

Navigating Spaces of Power: LGBTQ+ Christians in Texas

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Undergraduate Research Fellowship

April 4, 2023

Over the past several decades, Evangelicalism in the United States has taken a moral and political stand opposing the issues surrounding homosexuality. In this analysis, I use the term “Evangelical” to indicate a belief in “the inerrancy of scripture, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, and evangelism as a mission” (Walton 2006, 3). This fundamentalist interpretation of scripture has produced rhetoric that positions homosexuality as morally wrong. However, the nuanced relationship between LGBTQIA+ persons and the church tends to be overlooked in popular discourse, with the common narrative claiming that these identities are mutually exclusive. This research explores how LGBTQIA+ Christians in Texas navigate their identities and operate in religious and queer spaces.

Research Methods

The main research method for this project was survey. I identified over 100 affirming churches in Texas and disseminated the survey to Church leadership. I used the online site gaychurch.org as the main resource for identifying congregations that would be appropriate to survey; additionally, I identified several churches affirming of LGBTQIA+ identity from social media outreach, such as Galileo Christian Church and Cathedral of Hope. After contacting these churches, several ministers and church officials agreed to share the survey with their congregation and in online spaces for LGBTQIA+ Christians. A total of 70 responses to this survey were recorded from February 22 to March 16 in 2023, totaling to 23 days. Out of these 70 responses, 64 were completed. Out of these responses, 7 were recorded outside of the state of Texas; however, a majority occurred within state lines, especially in the DFW metroplex. Most churches who accepted to disseminate the survey are affirming, meaning that they openly

support and accept LGBTQIA+ identified persons.

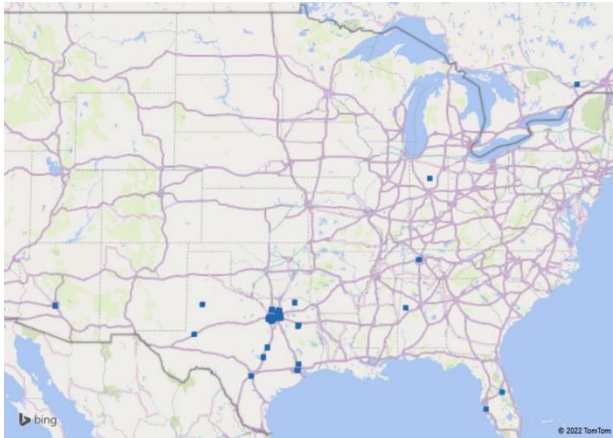


Figure 1: Total Map of Responses

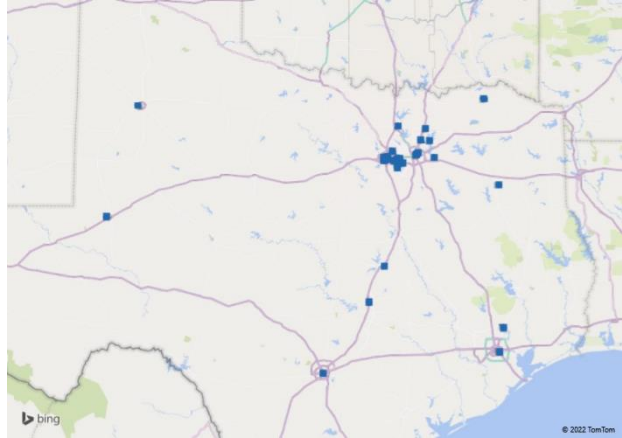


Figure 2: Map of Responses in Texas

This survey was designed to assess how self-identified LGBTQIA+ Christians understand their identities in conjunction and what strategies are used to navigate Christian spaces. All survey responses were anonymous. Mahaffy’s definition of Evangelical was provided as a both an operational definition and a screening method (Walton 2006). Additionally, the following was included as a screening method for queer and/or LGBTQIA+ identified persons:

“Do you experience same sex attraction, identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming, or any other non-heteronormative sexuality or gender not included?”

