul. The author recognizes that there are disputed letters from Paul, where his authorship has been called into question.

<sup>45</sup> Additional texts from the Pauline corpus which are quoted are, 1 Timothy 6:1-2 and Ephesians 6:5-9.

applications to their own situation. That story was the story of Exodus.’ White America played the role of Pharaoh, who unjustly held God’s people.”<sup>46</sup> The white interpretation of the Exodus story differed significantly from the black interpretation, though both read the same text. However, blacks, given their own interpretive community, turned to this passage as they began to form their own set of highlighted texts. Blacks’ rejected the dominant white interpretation.

Black Christians evolved as an independent interpretive community, apart from the white Southern Christian interpretive community. Blacks took up the same biblical canon, the same set of authoritative scriptures as other Protestant denominations. The Bible that they heard preached did not resonate with their experiences as a community of oppressed and enslaved people; it did not speak to their history, identity, or theology. However, this changed as blacks read the Bible within their context. Meaning emerged through the encounter between the Black Christian interpretive community and the biblical text. The Bible was able to transcend the time period in which it was written, speaking to the experience of enslaved blacks in America.

The Black Church, like other denominations, gave greater attention to certain passages within the larger biblical canon. However, these texts did not supplant the Bible or detract from the tenants of Christianity. Rather,

the structure of beliefs for black Christians were the same orthodox beliefs as that of white Christians, there were also different degrees of emphasis and valances given to certain particular theological views. For example, the Old Testament notion of God as an avenging, conquering, liberating paladin remains a formidable anchor of the faith in most black churches.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 85.

<sup>47</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 3.

What emerges in the Black Church is an interpretive subcanon, one that speaks to the experience, history and context in which blacks in America read the Bible. It has its own emphases, giving greater attention to select passages and ignoring others. This allows the Black Church to define its theology; it is still, however, a church and denomination deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.

The interpretation of the biblical canon in the Black Church supports the black worldview and theology and challenges the white Southern Protestant view. Applying a new interpretation to the text is supported by appealing to established biblical methodologies, the world of the author. The Black Church “raise[s] the question concerning why a biblical text addressing a labor arrangement, as opposed to physiological distinctions between races, was found so useful in attempting to understand the differences between Europeans and Africans.”<sup>48</sup> This interpretation is a clear use of both historical and textual criticism, situating the text in the historical context in which it was written. The interpretive community employs methodological tools that are common throughout the Christian tradition, supporting its unique identity and theology.

A further example of the Black Church’s interpretation of the Bible occurs in its early formation when it stated that it was practicing authentic Christianity, free from discrimination that the ‘white church’ was practicing.<sup>49</sup> They read, from the Pauline epistles, of a church community that is undivided, and in that reading they found their own community. Noticeable is that the Black Church highlights different passages from the Pauline corpus than the ‘white church’ does. It does not reject the Pauline corpus all

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<sup>48</sup> Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> One might argue from that the Black Church is a Golden Age Movement according to Robert Ellwood’s typological classification of NRM.

together, rather ignores, initially, the passages that speak to slavery, and instead focus on those which speak of one undivided Christian body. Focusing on different passages within the biblical canon permits the Black Church to advance its theology of unity and equality. The Black Church however, is not the only denomination that defines itself through a reinterpretation of the biblical texts.

The Women-Church Movement, primarily a Roman Catholic movement, was formed in 1983 out of the Women's Ordination Conference.<sup>50</sup> This movement counts Mary Hunt, Elisabeth Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether among its founders. It emerges as a reactionary movement to the social and religious stress that women have experienced. In Roman Catholicism and other Christian denominations, women have been excluded from roles within the church's hierarchy. The movement places the blame for the exclusion of women on the patriarchal system that has defined Christian Churches. In society women have faced political, academic and economic hardships as a result of their perceived gender inferiority. Patriarchy has perpetuated a worldview that dehumanizes and marginalizes women. The feminist views in the decade before called for the recognition of the equality of women and the recognition of their inherent value.

The Women-Church Movement is characterized by its, "critique of clericalism, the rejection of a pessimist anthropology that blames women for sin, openness to a plurality of sexual life-styles, and a view of God that is no longer defined by male gender

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<sup>50</sup> A history of the Women-Church Movement can be found in, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), 11-24.

exclusivity.”<sup>51</sup> It rejects and defines itself in opposition to the patriarchy and misogyny that have been characteristic of Christianity, both in its power structures and theology. It claims that the voice of women has been excluded from Christianity, leading to the formation of a male-centered theology and biblical reading. Women-Church seeks to restore women’s place in the Christian community.

Women have heard the male-interpreted Bible preached to them, imposing a specific theological and social view of women. Women were to blame for sin entering the world; Eve ate and shared the forbidden fruit with Adam, leading to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Readings from Leviticus reinforced the belief that women were unclean and a source of pollution. The Pauline corpus was read by men with special attention to those passages where women were called to be submissive to their husbands.<sup>52</sup> However, the patriarchal interpretive worldview was not go unchallenged by women.

Women began to challenge the dominant patriarchal Christian theology. They turned to the biblical canon from their particular context and focused upon texts which had not been previously presented and reinterpreted texts which had, creating an interpretive subcanon. These highlighted texts reflected a Women-Church interpretive community, who brought their history, identity, and questions with them to their encounter with the text. In returning to the biblical text Women-Church was able to read the Exodus story anew. Within their context, Women-Church saw that the “ultimate

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<sup>51</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Women-Church Movement in Contemporary Christianity,” in Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 200.

<sup>52</sup> Ephesians 5:22-24.

exodus of the people of God [was] from all historical conditions of servitude.”<sup>53</sup> God had delivered people every form of bondage, including patriarchy. This interpretation had “never explicitly applied to the bondage of women under patriarchy and to hopes of gender equality.”<sup>54</sup> This interpretation is important for women in overturning a patriarchal system, creating equality within Christianity, and advancing a theology that values gender equality.

