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## Thy Kingdom Come: A Biblical Theology of Social Justice Movements

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Seattle Pacific University

Thy Kingdom Come: A Biblical Theology of Social Justice Movements

Submitted to Dr. Christine Chaney

In Partial Fulfillment of

HON 4899: Honors Research Capstone

By Chloe Guillot

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## Introduction

Over the course of the last century, there have been three identifiable social justice movements within America that have had implications for both broader society and the church: abolition and Civil Rights, feminism, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. The fact that these movements have captivated the American consciousness and sparked large-scale reformation on a societal and religious level is evidence of their significance to the development of our theological imagination. Some view these societal shifts as cultural trends that are in opposition to the will of God, however, I argue that we may view these shifts as evidence of the ways that God is presently working within society to move us towards God's ultimate will for liberation and justice on Earth. One must then examine how these social justice movements that push us towards equity are situated within what God has already done, what God is presently doing, and what God is revealing.

My interest in this topic stems from my identity as a young, biracial woman who is actively involved in pro-LGBTQ+ advocacy, and also from an attempt to understand my upbringing in a conservative, white, Evangelical church. In acknowledging these biases, I hope to demonstrate that this paper is written from the perspective of someone who has stake in the argument; various aspects of my identity have been contested and debated by the faith that I grew up in. However, it is my belief that theology comes from experience; my experience thus far, admittedly brief in comparison to others, has led me to see God as one who works through and for justice. This is not the only conception of God that is meaningful, but it is the aspect of God's identity that has the most significance to me in the current age of social unrest and growing injustice. Thus this paper is an attempt to contextualize inner spirituality, outer

experience, Biblical record and existing doctrines into the pressing needs of the current age. This paper is not without bias, but it is also not without importance.

## Theological Grounding

### Models of the Kingdom

An important, yet sometimes overlooked, aspect of theological construction is one's conception of the idea of the Kingdom of God. Jesus speaks extensively of the Kingdom, of his own relationship to it and of its inevitable coming, but what one does with that image of the Kingdom has the ability to profoundly impact other areas of social and theological behavior. In his book *Models of the Kingdom*, Howard Snyder examines some of the most prevalent models that define how one views the Kingdom of God and how those models have the potential to influence behavior. The first model Snyder lists is *The Kingdom as Future Hope*. One of the beliefs that grounds this model is the opinion that "since we live in a fallen, ruined world that bears in every area marks of the Fall, there is no hope for the world short of the second coming of Christ.<sup>1</sup>" The Kingdom of God will be fulfilled only when Jesus returns to Earth, wherein all pain, grief and injustice will be eliminated for all eternity. One problem with this model, then, is that it leads to a cultural pessimism that tends to view present efforts towards reformation as futile. If the Kingdom of God is only a future hope, then one evades the responsibilities of moving towards justice in the present. There is a sense that we are just biding our time until Jesus returns, wherein everything that is wrong will be made right. Therefore social justice

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<sup>1</sup>Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 26.

movements, as an action that may be seen as trying to bring about the Kingdom now, are viewed with skepticism.

Conversely, one who believes that God is still using liberation as a means of revelation may choose to see the Kingdom of God as both present and future. In N.T. Wright's *Simply Jesus*, he writes that "the idea of a kingdom that is both emphatically present and emphatically future"<sup>2</sup> aligns with the Israelites experience of awaiting ultimate victory in the midst of their victorious leaders and revolutionaries, meaning that it is possible to say that the kingdom of God is a reality here on Earth and also a future that we are moving towards. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously claimed "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The course of human history, though muddled and complex, may be situated on a tilted slope directed towards the coming kingdom of God and God's desire for justice. The aims of the Christian faith lie in not only our own entry into that kingdom, but in the task of bringing that kingdom to Earth even as we progress towards it. This is different than saying that we must move towards a Christianized culture that enforces the reign of Christian political and societal power<sup>3</sup>. Rather, if we choose to consider a model of the Kingdom that speaks to God's power to transform our society in the present, then the promises that undergird the coming of the Kingdom are breaking into society in the here and now. These are promises of love, mercy and justice; the Kingdom of God is breaking in as a display of God's love. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom, he speaks with a level of urgency that suggests that the Kingdom is imminent, if not already present.<sup>4</sup> Wright writes that "Jesus's death was seen by Jesus himself...as the ultimate means by which God's kingdom was established."<sup>5</sup> According to Wright, the death of Jesus was the first in-breaking of

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Snyder explores these models under the "the kingdom as political state" and "the kingdom as Christianized culture" models.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to Luke 17:20-21, Mark 1:15, Matt 4:17, Luke 10:9

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Simply*, 185.

the Kingdom, which means that we are now living between the tension of the now and the not yet. The Kingdom has come, but the Kingdom is not fulfilled. If one operates with that understanding of the Kingdom, then social justice movements, which reveal the love and mercy of God, are anticipatory signs of the Kingdom coming that we are called to participate in and through. But this view of social justice requires a willingness to see God in the broader culture, not just in the church. This paper is operating under this model of the Kingdom, in which the Kingdom has already broken through in the here and now, yet we await the coming of Jesus when the Kingdom will be fulfilled. This understanding of God as working in the present by ushering in the Kingdom is key in order to contextualize the theology of social justice movements within the broader movements of God. In order to understand how God can be both present and future, we must look to divine revelation as a means of uncovering how God is working.

## The Doctrine of Revelation

The theology of God's self-revelation is a difficult topic to address in the modern context, as the assurance of the Biblical prophets recorded in the God-breathed words of Scripture has long passed. Anyone claiming to be hearing from God in today's world may be viewed with growing suspicion, as claims of God's divine revelation have led people to defend selfish intent with holy motivation. But for the sake of argument, let us assume that God still has something to say in our world, and consider how God would now communicate Their message to people in a Western society marked by the long-standing effects of structural inequity and consumed by the force of self-interest.<sup>6</sup> If humanity is progressing on a slope tilted towards justice, then revelation

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<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to use they/them pronouns for God within this paper to represent the non-gender conforming nature of God.

becomes a tool that God uses to assist us on the journey. Humanity cannot drive progress forward on our own, as it is through a submission to the divine will of God that we move towards the Kingdom. Revelation is God's way of communicating God's will.