Queer and Christian

Resistance to Queer

The 2017 Nashville Statement, a formal statement denouncing non-heteronormative sexuality and a nonbinary conceptualization of gender, exists as a product of conservative evangelical thought. In Spencer’s rhetorical critique of this manifesto, he records that “the statement asserts that ‘it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism’”

based on a narrow conceptual framework holding man and women as complimentary beings in God's design (2021, 1066). Spencer (2021) focuses his argument on the statement's acknowledgment of intersex individuals without a theological exploration of their place in God's creation; he illustrates that this crucial omission cripples the Nashville Statement's aim in upholding the gender binary framework and enshrining heteronormativity. By acknowledging the existence of sex outside of male and female by using a medicalized perspective, the manifesto collapses in a void existing between myopic theology and scientific reality. For the purposes of this discussion however, the Nashville Statement exemplifies nation-state pacification. The devaluing of "unproductive" non-normative sexuality and gender in this theological framework is devoid of a stable foundation; largely, its underlying aim is to support the notion that homosexuality and non-binary genders exist as a threat to the stability of American society, an idea promoted by capitalism (D'Emilio 1993). By not relying on a purely scientific or purely doctrinal approach to sex, gender, and sexuality, the Nashville Statement shows its true colors: an attempt to perpetuate heteronormativity as the only stable, productive form of relations.

Acceptance of Queer

Thomas and Olson (2012) review the frequency of writings concerning the issue of homosexuality in the church; from this they concluded that mainline Christian leaders have gradually began to shift in their attitudes towards homosexuality. The authors argue that the basis of the moral authority by which homosexuality is deemed sinful has gradually shifted away from a solely biblical perspective and merged the moral authority of the bible with that of the "natural order," or perspective stemming from science and medicine (Thomas and Olson 2012, 242). From the 1960s to the 2000s, the evangelical community has in part shifted from intolerance to

attitudes and behaviors that are at least tolerant of the gay community on a personal level.

Although formal theology continues to believe that same-sex acts are a sin, the vitriol from the evangelical community and the labeling of certain bodies as deviant has begun to decline, giving room for queer persons to operate within the two communities.

It is this same break from Bible to biology that aids, on a personal level, many queer persons to successfully integrate their queer and Christian identities. Walton's (2006) study on eight self-identified gay Christian men reveals the importance of a break from this fundamentalist approach to scripture. Walton records that each of his participants "came to believe that selective Biblical literalism is an inappropriate way to interpret the Bible" (2006, 6). Many of the men interviewed took a humanist perspective, believing that God is a manifestation of love, and from that homosexuality could not be condemned. Furthermore, Walton also writes that many these men separated the idea of God from the institution of the Church; operationally, this allowed for a perpetuation of personal spirituality without allowing the hate from ecclesiastical authority to affect their belief.

Navigation of Identity

The results of this study revealed the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ Christians in their own language. I have highlighted three key themes which I believe to be important to understanding how LGBTQIA+ Christians navigate their respective identities and both religious and/or queer spaces. The three themes are theological security, spiritual reclamation, and Christian placemaking. These represent conceptual markers within the community which help to identify queer Christian culture as distinct from mainline evangelical Protestant culture. In many ways, the growth of queer Christianity is a response to evangelical attitudes towards homosexuality, but to rely on that assumption would be to misinterpret the individual nuance of

this community. Queer Christianity is a dual act of creation and reclamation that breathes new life into doctrinal stagnation.

Theological Security

Many LGBTQIA+ Christians are open about the discrimination they've received to their gay identity. One respondent recorded that their experience with religious counseling "has been rooted in church leaders discussing how being in a same-sex relationship is a sin and wrong," ending by saying that "it has never been a positive experience." Despite the vitriol stemming from many pulpits in Texas, many LGBTQIA+ Christians have developed a robust and intellectually thorough understanding of Christian theology. The words of one respondent captures the essence of this theological security: "I sought counsel with pastor who admitted I knew the Bible better than he did." In a very literal way, this comment betrays how queer Christianity responds to and reclaims Christian doctrine; this also dispels any notion that gay congregants are less-then in terms of spiritual education. Multiple respondents recorded that they experienced a prolonged period of spiritual longing and growth, resulting in the aforementioned theological security. One key evidence to this claim is the variety of interpretive frameworks which LGBTQIA+ Christians adopt when examining scripture. A large portion of respondents fell outside of either a literal or exegetical interpretation of scripture, citing thoroughly developed contextual frameworks that betray significant research and contemplation (fig. 3). Multiple responses spoke to a blended literal and exegetical interpretation, which in conjunction with the

statistics on Bible reading, illustrating not only a significant engagement with Christian scripture, but a spiritual and conceptual response that builds something distinct (fig. 4).