Women-Church gave attention to passages that a male dominated interpretation had not and sought out women’s “positive roots in the biblical tradition.”<sup>55</sup> It focused on the faithfulness of women in the Gospels; it was women who remained faithful and committed to Jesus during his passion, while the men abandoned him. It was women who remained at the foot of the cross and Peter who had denied and abandoned him. Additionally, Jesus showed great care and concern from women in his ministry. Jesus healed many women and surrounded himself with women as he ministered. He healed the hemorrhaging women, spoke passionately to a prostitute, and was assisted in his ministry by the hospitality of women. Women-Church highlights passages portraying women in a positive light and ignores those that do not. This allows the movement to show that the founder of Christianity himself valued women, others should follow his lead.

Women-Church desires a Church defined by gender equality, claiming that this vision of church “is in better keeping with the original Christian vision of a community of equals.”<sup>56</sup> They read in the Pauline epistles, like the Black Church, of a church community called to be undivided, and in that reading they find their own community.

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<sup>53</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church*, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church*, 41.

<sup>56</sup> Ruether, “The Women-Church Movement in Contemporary Christianity,” 196.

Women-Church highlights different passages from the Pauline corpus than the dominant patriarchal interpretation, shunning the passages that have been interpreted to advance the passive submission of women to men. Women-Church does not entirely reject the Pauline corpus. Instead, it ignores, initially, passages that speak of the subordination of women to their husbands and instead focus on those that speak of one undivided Christian body.

Women formed their own interpretive community, apart from the dominant male interpretive community. The Bible that they heard preached did not resonate with their experiences as a community of an oppressed and subordinate people, it did not speak to their history, identity, or questions. Women, however, approached the text and read it for themselves, finding meaning and making it meaningful. Within their own context women were able to (re)interpret the text and give greater attention to certain passages within the larger biblical canon. However, these texts did not supplant the Bible or detract from the tenants of Christianity. What emerges in the Women-Church is a subcanon, one that speaks to the experience, history and current context in which women read the Bible. It has its own emphases, giving greater attention to select passages and ignoring others. It is still, however, a church community deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.

Black Church and Women-Church Movement assume an already existing biblical canon, one Protestant, the other Roman Catholic, in its entirety, not removing troublesome passages or books. The Bible remains a source of authority. However, both engage in forming a subcanon, highlighting select passages and reinterpreting others. This allows them to support their unique worldview, setting them apart and differentiating them from other denominations. Continued (re)interpretation of the text

allows for new meaning and new religious truths to emerge, as new questions arise. This allows a historic text to have new meaning within a new context as new interpretive communities engage it. This being said, one can examine how new religious movements, who claim lineage with Christianity, engage in a similar process of forming a subcanon and offering new interpretations to the text.

The examination of a new religious movement, such as MCC, offers, “a privileged locus for the phenomenological development of certain more universal religious phenomenon, such as ... the formation of a canon.”<sup>57</sup> One can observe firsthand the process by which a religion forms a subcanon, and provides subsequent interpretation to it, that supports its unique identity. NRM, such as MCC, forms a subcanonical body of literature that serves as a, “more tangible and permanent basis of absolute authority.”<sup>58</sup> This satisfies a movements’, “desire for a fixed identity over and against other movements.”<sup>59</sup> Even if a NRM assumes a canon already employed by another religion or denomination it will still, as noted, form a subcanon with the larger one and provide its own interpretation to the text.

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<sup>57</sup> Cornille, “Canon Formation in New Religious Moments the Case of the Japanese New Religions,” 279.

<sup>58</sup> Cornille, “Canon Formation in New Religious Moments the Case of the Japanese New Religions,” 289.

<sup>59</sup> Cornille, “Canon Formation in New Religious Moments the Case of the Japanese New Religions,” 289.

## Chapter Four

### (Re)interpreting the Texts of Terror

Metropolitan Community Church accepts the already existing Christian biblical canon. However, as a new religious movement that situates itself in the Christian tradition, MCC initially confronts the texts that Christian denominations quote condemning homosexuality. These texts have been used to terrorize gays and lesbians, justifying verbal and physical abuse. In responding to these texts MCC reconstructs a Christian worldview and theology, one in which gays can claim full inclusion in Christianity. MCC deconstructs the traditional Christian interpretation and construct an interpretation that is reflective of its gay and lesbian membership. This is evidenced in MCC's internal publications (e.g. pamphlets, newspapers), MCC's by-laws, Troy Perry's autobiography, Nancy Wilson's book, ethnographies, and the like. It is these sources that reveal MCC's interpretive subcanon and its interpretive method.

As an interpretive community, MCC brings the history, identity, and questions of its gay membership with it as it approaches the Bible. It rejects the dominant interpretation given to the 'texts of terror,' producing their own interpretation of the same texts. The 'texts of terror' are the six biblical passages most frequently quoted to condemn homosexuality. Their traditional interpretation within Christianity has been used to marginalize gays and lesbians. MCC, however, deconstructs these interpretations

and constructs a new interpretation that is reflective of the community who is interpreting the text. MCC is able to remove the terror from the texts.

MCC views the Bible as the “divinely inspired Word of God, showing forth God to every person through the law and the prophets, and finally, completely and ultimately on earth in the being of Jesus Christ.”<sup>60</sup> This understanding of the Bible is the same as with other traditional Christian denominations and highlights the Bible’s canonical status. It is a source of authority for MCC, with no other competing or alternative text. Given that the homophobic interpretation of the Bible has led to the condemnation of homosexuality and gays, it would be understandable if gays and lesbians looked at the Bible as a source of oppression and hate and rejected it.

MCC states that there are three influences on its biblical interpretation: scientific methods, social changes, and personal experiences.<sup>61</sup> These inform MCC’s hermeneutic, a gay Christian hermeneutic. This hermeneutic is the result of MCC’s desire to integrate being both gay and Christian. MCC, like any other denomination, attempts to apply the text to the life of the reader.<sup>62</sup> This means that MCC must make the biblical text relevant to a gay audience, taking into account the context and questions which gay people bring. Thus, the dialogue with the text is informed by the life experiences of the people interpreting the text, and cannot stray far from the subjective experiences which they bring. The text simply provides a possible way of looking at things, the reader provides the meaning.