Narrative theology, which developed in the late 20th century, is a branch of theology that examines how God interacts with God's people throughout the Biblical narrative in order to locate the source and meaning of revelation. In George Stroup's book, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, Stroup provides a definition of revelation that will serve as one of the starting points for this paper:

revelation, as it appears in most contemporary theological discussions, refers to the unveiling or disclosure of a reality that is not accessible to human discovery and which is of decisive significance for human destiny and well-being.<sup>7</sup>

There are two key elements of Stroup's definition that are relevant to legitimizing revelation: first, God is not creating a new reality but rather disclosing an existing one, and second, revelation must move humanity towards the greater good. The endpoint of this theory of revelation is not to argue that God is doing a new work, but rather to argue that God is revealing a part of God's existing work that humans cannot see on their own. This definition of revelation falls into the theory that human history is moving toward God's ultimate will for justice, and that God is revealing parts of God's plan as we continue on the path.

While many theologians have proposed theories on God's revelation, James Cone's theory is applicable for those who see God's revelation through the lens of justice. Cone's theory of a liberating revelation serves as the other basis for this paper, as his theory is formed around the idea that God works through historical shifts to bring liberation to those in bondage. In *God*

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<sup>7</sup> George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 42.

*of the Oppressed*, Cone grounds his argument in the first significant movement towards liberation in the Bible: the Exodus. Cone writes,

in the Exodus-Sinai tradition Yahweh is disclosed as the God of history, whose revelation is identical with God's power to liberate the oppressed. There is no knowledge of Yahweh except through God's political activity on behalf of the weak and helpless of the land.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, for the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, their initial knowledge of God came through experiencing the acts of God that set them free from enslavement: the calling placed upon Moses, the power of the plagues and, finally, the parting of the Red Sea. This form of revelation through liberation compelled an entire city of Israelites to leave their homeland and follow a God whom they had not heard from during their enslavement. This speaks to the power that liberation has to move the people of God closer to God. Therefore the idea of liberation as a form of God's revelation is found in the very beginnings of the Biblical record.

The connection between revelation and liberation does not begin nor end in the Exodus, but it is a prime example of this theory of revelation. In consideration alongside the Exodus, we can also trace God's revelation to the oppressed in stories like those of Hagar and Esther. Hagar, suffering under the abuse of her master Sarah, flees to the wilderness to seek refuge, but is met with the angel of God. God reveals that Hagar must return to Sarah and Abraham and bear Abraham's child. While we may interpret this story as the oppression of Hagar at this point, the story does not end with Hagar in Sarah's clutches. Years after Hagar returns, she once again finds herself isolated in the woods with the Angel of God, having been cast out by Sarah. But God reveals Godself differently in this part of the story, providing for Hagar and her child and allowing her to continue on her journey back to her homeland. God's revelation to Hagar and Hagar's obedience end in Hagar's liberation, showing that God's plan was always working for Hagar's liberation. While God reveals Godself directly to Hagar, the experience of God's

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<sup>8</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 59.



liberating revelation appears differently in Esther, wherein the name of God is never invoked. God works through Esther and Mordecai to liberate the people of Israel from the oppression of Haman, even though God never explicitly states God's purpose. The revelation of God's will for the Jews is displayed through Esther's intervention, which moves the people into a state of liberation from death. These two examples demonstrate how God moves people to liberation through events that seem out of their control, but are all tied to God's intent for the freedom of God's people.

It is not unreasonable to align revelation with liberation in the Biblical narrative, as the existence of the Biblical canon is a form of revelation in itself, and the participation of God's will in the story stands mostly unquestioned. The challenges of a more contemporary approach to revelation come from trying to present a Biblical theology of revelation that avoids the potential danger of pure theological subjectivism, as it cannot be reasonably assumed that every action in history is a direct consequence of God's revelation. One must be able to place up guardrails that navigate the complexity of claiming that an event or movement is an act of revelation away from a slope of complete relativism. But it is also important to consider that there is a part of theology that will always be subjective due to the mystery of God, and one can learn how to wield subjectivism responsibly. One consequence of post-enlightenment Christianity is the belief that everything can be understood through logic and reason. The risk of theology is minimized when we limit ourselves to the things we can see and experience tangibly. It seems that the practice of discerning God's revelation in history is a relic of the past; revelation is now a faith practice best reserved for personal meditation in the Holy Spirit and a thorough reading of Scripture. Admittedly, this focus on an objective truth eliminates many opportunities for harm in the way we apply God's word. The claims of divine revelation have been misused, misappropriated, and

misplaced. But by limiting the risk of our theology, we are also limiting the ability of God to speak into our lives in new ways and to reveal the realities which humans cannot see. Therefore, I argue for a theology of revelation that is open to the idea that revelation still exists, but in ways that align with God's character, namely the desire for justice and liberation that drives much of the biblical narrative. I believe this is the ethic that Cone argues for as well.

In opposition to the theologians that came before him, Cone asserts that divine revelation is not “the rational discovery of God’s attributes, or the assent to infallible biblical proportions, or an aspect of human conciseness,” but rather that revelation is “God’s self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of revelation*.”<sup>9</sup> While Stroup’s definition focuses more broadly on God’s revelation towards well-being, Cone narrows this definition down into an assertion of God’s desire to free the oppressed. Faith, Cone says, is what transforms acts of liberation into divine revelation: “faith is the response of the community to God’s act of liberation.”<sup>10</sup> Thus Cone’s view of revelation is not only liberating but also communal. This revelation does not occur only in the inner consciousness, but in the external sphere of a Christian community that leans into the reality that God is larger than our individual desires. This communal approach to revelation also functions as a guardrail against pure subjectivism, as one must give up their self-interest for the benefit of a wider community. This is why the knowledge of God should be interpreted in the context of others; because although we may never avoid personal bias, we can expand our understanding by taking into consideration a variety of other biases.

Cone is primarily concerned with moving theology away from a “rational study of the being of God” and into an examination of the works of God that move history towards freedom,<sup>11</sup> so his definition of revelation is grounded in his own theological bias. But the biased nature of

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<sup>9</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 47-48.

<sup>10</sup> Cone, *Black*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Cone, *Black*, 3.

Cone's work does not discredit his conclusions, as a theology of the oppressed is deeply important for understanding the God of the oppressed. The Biblical narrative is largely the story of enslaved people navigating through trials towards freedom; whether that enslavement is literal, in the case of the Exodus, or metaphorical, in the case of our enslavement to sin.

Another prominent theologian who approaches the topic of revelation is Richard Niebuhr.