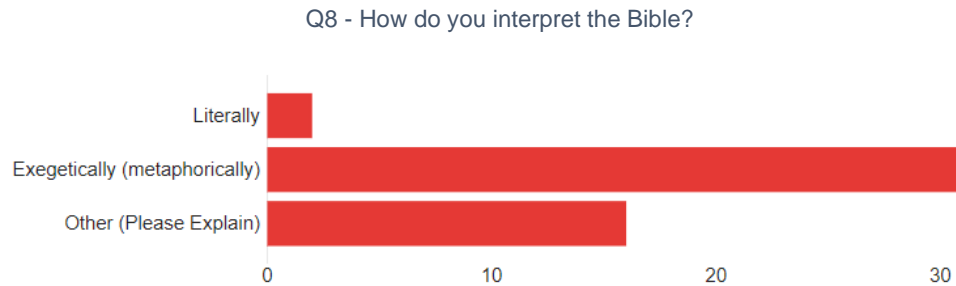


Figure 3

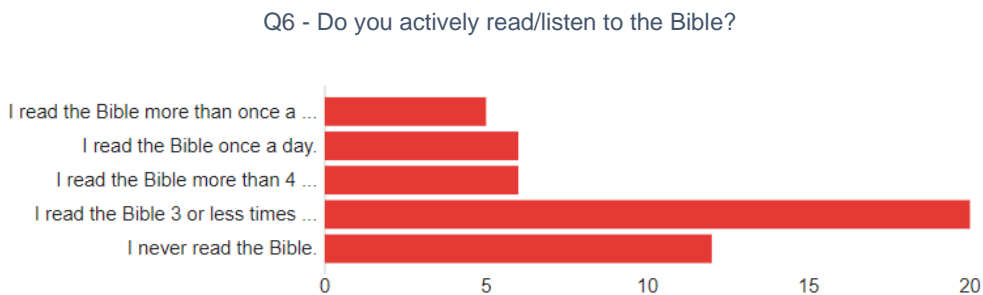


Figure 4

Spiritual Reclamation

“I have never doubted God's love for me. I have, however, known that some ‘church people’ (not my church) think I am a terrible person.”

“God is Love. Humans made religion in a crude attempt to put parameters on that.”

“I'm a Christ follower and believe that the best way to honor Jesus is to emulate his teachings. I also believe the majority of Christian denominations have been hijacked by the patriarchy with the intent of minimizing any voices that aren't straight, white, and male.”

In the conversation around personal, religious philosophy, many respondents illustrated a divide between cosmological concepts of the divine and the social institution of the church. In seeking to integrate Christian and queer identity, many LGBTQIA+ Christians have distanced themselves from the homophobic evangelical tradition that denies their sexual and/or gender identity. This process has resulted in a spiritual reclamation of the Christian cosmology in which LGBTQIA+ Christians deny elements of the religious institution but hold onto what is considered divine. Multiple respondents wrote that their personal religion ontology revolved around God and/or Jesus being the personification of love, while the Church distorts that notion; one respondent wrote that as a transgender woman, God created her in his image, despite this realization taking more than fifty years to develop. In the highly personal search for religious guidance, LGBTQIA+ Christians have found fulfillment not solely in the church, but in their connection to God. Through difficult periods of religious turmoil while homophobic evangelicals condemn their personhood, LGBTQIA+ Christians found personal refuge in their concept of an all-loving deity. This not only de-legitimizes the critiques levels against their identity, but strengthens their religious belief, translating into an effective process of Christian placemaking, discussed below. Through this separation between God and the church, LGBTQIA+ Christians can successfully reject the religious institution that denied their identity and reclaim spirituality that was barred by these traditional religious institutions. The theological doctrine that posits homosexuality as sin and upholds a strict gender binary can be ignored if that doctrine is corrupted by the hands of man; in other words, if theology does not align with the divine, because of its human authorship, then spirituality can be reclaimed. This breathes religious legitimacy into the doctrines of queer Christianity if the constructed theology is more aligned with their perceived cosmology.

Christian Placemaking

When asked where survey respondents sought connections with other LGBTQIA+ identified persons, by far the most common response was church. Again, it is worth noting that most responses came from affirming congregations that display high levels of attendance and engagement. Even so, it is clear that the Church as a social space is important to the LGBTQIA+ Christian identity. In the search for spiritual fulfillment, many who exhibit theological security and partake in spiritual reclamation are engaged in Christian placemaking, where congregations are sites of cultural, and in this case, religious importance. Barred from the existing religious spaces by nature of their gender and/or sexuality, LGBTQIA+ Christians were forced to create their own spaces of Christian fellowship and communion. One respondent wrote about their experience discovering the value of affirming churches.