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<sup>60</sup> Metropolitan Community Church, “Bylaws,” *Metropolitan Community Church*, <http://www.mccchurch.org> (accessed March 30, 2008).

<sup>61</sup> Eastman, “Not a Sin, Not a Sickness.”

<sup>62</sup> Abraham, “On the Doorstep of the Work,” 44.

MCC affirms that personal and group experiences bear upon the reading of a text.<sup>63</sup> A pamphlet distributed by MCC states:

All of us bring a particular ‘self’ to the text; a self that is shaped by a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religious affiliation, socioeconomic standing, education, and sexual orientation. Readers are also members of specific communities and personal history with that community shapes the way they approach a biblical text. These unique perspectives of readers are called one’s *social location*. Another term for social location is ‘community situation approach.’ The community’s life experiences and the relation of scripture to the community’s needs determine the ways in which the community makes sense of texts in the Bible. Each group finds a point, or points, of reference from which to read, reclaim and re-appropriate the meaning of scripture for the community in liberating and affirming ways.<sup>64</sup>

This defines the importance of the community’s life experience in a denominational hermeneutic. The ‘particular self’ are those who identify as gay and lesbian and the ‘specific community’ is MCC. The interpretation given to the text is tied to the person and community interpreting it, there is no objective interpretation. A gay readership has its own baggage which it brings to the reading of the text. The meaning of the text that evolves from the interpretation serves the ‘community’s needs,’ given that it is the interpretive community who supplies the meaning. Thus, MCC is the denomination that can make meaning of the biblical text for a gay audience, given the composition of its membership. It is the gay lens that allows for the reading, reclaiming and re-appropriation of scripture for gay and lesbian people.

Social change affects the interpretation of biblical texts. Interpretation is embedded within the specific context in which it is read and tied to the group or individual that provides the interpretation. Thus, “every interpretation of a text in the

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<sup>63</sup> Eastman, “Not A Sin, Not a Sickness.”

<sup>64</sup> Monna West, “The Power of the Bible,” *Metropolitan Community Church*, <http://www.mccchurch.org> (accessed March 30, 2008).

Bible is a combination of the stories themselves and the interests, commitments, and beliefs of the person or groups reading the stories.”<sup>65</sup> MCC acknowledges that the interpreted text is embedded in the community’s pre-existing beliefs which inform the way the text is understood, revealing in part the communities beliefs and longings. Readers approaches the text with their life experiences, reading the text through those experiences. The text can have no meaning beyond the reader; its meaning is given in the encounter between the text and reader. Thus, a new social situation in which a reader approaches the text naturally informs the interpretation given.

The visibility of gay people is a new social change that affects the reading of the biblical text in MCC. When the biblical texts were written there was no idea of homosexuality, just same sex-acts. The text itself and the author make no mention of homosexuality, a term that arises in the nineteenth century. Rather, interpreters have interjected condemnations of homosexuality and gay people into the text. As gay people interpreted the Bible they did not find any condemnation of homosexuality or gays and lesbians. Gay people began to vocally express their discoveries of the text, expressing their interpretation. The social changes of the 1960s that allowed the emergence of MCC also made possible a gay reading of the Bible.<sup>66</sup>

New scientific methods, especially in the areas of history, linguistics, and the associated social sciences, have shaped the interpretation of the Bible, understanding the author’s world. MCC states that “the Bible was written in several languages, embraces

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<sup>65</sup> Eastman, “Not a Sin, Not a Sickness.”

<sup>66</sup> For a detailed description on how social changes in the 1960’s fostered the emergence and growth of MCC see, Melissa Wilcox, *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

many literary forms, and reflects cultures different than our own.”<sup>67</sup> This suggests that the Bible is read with attention to the context in which it was written, understanding that context is informed through insights from the social sciences. The text has a history and is the result of the author’s ‘particular self’ and the ‘specific community’ to which he belonged. Scientific methods assist in unveiling the author and the context in which the text was produced. The use of this within MCC allows for the deconstruction of Christianity’s traditional interpretation of the ‘texts of terror’ and allows for the construction of new meaning.

In part MCC emerges as a response to the traditional Christian interpretation of passages in the biblical canon that refer to homosexuality. The six passages that have been traditionally quoted in reference to homosexuality are: Genesis 19:1-25, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. MCC calls these the ‘texts of terror’<sup>68</sup> or the ‘clobber passages,’ gay people have endured violence and discrimination as a result of the Christian interpretation and application of these texts. The interpretation of these texts has led to the harassment and killing of gay people, spawned hateful websites,<sup>69</sup> and led to religious rhetoric that vilifies homosexuality and gay people. The interpretations given to these passages terrorized gays and lesbians, giving biblical credence to oppressive and violent behavior.

Genesis 19:1-25, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, is one of the most often quoted passages condemning homosexuality. The traditional interpretation of story states that angelic male strangers entered the city of Sodom and entered Lot’s house to stay for

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<sup>67</sup> Eastman, “Not a Sin, Not a Sickness.”

<sup>68</sup> This term is coined by Phyllis Tribble in her book, *Texts of Terror*.

<sup>69</sup> Examples of this include: [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com), [www.lovegodsway.org](http://www.lovegodsway.org), [www.freejesus.net](http://www.freejesus.net) .

the night. Villagers approach the house where they were staying and wanted to know (*yadah*) them. 'To know them' has been interpreted to mean that the villagers wanted to have sex with the guests, engaging in same-sex sex. The interpretation of the text holds that the sin of Sodom was homosexuality, which incurred God's punishment, the destruction of the city. The application of this interpretation within Christianity has led to the marginalization of gays and lesbians, because the fact that God punished those who engaged in homosexual acts.<sup>70</sup>

The traditional interpretation relies on the verb *yadah*, to know. When one reads that the townsfolk want *to know* the outsiders it is read so as to infer carnal knowledge, sex. The villagers wanted to rape and overpower the strange men who Lot was housing. Sex was used to humiliate and show dominance over another, with heterosexual men engaging in same-sex sex acts to accomplish this. The dominator was the penetrator and the dominated was the penetrate.<sup>71</sup> In the context in which this text was produced,

approved sexual acts never occurred between social equals. Sexuality, by definition, in ancient Mediterranean societies required the combination of dominance and submission. This crucial social and political root metaphor of dominance and submission as the definition of sexuality rested upon a physical basis that assumed every sex act required a penetrator and someone who was penetrated. Needless to say, this definition of sexuality was entirely male<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the men of Sodom wanted to assert their dominance over the strangers by sodomizing them.