Nearing the conclusion of his aptly named work *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr writes

when we speak of revelation we mean that something has happened to us in our history which conditions all our thinking and that through this happening we are enabled to apprehend what we are, what we are suffering and doing and what our potentialities are.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas Cone is primarily focused on the external ramifications of revelation, Niebuhr brings both the external and internal realms of revelation into conversation with one another. Revelation is both a facet of history and a facet of the inner life. Again, Niebuhr writes, "in our conceptual knowledge, we move back and forth from reason to experience and from experience back to reason."<sup>13</sup> Revelation is an interplay between the lived consequences of God's work in the world and the internal struggle towards a rationalized discernment. Brought into conversation with Cone, revelation is not just about progressing towards God's work of liberation, it is also a call to examine who we are in the present. It is important that revelation have meaning for both our bodies and our souls, in the sense that revelation can shape the world around us inasmuch as it can shape us spiritually. In fact, I would argue that God's divine revelation must first act in the hearts of believers in order to attune them to God's justice, so that they are then prompted to choose to participate in acts that liberate rather than acts that oppress. To say that God's revelation is moving towards liberation is not to say that determinism governs humanity; rather it is to say that the Holy Spirit reveals God's will for humanity's freedom to each of us, and the

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<sup>12</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York, NY: MacMillan Co, 1941), 138.

<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr, *Revelation*, 135.

individual can choose whether or not to participate in that freedom. But those who have their hearts attuned to God will choose justice, and thus the liberation of God becomes expressed in these movements led by those who have listened to the revelation of the Holy Spirit within themselves.

That is not to say, however, that Niebuhr has nothing to say on the progress of human history. Niebuhr's claim that revelation is a "moving thing" fits well into Cone's claims, as Niebuhr writes:

meaning is realized only by being brought to bear upon the interpretation and reconstruction of ever new human situations in an enduring movement, a single drama of divine and human action. So the God who revealed himself continues to reveal himself—the one God of all times and places.<sup>14</sup>

The revelation of God is taking place over the course of human history, and can only be discerned by being brought into conversation with the rest of the story. Revelation is not stagnant; it moves as God moves.

This discussion of revelation must lead to a practical conclusion situated within the larger discussion of whether or not God is moving human history towards liberation. If we are to take seriously the claim that God's revelation is moving human history towards liberation, then that revelation must be applied to practical situations. In the case of Cone, God's revelation is directly tied to the full equality of black people in America, and the continued progress towards that future reality is evidence of God's desire for mankind. But that revelation towards liberation can be equally extended to other groups who are facing oppression from the church: namely women and the LGBTQ+ community. In the same way that the abolition movement and the Civil Rights Movement appeared to be reflections of God's revelation to humanity on behalf of black folks, I would argue that the current movements towards women's equality and LGBTQ+ inclusion are

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<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, *Revelation*, 135-136.

also God's revelatory work in action. The most pressing difference, however, is that there are no verses in Scripture that directly limit the freedom of Black people, while both women and the LGBTQ+ community must face the challenge of validating their inclusion in the face of Biblical verses that have been weaponized against them. There is much credence to be given to the theologians who have opposed this weaponization of Biblical law through a close examination of the canon with contextual and exegetical interpretation, but in addition to this work, I also want to propose that the very idea of *law* in the Bible is less stagnant than one may be led to believe. Thus revelation can be equally applied to the idea that God's commandments shift towards liberation in response to those who need liberating.

### The Hermeneutics of Law

The argument for Biblical inerrancy has lent itself to a belief in Biblical stagnancy. One may believe that God's unchanging nature is reflective of the unchanging nature of God's word, but there are revisions that occur within Bible itself. The Bible is a living document, and over the course of Biblical record, societal, cultural and religious shifts led to changes in the Biblical laws documented in the Torah. These changes do not reflect a fickle God, but rather a God who sees the need for evolving laws to address evolving temporal realities. Furthermore, changes in these laws do not reflect a change in God or God's character, but rather a deeper understanding of what the law is trying to accomplish. Just as revelation does not create new realities, the law does not create new realities either; rather, the law reveals God's heart in the midst of an evolving reality.

In the discussion of law, I will differentiate between *temporal* and *transcendent* law. Temporal law applies to a law that is grounded in a specific historical context, and is thus difficult to apply to our modern context. A simple example of a temporal law would be the detailed ceremonial laws found in the Torah relating to animal sacrifice, as this kind of sacrifice

is rarely, if ever, practiced in modern Christianity or Judaism. A transcendent law, conversely, carries meaning beyond a specific point in time and should apply within any context. Again, a simple example of a transcendent law is the command to love your neighbor, as this law is not limited by a specific cultural or societal standard. Another way to discuss the difference between temporal and transcendent law comes from William J. Webb, who identifies the dichotomy between *kingdom values*, “those which transcend any culture or time,” and *cultural values*, “those which are locked into a particular place and time.”<sup>15</sup> In both classifications (the transcendent/temporal and the kingdom/cultural), it is clear that there are commands within the Bible that are constrained by a specific contextual moment and others that can be removed from their original context and still be applied with the integrity of their intention.

There are documented examples of temporal laws changing in response to cultural shifts in the Biblical narrative; specifically temporal laws contained within the Old Testament. Old Testament slave laws are an example of a temporal law that has been applied out of context, but if one tracks the evolution of these laws through the Torah, one can see how the Israelites adapted their laws to adjust to an evolving world. In Exod. 21:2-11, the slave laws deal exclusively with Hebrew slaves, but by Lev. 25:39-55, the law begins to include specifications about foreign slaves as well. In Leviticus there is now a clarification that the Hebrews are only to be enslaved in order to pay off a debt, while other slaves may be gathered from the foreign nations. At this point, some Biblical translators begin to differentiate between Hebrew *servants* and foreign *slaves*, as a hierarchy of nationality begins to develop within the slavery system.<sup>16</sup> By Deut. 15:12-18, laws regarding Hebrew slaves have become increasingly liberating, demanding

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<sup>15</sup> William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001),

<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew word is the same (*šākîr*), but some translations found it necessary to mark the distinction between a servant and a slave due to the differences outlined between Hebrew/non-Hebrew slaves.

both freedom and severance for both men and women after six years. If one reads between the lines of this narrative, one may see how the interaction between the Israelites and foreign nations affected the development of slave laws, as the need for Hebrew slaves decreased with the influx of slaves from foreign nations. God saw that the Hebrews could be set free and replaced by slaves from foreign nations.<sup>17</sup>

Another example of laws changing with context in the Torah comes from the story of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 26-27. Israelite inheritance law, as dictated on Mount Sinai, established that land would be divided amongst the tribes and passed from fathers to sons. But along the journey, Zelophehad passed away without a male heir, leaving his five daughters behind without a claim to their father's property. Rather than accept this injustice, Zelophehad's daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, take their case to Moses, and make their claim: "Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers" (Num. 27:4 NRSV). Moses takes their petition to God, and God agrees with the women: "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them" (Num. 27:7). This story does not paint a portrait of a rigid, unchanging God, unwilling to adapt to the evolving needs of Their people; rather the God portrayed in this story recognizes that some laws must be altered when the law itself is creating injustice. This same story is also picked up in Numbers 36, when the people realize that another problem has presented itself: what happens to the land if the women marry outside of their tribe? And once again, God changes the law to address a new issue that has

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<sup>17</sup> Now, one would recognize any form of slavery, even the enslavement of foreign nations, as oppressive. But it is necessary to contextualize these laws within history, and though the enslavement of foreign nations is immoral by today's standards, the point of liberation in this case is emphasized by how God interacts with God's people in these particular laws, and how the laws change with context.

arisen: God commands the daughters to marry within their tribe, so that the land will stay with them when it is time for Jubilee.<sup>18</sup> As this story unfolds, the law changes as new situations arise within an evolving society, and God is willing to listen and response to the needs of the community.