“Discovering queer-affirming Christianity, and likewise non-religious queer spaces that are open and supportive towards religious queer folks completely saved my life. I was never so miserable as when I felt both myself and my closest friends were eternally doomed by what I was taught growing up in a fiercely conservative branch of evangelicalism. I knew I loved Jesus and his teachings, but I could never reconcile the so-called perfect love of Jesus preached alongside rabid, violent hatred for fellow humans, and it made me dread anything to do with religion for a very long time. Finding out that wasn't the only way to engage with Christ, the Bible, and the church was the biggest relief and joy I could imagine. Being proudly queer made me a better, happier, healthier Christian, and vice versa.”

This response illustrates how important affirming churches are for the successful integration of queer and Christian; with the creation of these spaces comes the ability to

strengthen the queer and Christian identity integration process through shared experience. While Christian belief has been steadily declining throughout the last several decades, the demographic growth of LGBTQ+ Christians has grown, with affirming churches being founded while other paces of worship have been shutting their doors for good. The active creation of these spaces, with their importance to the maintenance of a LGBTQIA+ Christian identity, signifies the growth of queer Christianity in the spiritual and physical presence of Texas. When asked if there are many spaces available for LGBTQIA+ Christians, most survey respondents indicated that there are spaces available, despite the presence of traditional evangelical pushback (fig. 5). Additionally, an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that their congregation is affirming, illustrating that the spaces for queer and Christian to coexist are available for those who seek them out (fig. 6). Ultimately, there is a significant need for and growth of queer Christian placemaking that serves a vital role in the successful navigation of these identities.

Q16 - In your experience, are there many Churches or Christian groups affirming of LGBTQIA+ identities?

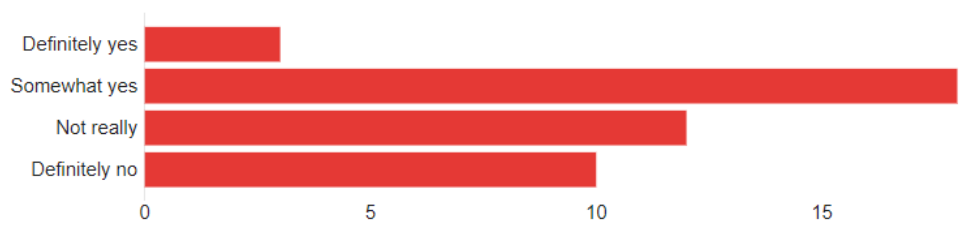


Figure 5

Q15 - How would you describe your Church or Religious Community's attitude towards homosexuality?

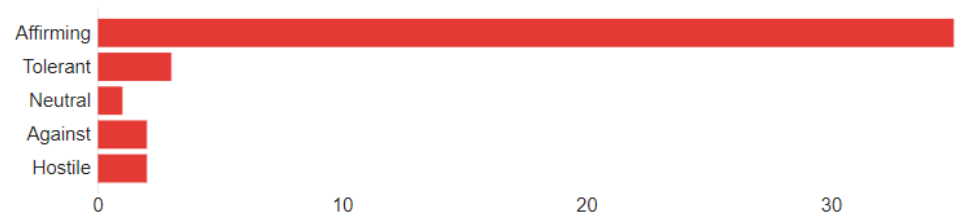


Figure 6

Discussion

In the search for how LGBTQIA+ Christians have navigated identity relative to personal philosophy and social space, the resounding theme among most responses has been resilience; resilience to reclaim space, identity, and spirituality. Resilience in the face of a religious framework that seeks to delegitimize the foundation of your personhood. Through this resilience, a growing population at the intersection of Christian belief and queer identity has found fellowship in shared struggles and common opposition. But more than that, queer Christianity is not only a response to traditional evangelicalism's homophobic doctrine, but the breath of new life into a religion that has grown stagnant.

The work done at this intersection, while thorough, is not enough. What influence does Christianity's legacy of misogyny have on those who identify as queer, Christian women; in the same vein, how does race compounded with non-heteronormative sexuality affect religious frameworks in minority culture in the United States. Finally, as traditional evangelical doctrine that targets homosexuality typically utilizes the Bible as a tool for dismantling queer Christianity, it is crucial further research how LGBTQIA+ Christians understand scripture in relation to their personal understanding of divinity. Despite this, I believe that this research suggests something of the growth and strength of identity at this intersection; furthermore, this work thoroughly dispels the notion that non-normative sexuality and/or gender cannot exist with Christian theology. We must be mindful in remembering how queer Christianity transforms religion, and we must not collapse the possibilities of religious experiences into a single narrative. Regardless of personal religious belief, in the reclamation of spirituality, God becomes "bigger than binaries and bigger than people."

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