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<sup>70</sup> This equates being gay with engaging in homosexual acts. Chapter one draws a distinction between these two terms and that discussion is useful here.

<sup>71</sup> A longer discussion of this can be found in, John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, 41-61.

<sup>72</sup> Monna West, "The Bible and Homosexuality," *Metropolitan Community Church*, <http://www.mccchurch.org> (accessed March 30, 2008).

MCC relies on the context and the text in interpreting the Sodom and Gomorrah story from Genesis. As the context demonstrates this passage is about an act of violence and dominance, not purely sex. The men of Sodom wanted to rape the male guests, exert physical force over them to show that they are in control. Thus, the text has nothing to do with sex, let alone male homosexuality. It is a story about power, control, and social dominance. The verb *yadah* appears in Judges 19:22-30, a story that parallels the Genesis passage. In the Judges passage male villagers again want ‘to know’ the male guests; however, the homeowner offers up his concubine. The Judges passage has never been interpreted so as to include homosexuality. It appears as if *yadah* carries a homosexual implication solely in the Genesis passage. Subsequent references in both the Old and New Testament to Sodom and Gomorrah make no reference to homosexual activity. Jesus’ reference to Sodom (Matthew 10:15) states that that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality.

Additional problems with the traditional interpretation of the Genesis text are presented in a pamphlet published by MCC:

First, the judgment on these cities for their wickedness had been announced prior to the alleged homosexual incident. Second, all of Sodom's people participated in the assault on Lot's house; in no culture has more than a small minority of the population been homosexual. Third, Lot's offer to release his daughters suggests he knew his neighbors to have heterosexual interests. Fourth, if the issue was sexual, why did God spare Lot, who immediately commits incest with his daughters? Most importantly, why do all the other passages of Scripture referring to this account fail to raise the issue of homosexuality?<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Eastman, “Not a Sin, Not a Sickness.”

These observations within MCC deconstructs the traditional interpretation and constructs a new interpretation. MCC points to the inconsistencies in the traditional interpretation, showing that it is illogical.

MCC (re)interprets the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as a violation of hospitality. This is supported by appealing to Ezekiel 16:48-50 that states that people of Sodom were inhospitable, making no mention of any homosexual act. Actually, nowhere in the Bible is the sin of Sodom stated to be homosexuality; rather, the biblical text in referring to Sodom identifies the sin to be its lack of hospitality. The townsfolk of the city offered no hospitality to the visitors, rather they sought to physically dominate them and make them subordinates. The guests should have been treated respectfully and offered hospitality, which is in keeping with the context in which the text was composed. The sin of Sodom was the “inhospitable treatment of visitors sent from the Lord.”<sup>74</sup> Hospitality was a highly revered virtue and was expected to be extended to all guests who entered Sodom.

With a reinterpretation of the Sodom and Gomorrah passage, MCC is able to make a new application. Gay people are all too aware of how they have been denied hospitality in Christian congregations. The Bible explicitly calls for hospitality to be extended and demonstrates the punishment for those who fail to extend it. MCC points out how Christian denominations have neglected the biblical virtue of hospitality and the ways that they have failed to extend it. Thus, the terror of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is turned away from gays and lesbians and towards denominations who have excluded gay people.

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<sup>74</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 93.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 can be examined together given the similarities between the passages. The passages state that a man who lies with another man as he does with a woman is an abomination. The punishment outlined in the text for such a man is death. These passages have been interpreted as a straightforward condemnation of homosexuality. Gays and lesbians have experienced firsthand the terror of this passage. People who have killed or bashed gay people have often appealed to these passages as support for their actions.

The passages from Leviticus are a part of the Jewish Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26). This is a distinct section of Leviticus, which was originally intended for Israel's priests. It contains numerous laws, ranging from sexual behavior to dietary laws. The Code is written in order to keep God's chosen people holy and to distinguish them from non-Jews. With this understanding, the prohibition concerning men having sex with men was "an attempt to preserve the internal harmony of Jewish male society by not allowing them to participate in anal intercourse as a form of expressing or gaining social and political dominance."<sup>75</sup> This prohibition maintained the Jewish distinction from non-Jews and assisted in establishing internal social order.

According to Leviticus any man who lies with another man as he does with a woman is an abomination. An abomination is,

that which God found detestable because it was unclean, disloyal, or unjust. Several Hebrew words were so translated, and the one found in Leviticus, *toevah*, is usually associated with idolatry, as in Ezekiel, where it occurs numerous times. Given the strong association of *toevah* with idolatry and the Canaanite religious practice of cult prostitution, the use of *toevah* regarding male same-sex acts in Leviticus calls into question any

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<sup>75</sup> West, "The Bible and Homosexuality."

conclusion that such condemnation also applies to loving, responsible homosexual relationships.<sup>76</sup>

The prohibition against men lying together was a concern with distinguishing between what was clean and unclean. To maintain cleanliness men were not to lie together, maintaining their purity.

MCC interprets the text by appealing to the context in which the text was composed. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are only applicable to the people to whom they were addressed, holding validity only for Jewish males. The texts were not written for the entire world, but for a distinct religious community. MCC points to the New Testament where Paul explicitly states that Christians are not under the law,<sup>77</sup> making the Holiness Code obsolete in Christianity. If Christian denominations insists on using these passages to condemn homosexuality, then they must also enforce the remaining prohibitions outlined in Leviticus, no tattoos, eating pork or seafood, or wearing clothes made from blended materials.

The interpretation offered by MCC is the inability to relate the Holiness Code prohibitions to the modern situation in which homosexual acts take place between committed and loving gay couples. The prohibition in Leviticus was to distinguish Jews from non-Jews and maintain cleanliness, both of which are not applicable to the gay people. It is impossible to apply a text written over two thousand years ago to the modern situation where a man has sex with another man in a committed and loving relationship.