In his book *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, Webb also brings up another complexity within the discussion of Biblical law in what he defines as the difference between a *redemptive spirit* approach and a *static* approach. Webb states that a redemptive spirit approach “encourages movement beyond the original application of the text in the ancient world” while a static approach “understands the words of the text aside from or with minimal emphasis upon their underlying spirit and thus restricts any modern application of scripture to where the isolated words of the text fell in their original setting.”<sup>19</sup> A static approach assumes that Biblical laws must always be applied in the way they were intended when written, which limits the interpretation of the law to how the law was assumed to be applied in ancient Israel. A redemptive spirit approach, conversely, is less concerned with exactly what the law *says* and more focused on what the law *does*. This approach not only considers the spirit of the law, but also how the law compares to the cultural standards of the time.

As an example of this dichotomy, let us consider Col. 3:18-19, in which Paul is giving commands to both husbands and wives. In verse 18, Paul writes “wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” (Col. 3:18 NRSV). For those who use Paul in support of complementarianism, verse 18 is one of the primary verses of importance. If one has a static approach to scripture, then one would conclude that women are always to submit to the headship

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<sup>18</sup> Jubilee is a practice that is supposed to take place every 50 years, wherein slaves are set free, the land is allowed to rest, debts are forgiven and all land and property is returned to its original owner (Lev. 25). There is no biblical evidence that Jubilee was ever celebrated.

<sup>19</sup> Webb, *Slaves*, 29-31.



of their husbands in any context. But in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Beth Allison Barr explains that the focus of this chapter does not lie with verse 18, which is Paul’s account of the standard Roman practice of wifely submission, but in verse 19, in which Paul writes “husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly” (Col. 3:19 NRSV). In our contemporary society, we dial in on verse 18, because it is the most shocking to our cultural values. But in first-century Rome, verse 19 is where Paul was actually emphasizing kingdom values, as he called husbands to account for how they treat their wives and defines what sets Christian households apart from the Romans. Roman household codes would focus on the male as the only independent agent, but Paul gives both authority and accountability to both the man and the woman for their actions. Barr writes that “instead of endowing authority to a man who speaks and acts for those within his household, the Christian household codes offer each member of the shared community...the right to hear and act for themselves.”<sup>20</sup> According to Webb’s methodology, therefore, the *redemptive spirit* within this text can be measured by comparing the standard of Roman practices to Paul’s new commands, and the gap between the authority of women granted by the Romans and the authority granted by Paul is where the text finds its meaning. Paul gives *more* freedom to women, and so the application of the law comes not from the static interpretation, but from how God is moving to create a more inclusive society.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself demonstrates this emphasis on the redemptive spirit of laws when he says that he has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). Jesus explicitly reframes the law of the Torah, but he does so in a way that maintains the intent of the law and points to the heart of the issue at hand. When talking about anger, Jesus says, “you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’ ...But I say to you

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<sup>20</sup> Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 33.

that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matt. 5:21-22 NRSV). And again, Jesus says “you have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’” (Matt.5:28-27 NRSV). In these two examples, Jesus restates an explicit law, as outlined in the Torah, before pulling out the core emotion that leads to a violation of this law. Jesus appears to be doing the hermeneutical work of interpreting the law in a way that highlights the spirit of the law rather than the static application. Webb writes that:

Jesus' approach to Scripture goes beyond focusing on its isolated words to meditate deeply upon its underlying spirit. With great ease, Jesus captures the spirit of the Old Testament text and so engages his audience in specific ways of "improving upon" the words of their sacred tradition.<sup>21</sup>

While humans, with our limited capacity for understanding the complexities of God, cannot claim to engage in this work with the same authority that Jesus carries, we can challenge ourselves to engage in the ethic of the law rather than just the written letter. We are not freed from the implication of the law, but we are liberated from those who apply the law without applying the spirit.

Following this thread of Jesus’s liberating work, Jesus does explicitly challenge laws regarding sex and sexuality, as he proposes to move the law away from strict regulation of gender conformity in his address of Eunuchs. A Eunuch is a man who has been castrated, sometimes in order to be placed in charge of a harem or group of women. But in Mosaic Law, Eunuchs were prohibited from entering the temple, as explained in Deuteronomy when the law says “no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (Deut. 23:1 NRSV). This is a biblical example of somebody being excluded from full participation in the people of God because of an aspect of their gender

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<sup>21</sup> Webb, *Slaves*, 62.

identity; the absence of a sexual organ. But in Matthew, Jesus challenges this law by saying “there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:11-12 NRSV). Jesus says that it may be hard for some to accept this fact, as He is challenging the social order: not only are Eunuchs to be accepted, but now Jesus introduces the idea that someone could be born a Eunuch. Jesus upends gender expectations, hinting that the way someone is born, in regards to their gender and sex identity, does not exclude them from the Kingdom. We see this theology at work in Acts when Phillip encounters the Ethiopian Eunuch. Rather than shunning this man for his sexuality, Phillip shares the gospel with him and baptizes him (Acts 8:26-40 NRSV). Again, the law has been challenged to create a more inclusive Kingdom, and we see the effects of that challenge in the text as the word of God is spread further by the ministry of the Ethiopian Eunuch.

So as we move into a discussion on whether or not revelation can lead to changes in the law, whether that law is explicit or implied, we must understand that there is Biblical evidence that law does evolve with the evolution of circumstance. Furthermore, we must be careful to consider what laws are considered temporal and what laws are considered transcendent, for transcendent laws can be applied outside of their historical context but temporal laws are subject to cultural shifts. Finally, we must note that changes in the law move us towards love and justice. Laws that account for the exclusion of a specific group of people, such as the case of Zelophehad’s daughters or laws regarding slaves and eunuchs, appear to be grounded in temporality and subject to a shift towards liberation. The law does not move to oppress these groups further but rather moves to grant them more freedom. When the law is explained in this way, it fits into the idea that history is always moving towards God’s desire for liberation. This is

not to say that all laws are temporal and subject to human evolution, but it is rather to say that the expanding inclusivity of law plays a role in moving history towards the Kingdom on Earth.