The remaining 'texts of terror' are found in the Pauline corpus, Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. The passages have been interpreted as a

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<sup>76</sup> Eastman, "Not a Sin, Not a Sickness."

<sup>77</sup> For Paul's understanding of the Law see, Rom 3:20; 8:3; Gal 2:15-16; 2:21; 3:10-11; 3:21; Eph 2:8-9.

condemnation of those who defile themselves with mankind, are effeminate, and those men who have abandoned natural relations with women and lusted for one another. They have been applied to homosexuals and gays.

Paul's writing is done with attention to his audience, producing a text that is relevant to ancient Mediterranean social and religious context.

Paul's reference to natural and unnatural sexual acts must be taken in light of Mediterranean sexuality. He is not attempting to give an ethical teaching concerning homosexuality. He is trying to meet his Gentile audience on their own terms; using the example of some people who are not upholding the dominant/submissive model as an opportunity to talk about all persons' need for the saving grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>78</sup>

Males were to be the penetrators in sexual acts, reinforcing their social position and their masculinity. Any sexual act in which a man was not a penetrator was against his nature detracted from his masculinity. What is evident in the passage from Romans is that "vaginal sex, that is penis in vagina, as the only form of sex that is real. Other forms of sex could only be deformities when compared with the norm of natural sex."<sup>79</sup> Paul calls people to act in accord with their nature.

In the Romans passage 'unnatural acts' should not be equated with natural law. Rather, Paul writes about what is contrary to one's own nature, acting against our own nature. This passage is understood within the totality of Romans epistle. It was assumed that Gentiles were excluded from the covenant. However, God demonstrates that the salvific act of Jesus extends to the Gentiles. This reveals to humanity the true nature of God. Paul uses an analogy, with which his audience is familiar, to say that the Gentiles are included in the covenant which Jesus established.

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<sup>78</sup> West, "The Bible and Homosexuality."

<sup>79</sup> Long, *Men, Homosexuality, and the Gods*, 90.

The appearance of the word *malakos*, translated as effeminate, in the passage from 1 Corinthians is not isolated in the Pauline corpus. It has not been translated consistently throughout the Pauline epistles. The word “*malakos* in the Greek text, which has been translated ‘effeminate’ or ‘soft,’ most likely refers to someone who lacks discipline or moral control. The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament but never in reference to sexuality.”<sup>80</sup> It appears that the translation as effeminate is an isolated incidence and is not in keeping with the rest of the text. The translation of the word as effeminate is an isolated incident, and not in keeping with the remaining translations of the word.

A similar problem is evident in 1 Timothy, with *arsenokeeteh*, which has been translated to mean a reference to homosexuality. However, the term is ambiguous, being given numerous interpretations throughout the ages. A literal interpretation of the word is, ‘male-active-bed.’ Within the context in which the text was written it would be probable that it was a reference to male-cult prostitution. This would be in keeping with the author’s world, knowing of temple prostitution. Temple and cult prostitution would not be in keeping with the Law which Paul advocated and preached, it would have been condemned. Thus, both words have been translated with a homophobic slant, showing a bias towards gay people.

MCC offers an interpretation of the ‘texts of terror,’ and deconstructs the traditional Christian interpretation. While the texts are the same, the interpretation is different. MCC, an interpretive community, offers an interpretation of the text that reflects the author’s world and a gay reader’s world. MCC with a primarily gay and

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<sup>80</sup> Eastman, “Not a Sin, Not a Sickness.”

lesbian congregation approaches the Bible with the history, identity, and questions of this membership. MCC has formed a denominational specific subcanon and (re)interpreted a biblical position on homosexuality. These texts become meaningful for MCC and its gay membership with its interpretation, one given by MCC and not one imposed on them from the outside.

## Chapter Five

### Interpreting Meaningful Themes

MCC moved beyond being purely a reactionary movement and did not confine itself exclusively to the ‘texts of terror’ and ‘clobber passages.’ It expanded its biblical horizon and sought out passages from the biblical canon that spoke directly to their experiences. Thus, after MCC expounded and defended its position regarding the ‘texts of terror’ it felt they had “more important, pressing, exciting, and enjoyable Bible reading and studying to do!”<sup>81</sup> This new direction in biblical exegesis led to the formation of a separate interpretive subcanon for MCC, one which looked upon and spoke positively about gays and lesbians.

Gays and lesbians “like the other marginalized people, were not permitted to interpret the scripture for themselves. Instead they encountered scripture secondhand.”<sup>82</sup> This parallels the same point made during the Protestant Reformation, calling for a firsthand interpretation of the Bible. The secondhand interpretation, which came through a non-gay lens, led to the condemnation of homosexuality and gay people. It was as if a wedge was placed between gay people and the Bible, making it an inaccessible text. Gays and lesbians were told what the Bible said about them. MCC, however, ended this, interpreting the text first hand and interjected the gay and lesbian interpretive voice into the text. This turned “scripture from an adversary into a friend and” turned, “queer people

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<sup>81</sup> Wislon, *Our Tribe*, 79.

<sup>82</sup> Abraham, “On the Doorstep of the Work,” 41.

and communities from objects of scriptural injunction, to participants in scriptural (re)interpretation.”<sup>83</sup> Gays and lesbians actively engaged in biblical interpretation, instead of passively accepting a non-gay interpretation. Biblical interpretation within MCC interjected the gay and lesbian subjective voice into the Bible, a voice that had been silenced was now speaking.

MCC could not fathom that the Bible did not tell stories about “ancient gay men and lesbians who had mutually consenting adult relationships.”<sup>84</sup> Rather, it was that Christianity had not presented any biblical passage that spoke of same-sex love and gay people. MCC sought to document and present the biblical existence of gays and lesbians. What was needed was a reexamination of the biblical canon with an attentive eye to passages that spoke to gay and lesbian Christians. In picking-up the text gay people would be able to read the Bible first hand instead of having it read to them.

MCC’s takes a new approach in interpreting the Bible, relying less on existing scholarship and literature and making significant use of biblical and literary criticisms. Rather, MCC is in part reliant on experimentation and imagination, with the sporadic use of methodological tools. Nancy Wilson, current moderator of MCC, writes in support of this:

Biblical scholars have always found a place for speculation and imagination when reading the Bible. Thousands of books and stories have been written that expanded on or amplify the Bible ... They imagined, wrote, speculated out of their deep love and involvement with the characters and messages of the Bible.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Abraham, “On the Doorstep of the Work,” 47.

<sup>84</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 113.

While this approach is not identified through the exclusive use of biblical methodological tools, it still finds a home within the Christian tradition.

The allegorical method is one approach that MCC employs in reading the Bible. Allegory concerns itself with the meaning of that lies outside the narrative, focusing on the symbolic meaning and not the literal meaning. Allegory seeks to uncover the symbolic meaning behind the text, evident in MCC's interpretation concerning eunuchs and barren women. Some have commented that: "Without being attentive to allegory, it is not possible to read the Bible."<sup>86</sup> Allegory is an established biblical method, employed by early Christian theologians.<sup>87</sup> Allegory is built upon literary and historical criticism, biblical methodological tools that are already in use within Christian denominations. It is an interpretive method that analyzes the text's symbolism and seeks a spiritual meaning that is rooted in the context of the faith community.<sup>88</sup> It does not disregard the text, but rather engages it within a specific interpretive community. The allegorical interpretation, thus, reflects the theological bent of the interpreter(s). MCC's use of allegory is within the bonds of Christianity, given its previous and continued use in other denominations.

Imagination is an important cognitive ability in reading the text and applying an allegorical interpretation. The idea that "the interpretation of a text demands some exercise of our imaginative capacities, however, is not a new assertion."<sup>89</sup> Imagination allows the reader to fill in the gaps in the text and interpret the passages. The gaps in the

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<sup>86</sup> Robert Wilken, "In Defense of Allegory," in *Modern Theology*, 14:2, April 1998, 198.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Throckmorton, "Redeeming the Bible for Sexual Minorities: A Modern Hermeneutic for Allegorical Exegesis," in *Journal of the Society for the Study of Metaphysical Religion*, 6:1, Spring 2000: 49-53.

<sup>88</sup> Throckmorton, "Redeeming the Bible for Sexual Minorities," 49.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Muldoon, "Reading, Imagination, and Interpretation: A Ricoeurian Response," in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 40:1, March 2000: 71.

text “stimulates the ‘readers creative activity,’”<sup>90</sup> allowing them to complete what is otherwise an incomplete text. The interpretations of a text that are the result of imagination are personal, reflective of the person or group who is doing the interpretation.

The interpretation of the Bible in MCC is not an academic exercise, but is preached, lived, and experienced. It would be wrong to think that the interpretive community writes pamphlets, books, and articles with no intention of giving voice to their interpretation. MCC interprets the Bible so that is relevant to gay and lesbians people, forming a message that resonates with them. This can be seen in MCC’s liturgical celebration of Gay Pride. This is a worship service that is unique to MCC.

Gay Pride is celebrated on the first Sunday in June within all MCC congregations. Gay Pride marks gay people’s move from living in invisibility and shame to their visible call for equality. The readings for this celebration, while varied, focus on the themes of equality, belonging, and love. These are relevant themes for gay people, themes which resonate with them and they desire to hear preached. The interpretation of the Bible in MCC yields these themes.

The readings for Pride 2002 (Genesis 1, Romans 8:37-39, Isaiah 43:1-7, 1 Corinthians 13, Acts 10:9-6, Genesis 9:8-17) highlight the themes of community, God’s love, unity, and a desire to overcome division. The readings are selected from the biblical canon, yet interpreted in such a way so as to meet the unique pastoral need in MCC. In interpreting the text with attention to a gay membership MCC crafts a message that speaks to the celebration of Gay Pride.

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<sup>90</sup> Muldoon, “Reading, Imagination, and Interpretation,” 75.

... we will celebrate our true identity with Pride and with Joy, and not live in a place of arrogance, reacting in a defensive and egocentric manner. We value ourselves as Children of God and proclaim the Gospel of the Love of God by accepting that as a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Seeking community, we too have the right to witness and testify to be loving, to be loved and to love ... Therefore, in public we state in the presence of the people of God, what we hear in the silence and in the sanctuary of our hearts, where we experience the voice of the Holy Creator God, that in all things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us.

This is the preached interpretation of the biblical passages, reflective of the interpretive community. The themes transmitted are not isolated to this celebration, but elsewhere in the tradition.

The love of God is extended to gay and lesbian people; this is the original message of the Rev. Troy Perry in establishing MCC. This message preached in the homily places gay and lesbians in direct relation with God, not contrary to God. The unconditional love of God for *all* people remains a central theme in MCC. Recognizing this will lead to the end of the divisions and inequality that has characterized the Christian tradition. It is a theme preached during Gay Pride and evidenced elsewhere in MCC.

This theme is evident in the in the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew, the centurion who pleads for his servant's life (Matthew 8:5-13). Nancy Wilson, relying on Tom Horner's work, writes:

In the version told in Matthew, the Greek term used for servant is different from the term used in Luke. The term in Matthew is one that was associated with a common practice among Gentiles in Jesus' time: he was a 'slave boy' which meant a young male lover, who might have been a debt slave.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 162.

It was not uncommon during Jesus' time for men to have young male lovers. The centurion's deep interest in his slave witnesses to a more intimate relationship, beyond slave and owner. Not only is the relationship significant, but also Jesus' response to the request of the centurion. Jesus, embedded in the context and aware of the relationship between the boy slave and centurion, offers a, "nonjudgmental approach to the centurion's pain and love relationship."<sup>92</sup> Jesus does not condemn the centurion or his intimate relationship with the boy slave.

The theme of God's unconditional love is highly meaningful for gay people because they have often heard in Christian Churches solely of their sin and depravity, never of God's love for them. MCC highlights this theme in their biblical interpretation to support their theological view that gays and lesbians are equally loved by God. MCC drawn no distinction between God's children, advancing equality.