## A God of the Culture

In addition to his theology on revelation, Richard Niebuhr also wrote a theology of culture that warrants a brief excursus. One cannot argue that God is revealing Godself through history and bringing to light new interpretations of the law without looking at how, or if, God interacts with a changing culture. This is not to say that God is subject to the culture, but rather to say that God may use a shifting culture to bring about new evidence of God's divine self-revelation to a people who are looking for guidance. There is not always a prophet coming down from the mountain to bring us news of God's commands: we must also become attuned to the new ways in which God is speaking. I would argue Christian reformations, such as the Protestant Reformation, represent a cultural shift that brings about a new revelation. But if God is not confined to the boundaries of the church, then God is also not confined to Christian reformations. There are constant reformations occurring within our society that allow us to see the inbreaking of the Kingdom now, an inbreaking of love, justice, and mercy. This is where we can see God moving through the culture in order to transform it.

There appears to be a common conception in American Evangelicalism that Christians must hold themselves above the influence of these perceived cultural shifts. This belief is not without merit, as there are many verses in the Bible that proclaim the position of Christians as those who defy the commands of this world, assuming that this world is one corrupted by sin.<sup>22</sup> But it is no coincidence that one of the primary ways that this belief has been applied is in reference to Christian participation in social justice movements. Some evangelical leaders have

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to Rom 12:1-2, John 15:19, 1 John 2:15-16, James 4:4.

drawn a line that clearly delineates between social justice and biblical justice, arguing as if the two must be separated. One of the most infamous examples of this belief is the Dallas Statement, written in June 2018 by a group of Evangelicals in response to the rise of Critical Race Theory, Marxism and other perceived threats to the established order. Within the statement, the authors write “we deny that true justice can be culturally defined or that standards of justice that are merely socially constructed can be imposed with the same authority as those that are derived from Scripture.”<sup>23</sup> The intent of this statement is clearly to argue that social justice, more specifically movements regarding race, gender and sexuality, are not consistent with God’s desire for justice. God’s justice, evidently, is confined to “showing appropriate respect to every person and giving to each one what he or she is due.”<sup>24</sup> What the authors fail to explain is how contemporary conceptions of social justice differ from this definition, as modern justice movements do seek respect and equity for everyone. This definition also minimizes our responsibility to participate in justice as a community; we can show respect on an individual level, but we must also interrupt and correct unjust systems. These Evangelical leaders wish to portray social justice as a cultural fad in order to discredit its relevance to the Christian community, which represents both a shallow view of justice and a shallow view of culture. The claim that justice is “merely socially constructed” implies that the authors of the Dallas statement have a better grasp of Biblical justice than others who are fighting for justice, but their definition of justice is also constructed. Jewish scholar Moshe Weinfeld identifies that within the Bible, the concept of social justice is actually most commonly expressed through the pairing of the words “justice and righteousness.”<sup>25</sup> This word-pair is not only used for the instruction of individual

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<sup>23</sup> <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/>

<sup>25</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 25.

acts of justice, but also to refer to political and institutional change. Weinfeld explains that the “the establishment of a just society is the responsibility of the king.”<sup>26</sup> Thus the Biblical concept of social justice deserves a broader and more comprehensive definition that does not limit the extent of righteousness and justice to the personal-sphere.

This is where Niebuhr's work, *Christ and Culture*, becomes a starting point for a more robust discussion of how God interacts with culture. Niebuhr identifies five approaches to the problem of how Christ interacts with the present culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox and Christ the transformer of culture.<sup>27</sup> Up to this point, I have been primarily concerned with arguing against the *Christ against culture* viewpoint as a critique of modern Evangelicalism, but I wish to move into a brief explanation of the *Christ the transformer of culture* model to demonstrate how one may be able to see God working through cultural shifts. The transformer of culture model professes both that the “opposition between Christ and all human customs is to be recognized” and that “the antithesis does not lead to either Christian separation from the world...or to mere endurance in the expectation of a transhistorical salvation.”<sup>28</sup> Rather, under this model, one sees that Christ is presently working in the world to bring about the Kingdom of God by intersecting with the culture and transforming it. The focus of this view is less on the history of sinfulness or the future of salvation, and more grounded in the belief that “the eschatological future has become...an eschatological present.”<sup>29</sup> Christ is transforming the culture now and the Christian heart must be attuned to this work, breaking free from the bonds that keep us chained to the brokenness of the world and reaching out for a savior that wants to make us whole.

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<sup>26</sup> Weinfeld, *Social*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper, 1951).

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, *Culture*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr, *Culture*, 195.

*Christ the transformer* aligns the most consistently with Cone's theory of revelation and with the examination of how the law is transformed to address the shifting needs of society. The *Christ against culture model*, conversely, cannot fully align with this idea because it advocates for separatism between Christianity and the human condition. This model is less concerned with transforming social conditions and more concerned with preserving the purity of our faith. But if one takes the claims of Christ as a transformer seriously, then one opens themselves to the possibility that God wishes to bring justice to this world in the present moment. While we may never see the fullness of God's Kingdom until the old creation is washed away, we can see the ways in which that transformation is already taking place. Therefore, it is reductive to distinguish between the justice of this world and the justice of God, as the Dallas Statement does, because they can be united. Anything that moves us closer to the Kingdom, liberating the oppressed and revealing God's will, is evidence of this ongoing transformation.

Finally, though I do not argue in favor of adopting a *Christ of culture* model, Niebuhr's observation within this section that

the fact that Christians have found a kinship between Christ and the prophets of the Hebrews, the moral philosophers of Greece, the Roman Stoics, Spinoza and Kant, humanitarian reformers and Eastern mystics, may be less indicative of Christian instability than of a certain stability in human wisdom<sup>30</sup>

brings up an interesting consideration in the conversation about how social justice movements fit into God's work. I would argue that the harmony between these ideas is less about the stability of human wisdom and more about the stability of God's imprint on our spirits, whether one claims to be a believer or not. The fact that many social justice movements operate outside of the boundaries of the church is not necessarily indicative of their inconsistency with God, but could rather be viewed as an expression of how the *Imago Dei* is present in all people. If all of creation

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<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr, *Culture*, 107.

is made in the image of God, then it does not seem unreasonable to believe that even those who have not officially proclaimed their faith may be subtly led by the same desire for love, mercy and justice that drives those of us who strive after a Godly life under the guide of religion. This is to say that the stark divide between Christians and non-Christians, clearly expressed in the divide between the spiritual and the cultural, may not be as clear as has been established. I do not believe that we can deny the image of God as it appears in our neighbors, even if they are not proclaiming Christians, because to deny them the image of God would be to deny them the ability to experience the fullness of God's love. This is not an endorsement of universalism, as this is to say nothing of everyone's ultimate salvation: only to say that God is constantly at work in and through the people around us. Therefore, the alignment of God and culture may be an opportunity for us to investigate how prevalent the influence of God truly is in this world.