The readings for the celebration of Pride in 1999 (Psalm 1:1-3, 25:4-10, 61:1-8 ; Matthew 6:25-33, 22:34-40, 10:27-31, 11:28-30) hit on the theme that God is the Source, Guide, and Refuge. The preached interpretation of these texts in MCC serves the pastoral need of comforting gay and lesbian people who live in a society that persecutes and vilifies them.

Hate makes no sense. Hate crimes make no sense. And so we arise as a people who are survivors of the ultimate hate crime -- the painful death of Jesus, of Godself. We are called to arise with Jesus to go beyond the death, beyond the hate-crimes, to new worlds, new spiritual realms, to new heavens and new earths. Arise because there will be no more tears. Arise because there will be no more death. Arise because all things are possible. In the midst of the sin of hate, of the prisons of fear, of prejudice, God arises in Spirit and pours in the greatest power of all -- eternal, cosmic-filling love. This is the love we celebrate with such pride at this time of

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<sup>92</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 162.

year. Be bold! The powers of hate may cause us pain, sorrow, some suffering, but the power of love will and is already overcoming.

This is a message of comfort for gay people in MCC, assuring them of God's love for them. Additionally, a theme that is drawn out is gay people's inclusion in the Christian community.

MCC's allegorical interpretation of eunuchs and barren women hits on the same theme of inclusion and love. Nancy Wilson states that: "Eunuchs and barren women, I believe, are our gay, lesbian, and bisexual antecedents."<sup>93</sup> Eunuchs,<sup>94</sup> in the biblical context, were non-reproductive and cut-off from "the assembly of the Lord."<sup>95</sup>

Additionally, eunuchs were stigmatized given the fact that one obtained immortality through their children, God's favor and blessing was evidenced in children. Jesus (Matthew 19:10-12) creates a typology of eunuchs, those who were made so, those who chose to be so, and those who were so from birth. The eunuchs from birth are modern day gays and lesbians.

Jesus was a eunuch, ostracized from his community by his criminal activity, for which he was executed, and dying without heirs, compromising his immortality. Just because Jesus was a eunuch does not mean that he was gay or homosexual. However, his relationship with Lazarus, whom he professed loved for, and his family life, where he had "an absent father and an overprotective, domineering mother,"<sup>96</sup> can lead towards questioning his presumed heterosexuality. Jesus, as fully human "had hormones, sexual

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<sup>93</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 124.

<sup>94</sup> Nancy Wilson rejects the narrow term of eunuch, as one who is unable to ejaculate, and prefers a broader term that includes those who acted as go-betweens. This is developed in her book, *Our Tribe*, on pages 126-127.

<sup>95</sup> "No one whose testicals are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord" (Lev 12:17).

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 135.

organs and a normal system of sexual arousal. He would have had to have romantic, erotic, or sexual feelings and impulses, whether or not he ever acted on them.”<sup>97</sup> MCC raises questions about Jesus, questions that are relevant to a gay and lesbian interpretive community. However, Jesus is just one of the eunuchs in the Bible, there are numerous others present in both the Old and New Testament.<sup>98</sup>

Eunuchs, while stigmatized within their culture and religion, are to be included in the salvific actions of Jesus Christ. Eunuchs are prefigured for salvation in the Old Testament: “Isaiah proclaims [Isaiah 56: 4-8] an inclusive covenant that promises that eunuchs and barren women, along with Gentiles, will someday have the right to full participation in the blessings of God and the worshiping community.”<sup>99</sup> Given that eunuchs would have comprised a small number of the overall population, Isaiah must have had in mind a broader meaning of eunuch. This carries over into the New Testament, in the passages concerning Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:34-35). God’s love and commitment is extended to every nation, not just a select few. In reading the passage from Acts:

An *ethni* [sic.] [the Greek work for nation] may be defined by a common history, vocabulary, dialect, culture, institutions, heroes, political leaders, scholars, values, and the ability to recognize each other even when submerged in the dominant culture. If these constitute an *ethni*, gay and lesbian people are include in the word nation used in Acts 10:35.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 146.

<sup>98</sup> Other eunuchs in the Bible include messengers, the magi, and prophets.

<sup>99</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 123.

<sup>100</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 118

This reading demonstrates that: “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.”<sup>101</sup> God has destined all to be ‘saved,’ including the eunuchs.

Inclusion is an important theme in MCC because gay people have often been excluded from participation in Christian communities and told of their exclusion from heaven, damned to a life in hell. However, MCC preaches a message where gays and lesbians are to be equally included in Christian Churches and told of their place in heaven, free from violence and hate. MCC highlights the theme of inclusion because it is a relevant theme for gays and lesbians, one which they have not previously heard.

The texts examined are representative of the interpretive subcanon that MCC constructs, other passages and stories could be included. MCC includes the following stories alongside the ones examined above: Lydia (Acts 16:11-15), hemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:40-48), the parable of the lost coin (Luke 8-10), and references to the color purple. These passages and their interpretation contribute to meaningful themes for MCC. In each passage MCC situates gays and lesbians in the Bible, making the Bible a text which speaks directly to gay people.

The “interpretation of scripture and God’s message tells them [the members of MCC] that through the MCC movement God is available to them.”<sup>102</sup> God is available to gays and lesbians, God has not abandoned them. An interpretation of the biblical canon removes the wedge that has been “keeping lesbians and gay men from any hope of being able to celebrate and experience the story and poetry of the Bible.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 117.

<sup>102</sup> Bauer, “The Homosexual Subculture at Work,” 118.

<sup>103</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 65.

MCC does not create a special gay edition of the Bible; rather, it creates an interpretive subcanon that reflects its gay and lesbian membership. These highlighted texts center on gays and lesbians, but do not move beyond the bounds of Christian interpretation that occurs in other denominations. MCC remains within the traditional Protestant biblical canon, giving greater attention and weight to alternative stories. Nancy Wilson states that it “is essential for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals to take back the Bible. If we are not included among the stories and characters of the Bible, then it cannot be our book.”<sup>104</sup> The Bible must be relevant to the gay and lesbian membership of MCC, creating a subcanon does just that. MCC produces a completely *queer* reading of the Bible for gays and lesbians, one that resonates with the gay community’s history and experience.