## **The Progression of Social Justice Movements**

### God and History

The Bible is, at its core, a story; but that story reveals God to us. The way that we see God in the narrative of Biblical history points us to a larger truth of seeing God in the way that history unfolds. That is not to say that history is predetermined, with God acting as a puppet master over unsuspecting and unwilling actors. Rather, it is to say that history acts as a catalyst for revelation; the will of God is made clear by looking for the spaces wherein God did show up through the progression. Though God does not control history, God, as the creator of all things, has left God's imprint on history. The key comes in discerning what events are revealing God, and what events occur outside of meaning. G. Ernest Wright and Reginald Fuller write that "in the Bible an important or signal happening is not an event unless it is also an event of revelation,



that is, unless it is an event which has been interpreted so as to have meaning.”<sup>31</sup> Not every historical event is evidence of God’s revelation, but if we attune ourselves to cultural and societal shifts within history, we can begin to see the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the ways we are led towards love, mercy and justice. Historical revelation requires contextualization through communal discernment, as in the Biblical narrative “every historical event is always interpreted by the historian and the prophet, by those who were present at the time, and by the successive generations of religious worship.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the progression of historical events in modern times requires interpretation, which can be achieved by taking into consideration how the event is moving society towards God’s coming kingdom.

In the Biblical narrative, especially in the Old Testament, the stories that we have grown accustomed to may seem violent and oppressive. But the shifts that occur from the time of the Exodus to the time of Jesus, wherein the people of God are in and out of captivity, fluctuating between war and peace, and finding times of divine silence and divine abundance, represent a larger metanarrative that is unfolding in Scripture. By the time of the New Testament, some Biblical authors tell the stories of the Old Testament through the lens of understanding history and their present condition. In Galatians 4, we see Paul using the story of Sarah and Hagar to illustrate a point about the freedom of a Christian (Gal. 4:21-28). In Acts, we read of Stephen, who recounts the story of Moses to illustrate the stubbornness of the people, saying “you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do” (Acts 7:51). The New Testament authors recognized that there were lessons to be learned from the narratives before them, and if the work of God is still unfolding today, then history is still rich with revelation.

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<sup>31</sup> Reginald H. Fuller and G. Ernest Wright, *The Book of the Acts of God: Christian Scholarship Interprets the Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1957), 22.

<sup>32</sup> Fuller and Wright, *Acts*, 22.

God is a God of action. Though we can seek truths about God internally, we can also seek truths by looking externally. God does not always speak or reveal Godself in the same way, but history is always happening, and God is always ultimately in control. Therefore we can look to the narratives around us to find God, even if we feel like God is not working. This revelation cannot be sought through individual pursuit, as it requires a communal discernment, with Wright and Fuller saying:

Knowledge and truth in the Bible involve things to do, not simply a belief in a God of nature nor an experience of the God within. God is too busy, too active, too dynamic to wait for us to experience him in the acts of worship we devise in our schedules. He is to be known by what he has done and said, by what he is now doing and saying; and he is known when we do what he commands us to do.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the revelation of God through history is not just an internal experience. It is an external manifestation of the heart and desires of God in moving historical progression towards the ultimate goals of justice and liberation.

Another way to consider the history of the Old Testament is through the framework of testimony, as outlined by Walter Brueggemann in his book *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Advocacy, Dispute*. The Bible does not provide a rigid historical witness, rather it provides the reader with a series of testimonies that are constantly being negotiated within the courtroom of the canon; testimonies of

Yahweh's transforming power and faithfulness, Israel's counter-testimony about the hiddenness and dark side of Yahweh, Israel's unsolicited testimony about Yahweh's partnership with human and creational communities, and Israel's embodied testimony of God's mediated presence in the world.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Fuller and Wright, *Acts*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Dennis T. Olson, "Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann and Bakhtin." *Biblical Interpretation* (Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 1998), 6(2): 162-180, <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com.ezproxy.spu.edu/content/journals/15685152> (Subscriber access); <https://ezproxy.spu.edu/login?url=https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.spu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=rh&AN=ATLA0000998973&site=ehost-live>.

Brueggemann's emphasis on the Old Testament as testimony is important because it highlights how the Bible lacks a definitive sense of closure; there is no foregone conclusion that the reader is expected to attain, but rather the reader and the authors are in conversation and contention, negotiating the meaning of these testimonies within the canon and concluding with different interpretations. Brueggemann, however, does assert that there are certain themes that appear in every testimony, including "an irreducible claim of justice, which is, in the most abrasive parts of the testimony, a demanding summons even to Yahweh."<sup>35</sup> As a testimony to the historical progression of Israel, the Old Testament carries meaning today because of the way justice is negotiated. Brueggemann writes:

Israel's testimony, with its uncompromising and irreducible commitment to justice, stands as the primary alternative to the deathly ideology of technological, military consumerism. In a variety of ways, in an endless variety of textual utterances, Israel's testimony is to the effect that Yahweh's passion for justice, passion for the well being of the human community, and passion for the shalom of the earth will refuse to come to terms with the power of death, no matter its particular public form or its ideological garb.<sup>36</sup>

Brueggemann's assertion demonstrates that in the Old Testament canon, whether one chooses to read from the perspective of history or testimony, the commitment to justice throughout the Bible is unavoidable. This view of history as testimony can also help us to make sense of negative developments throughout history. We live in a fallen world, meaning that evil, sin and brokenness will reveal themselves through catastrophe, violence and destruction. There are moments when we wish for God to intervene, and frustration builds when God does not. But God is not revealed to us in the things that bring destruction; God is revealed in the hope that persists despite terror. And the testimony of God's revelation in history comes through that negotiation between the evil of the world and the goodness of God. There is not a foregone

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 740.

<sup>36</sup> Brueggemann, *Old Testament*, 741.

conclusion that we can arrive to when bad things happen, but rather there is a continual attempt at understanding how God is still working.