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<sup>104</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 164.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

This paper sought to explore the biblical hermeneutic of Metropolitan Community Church. The preceding chapters have demonstrated that what MCC does in its interpretation of the Bible is not new to Christianity. MCC employs current and established biblical methodologies and is in keeping with other denominations that have (re)interpreted Christian scriptures in order to reflect the unique composition of their community and theology. While MCC challenges the dominant Christian worldview it does not stray from what other Christian denominations, that preceded it, have already done. What is truly new about MCC is not what it does with the Bible, but who it presents that interpretation to. MCC reads the Bible with keen attention towards texts that speak of relevant themes for gay people, something no other denomination had yet to do. MCC has engaged, as many others before it, in a (re)interpretation of scripture in order to support its unique mission, theology, and pastoral needs.

The Bible remains the sole authoritative text which MCC holds and to which its congregants look to for inspiration and spiritual guidance. MCC does not construct another independent scripture. Some NRM have constructed canonical texts that rival the Bible (e.g. *Book of Mormon* or *Health and Science*). However, this is not the case for MCC. This places MCC alongside other Christian denominations that hold the Bible as the sole authoritative text.

What MCC struggles against is not the Biblical text, but, rather, the interpretation that has been traditionally given to select passages. MCC accepts the entire biblical canon, having no problem with the text. However, it rejects the homophobic interpretation that has been given to passages. To claim that the biblical text is responsible, “for the church’s homophobia is to ‘find’ in the text all sorts of meanings which in fact require particular shared theological assumptions, acts of unifying and selection.”<sup>105</sup> The text without any interpretation cannot be responsible for the terror that gay people have experienced, because the text without a reader has no meaning. Every Christian denomination approaches the biblical text and in their reading creates meaning that is relevant within their particular denomination.

As gays and lesbians came out of the closet they began to look at the Bible with a new set of eyes, formed in part by their identity and history. Gay people have endured social and religious stress. The experiences they have gone through have contributed to the ‘baggage’ that they bring to the text, informing their interpretation. This allows gay people to have a unique reading of the Bible, one which has not previously taken place. Gays and lesbians are able to create a meaningful text for themselves, speaking to their questions and concerns. This is no different from other denominations that read the biblical text in light of the unique composition of its congregation, making it relevant to its membership.

MCC has ignored some passages in the Bible while drawing attention to other passages. Nancy Wilson affirms that “all of us [Christian denomination] – already ignore the parts of the Bible we find troublesome or not supportive of our favorite doctrine or

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<sup>105</sup> Fulkerson, “Is there a (non-sexist) Bible in this Church?,” 227.

theory. Most people are just not honest about it.”<sup>106</sup> While MCC accepts the entire Bible, they do not give meaning to all passages. Some passages simply sit as ink on the page, overlooked and ignored. Not all sections resonate with the community, they are meaningless. Other passages, however, are highlighted, with greater attention drawn to them. The reason that some passages are ignored and others highlighted is based upon the theological bent of MCC. Christian denominations have consistently drawn attention to biblical passages which are of theological importance and ignored others, this is not new.

MCC’s interpretive subcanon reflects its gay and lesbian membership and theology. MCC initially reacts to the ‘texts of terror,’ deconstructing the traditional interpretation and constructing new meaning. This allows MCC to remove the terror from the text and make it meaningful for gay people. Gays and lesbians in MCC are able to construct a biblical position on homosexuality, one which contradicts other Christian denominations. This is accomplished in part by the use of established biblical methodological tools. The ‘texts of joy’ arise when a gay readership approaches the Bible and finds meaning in select passages, passages which others have simply passed over or ignored. These texts take on heightened importance because their interpretation witnesses to same-sex love and gives gay people a biblical history. Christian denominations without a large gay and lesbian congregation would not be looking for such themes in the Bible; MCC, however, with a predominant gay and lesbian population readily finds these themes in the Bible. Denominations have consistently read the Bible and selected passages for special attention, using them to support their theology.

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<sup>106</sup> Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 70.

The interpretation in MCC given to the ‘texts of terror’ and the ‘texts of joy’ reflects a pastoral need in MCC, demonstrating that one can be both gay and Christian. MCC is able to demonstrate that the Bible does not condemn modern gay relationships and has little to say in regards to homosexuality. Further, MCC shows that some texts that have been used to deny full active participation of gays in Christian churches have been interpreted out of context. Reinterpreting the ‘texts of terror’ allows MCC to reach out to gays and lesbians and provide for them what had been previously denied, a Christian community where they could act authentically. The ‘texts of joy’ create a subcanon that builds up gay and lesbian Christians. These texts show that same-sex love is not something foreign to God and that Jesus, when speaking about eunuchs, prefigured gay and lesbian people for salvation. Gays and lesbians are known and loved by God, not hated and condemned to hell. MCC meets the spiritual needs of gay people in their interpretation; it is not merely an academic pursuit for them. Within Christianity, denominations have sought to make the text meaningful for people, to be a source of comfort and hope.

The questions that have been useful in classifying MCC as a Christian denomination via its interpretation of the Bible may be helpful in classifying other NRM. The following are relevant questions that could be asked in classifying a NRM as Christian given its interpretation of the Bible: (1) Does the NRM use already established biblical interpretative methods? (2) Is the NRM using an established biblical canon? (3) Is there a competitive text to the Bible employed in the NRM? (4) Has the NRM rejected or excluded any part of the biblical canon? These questions were useful in illuminating the thesis in this paper and could be prove helpful in extending the work to other NRM.

In the end, it is perfectly *queer* that Metropolitan Community Church is a new Christian denomination. This statement is supported by appealing to MCC's interpretation of the Bible. What is truly new within MCC is the subject matter upon which it focuses its attention in reading the Bible; what is not new is the fact that it interprets the Bible in light of its theology and the experiences, questions, and identity of its membership. MCC has engaged in the same process as other Christian denominations, making the biblical text relevant and meaningful to its congregation. Given the ever changing context one can expect that new readers will approach the biblical text and offer new interpretations.

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