Therefore, the question is not where is God in history, but rather what is God revealing through Their story. In Brueggemann's sweeping analysis of the Old Testament canon, he comes to the conclusion that the demand for justice is one of the primary theological considerations, demonstrating how the narrative of Israel's history is ultimately bent towards justice. If we are continuing on that arc of human history, then there are things in the here and now that God is revealing in front of our eyes. Though we may not always hear the booming voice of God, we can sense the shifts that occur in front of our eyes. Movements that push us towards love, justice and mercy ultimately push us towards God. The historical movements that disrupt our human understanding of what justice looks like are representative of God's divine will be imparted on us. Therefore, one must consider where in history these characteristics of God that expand the limits of our human understanding are able to be felt and seen.

## Social Justice Movements

Now that we have explored the revelation of God, the movement of the law towards liberation, the way that God intersects with culture and the evidence of God in historical progression, we can now move into examining how these different theological factors influence one cultural phenomenon: social justice movements.

The contemporary use of *social justice* as an ideology and practice did not emerge from secular roots, rather, it can be traced back to 19th century Catholicism. Catholic scholar Antonio Rosmini Serbati was one of the first writers to use the idea of social justice, or *la giustizia sociale*, in his work in the 1840s, writing in response to the struggles of the Catholic church in

Italy, the injustices of the industrial revolution and the cracks exposed by French Revolution.<sup>37</sup>

The first introduction of social justice in Rosmini's writings came in his work *Society and Its*

*Purpose*:

The only way to impede the formation of political parties and to keep them as moderate as possible is to sow early in the spirit of individuals who compose society the seeds of justice and moral, religious virtues. ... The health of society must ultimately be sought in the probity and moral virtue of the individuals composing it. ... I repeat: public good must be sought in the private citizen; social justice in individual justice<sup>38</sup>.

Rosmini emphasizes the need for a form of justice that moves beyond the person and into the sphere of public good. Thus, social justice incorporates a push for societal change that arises out of the individual recognition of morality and justice. The fact that this idea arose from a religious scholar is evidence of the inherent spirituality of social justice: it is rooted in the Christian calling to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly (Micah 6:8). The commandment to love your neighbor lends itself to an epistemology of justice, and that epistemology has been developed by both religious and secular agents to form the modern concept of the social justice movement. If social justice moves us from the individual into the communal, then a social justice movement is a collection of people working together to counteract an observed injustice in their communities.

For the sake of this paper, the social justice movements in focus center on three distinct identity markers: race, gender and sexuality.<sup>39</sup> In these three movements for justice, the church

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<sup>37</sup> Robert P. Kraynak, "The Origins of "Social Justice" in the Natural Law Philosophy of Antonio Rosmini" in *The Review of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2018), 80(1): 3-29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26564721>.

<sup>38</sup> (Cited in Kraynak) Antonio Rosmini, *Philosophy of Politics*, vol. 2, *Society and Its Purpose*, trans. Denis Cleary and Terence Watson (Durham, UK: Rosmini House, 1994), 2(15): 280-82; emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup> These three identity markers have been identified because they are genetic and biological factors. This paper will not be exploring the debate surrounding whether or not sexuality is a choice, and is instead operating from the scientifically grounded research into sexuality as a biological factor. For more: Kathleen, Mullan Harris, Gary W. Beecham, Eden R. Martin, Alan R. Sanders, R. B. Perry John, Benjamin M. Neale, Brendan P. Zietsch, et al. 2019. Large-scale GWAS reveals insights into the genetic architecture of same-sex sexual behavior. *Science* 365, (6456): eaat7693, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aat7693>.

and Christianity as a whole have been involved in both the oppression and liberation of these groups. For the sake of this paper, the Christian group in focus is primarily Evangelical Christians, as they have traditionally been aligned with a politically conservative theology.<sup>40</sup> The development of these movements within Christianity move through three stages of reactionary action on the basis of cultural shifts: opposition, resistance and transformation. I would argue that in cases wherein the Holy Spirit is truly revealing God's will for justice within cultural and religious institutions through social justice movements, these three stages of movement will always appear.

There will first be a firm opposition to the movement, taking place in both the wider culture and church, often represented by a broad moral objection and restrictive theological ideals. During the period of opposition, there are often laws and legal restrictions on a group that prevents an oppressed group from experiencing the fullness of their humanity within broader American society. Though there may be a small resistance beginning to form within the broader culture, the church as a whole does not react to this movement because of the perceived widespread opposition. Then there will be resistance to the movement; as the broader culture begins to accept the movement, the church must decide whether to adopt or resist the Spirit that is at work. Resistance often forms as societal laws that once restricted the group begins to change, and the oppressed groups are now able to express themselves more fully within society. During the period of resistance, churches and denominations begin to split their allegiance to the movement. Finally, there will be a transformation in the broader church. The culture has changed, and the church, for the most part, has changed alongside it. This does not mean that the root cause of the issue has been solved, and the need for a continued push towards social justice

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<sup>40</sup> Though I will mention mainline congregations, my primary area of knowledge is in reference to Evangelical churches as that is context I was raised within.

is absolved, but the church has demonstrated a willingness to change their opinion and align their theology with the Spirit of liberation that is at work.

As an illustration of this three-step model, let us recall an earlier Biblical example: the Exodus. The Exodus is ultimately a story of God's people moving from oppression into freedom, and thus it is consistent with other justice movements that follow that trajectory. When Moses and Aaron first approach Pharaoh with the demand that the Israelites be released, they are met with firm opposition: "still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said." (Exod 7:13).<sup>41</sup> As the plagues continue to enact violence and destruction in Egypt, Pharaoh shifts into the phase of resistance: "then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "this time I have sinned; the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong" (Exod 9:27). Pharaoh wavers between promising the Israelites' freedom and reenforcing their enslavement. He understands the need to liberate them, yet he remains chained to an oppressive mindset that prioritize his own power over the liberation of others. Pharaoh only recants his promises when the effects of the plague are gone, and Pharaoh is able to reassert his control, which demonstrates how resistance is ultimately an expression of one's desire to maintain their power. Finally, following the final plague, the liberative movement ultimately shifts into transformation: "during the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested." (Exod 12:31). Pharaoh relinquishes his control and the Israelites are set free, and therefore their status is transformed. This is not the end of the narrative, however, as Pharaoh again changes his mind and pursues the Israelites to the Red Sea. Though the Israelites have been liberated, there are still forces at work that threaten their freedom. That is why the work of social justice is never

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<sup>41</sup> I do not find it relevant to enter into a discussion about what it means to say that "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" in this context, though it is an important theological question.

completed, because even after transformation, there will always be evil that pushes against freedom.

Now, we can turn to examples of opposition, resistance and transformation that have occurred over the last two centuries. The progression of racial equality, feminism and LGBTQ+ inclusion have all taken root under different circumstances, yet they are held together by the impact that they have had on both broader society and the church. By approaching these movements from different perspectives, we can begin to see how social justice movements can operate in a variety of functions as a tool of liberation.

#### Transformation with the Culture: Slavery and Civil Rights

Although Christians today differ greatly in their responses to racial injustice, a majority would likely agree that racism itself is unbiblical. However, Christians have historically been primary agitators of racial discrimination in America, specifically when it comes to the treatment of Black Americans. Chattel slavery was carried out and defended by white Christians who used Scripture to dehumanize Black people in efforts to maintain their unjust power structures. The false theology of the Curse of Ham, arguing that Noah's curse on his son in Genesis (Gen, 9:20) extended to the nation of Africa, became the foundation of a racist theology that justified oppression. Even after slavery ended, clergymen of the 19th and 20th centuries joined the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan, and those who no longer used the Bible to defend their racism found nothing in Scripture to compel them to speak out against it. It has been through the slow tide of social movements and public discourse that opinions on racial inequality have begun to shift, and though the issues of systemic racism still divide churches, there has been notable progress. But the Bible that the systems of racism and slavery were built on has not changed; therefore one can



observe that the transformation that occurred was within the hearts and minds of those who were reading that sacred text.

Systems of racism and white supremacy are a human construction, and cannot be legitimately tied to any Biblical reference or command; though that did not stop Southern Christians from using the Bible to justify their beliefs. Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey writes that for Southern white Evangelicals, “interracial marriage was the sin that God punished in Sodom and that led to the flood or destruction of the tower of Babel.”<sup>42</sup> Within the New Testament, defenders of segregation viewed Acts 17:26 as “God’s plan...for each race to live separately.”<sup>43</sup> White slave owners had an easier task of Biblical justification, as slavery itself was an established system of societal function within the Old Testament. This gave White Christian slave owners a sense of moral righteousness and justification in their participation within the system, as they used texts about slaves to keep slaves in submission. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman writes about how his grandmother refused to read from Paul because white slave owners would give sermons from Colossians and Ephesians “to show how it was God’s will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us.”<sup>44</sup> White Christians demonstrated the full extent of damage that can be done when one weaponizes the Bible without consideration for the contextual application of the text or the redemptive spirit approach.

But in today’s society, it seems that most American Christians, regardless of their opinions on racial equality and white supremacy, would classify slavery and segregation as a sin.

There has been a general consensus among American Christians that slavery was a practice

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<sup>42</sup> Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey, *Between a Man and a Woman? Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 36.

<sup>43</sup> Viefhues-Bailey, *Between*, 36, “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live” (Acts 17:26 NRSV)

<sup>44</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 30-31.

grounded in a particular historical context, and that cultural and societal shifts have required an abolishment of that practice. However, at the time when abolitionists were first making this argument, they received pushback from conservative Christians who felt that Scripture was on their side. In *The Color of Compromise*, Jemar Tisby writes:

Abolitionist claims were mostly met with skepticism because they advanced arguments based on the "spirit" rather than the "letter of the law. Even when abolitionists made their case from the Bible, they were criticized because they were not able to cite a specific passage that explicitly condemned slavery. Instead, they had to argue from broader principles such as "love of neighbor" and the unity of humankind. Southern theologians, by contrast, appealed to a "plain reading" of the scripture which they claimed clearly showed righteous and godly people who enslaved people with apparently no rebuke or accusation of sinfulness. Proslavery advocates grew confident in the Confederate cause because it seemed like the proslavery theological arguments respected the Bible's authority and employed a straightforward method of scriptural interpretation.<sup>45</sup>

This argument between the transcendent and temporal laws, as explored previously, is a debate that has lasted centuries. In the case of slavery, it appears that it is the former that captured the Christian imagination. But abolishing slavery was only part of the transformation required to move Christians away from racialized readings of the text, as it would require the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement to push white Evangelical Christians away from their support of segregation. In the last 200 years, the Christian church has moved from staunch defenders of racist ideology to apathetic bystanders to, in the case of some churches, passionate antiracist advocates. In all three of those movements, the word of God and the character of God never changed, but something within society and the Church did. I would argue that the shift that led the church to oppose slavery and embrace antiracist ideology was a movement of the Holy Spirit towards justice, and ultimately, a revelation of God's will for liberation in history.

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<sup>45</sup> Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MN: Zondervan, 2019), 84.

As an illustration of this shift, one can consider prominent Evangelical leader Jerry Falwell. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Falwell was an outspoken supporter of segregation. His church, Thomas Road Baptist Church, refused to admit Black congregants until 1970.<sup>46</sup> But throughout late 1900s, those who used the Bible to justify segregation and racism began to fade away, and “support for segregation gradually eroded... there was no debate about the truth of these Bible verses.... they, or rather their prevailing interpretation which had been considered to be biblical inerrant truth, ceased to be part of the spoken Bible.”<sup>47</sup> Falwell, as well as others, were left without claim to the Biblically inerrant discrimination that they had once relied on. And in his later autobiography, Falwell would write that it was “God’s still small voice in [his] heart” that ultimately moved him away from his support of segregation.<sup>48</sup> I cannot claim to know whether it was truly God who changed Falwell’s heart, or if it was just the political ramifications of publicly supporting segregation, but Falwell’s statement nonetheless demonstrates that even the staunchest supports of segregation felt something within them that prompted transformation. As Viefhues-Bailey puts it, “the segregationist reading of these texts ceased to resonate as true with Conservative Christians.”<sup>49</sup> To move from a reading of the Bible that supported segregation into one that opposed it required spiritual, political and social change.

This is what happens when social justice movements move the church, and society, into transformation. It requires legal and political victories, as equality cannot be truly won without lawful protections. But it also requires a spiritual shift that takes root within the hearts of Christians and exposes the false teachings. The Abolition and Civil Rights Movements were historical movements, but contained within them was a movement of revelation. This revelation

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<sup>46</sup> Viefhues-Bailey, *Between*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Viefhues-Bailey, *Between*, 36. Citing: Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Viefhues-Bailey, *Between*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Viefhues-Bailey, *Between*, 36.

moved the church to reject segregationist readings of the Bible and, in theory, embrace a more equitable approach to race. Practically, the church still has a lot of progress to make in their approach to racial justice; churches are still largely segregated and white Evangelicals have expressed an unwillingness to address systemic issues of racism. But God is continuing to work through these social movements in regard to race. For example, the renewal of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 took root in the church and moved many churches to examine their own participation in racism. The process of transformation is never completed, and is an ongoing process, but God is always at work in that process.

#### Resistance to the Culture: Suffrage and Feminism

In the beginning, God created man; and from man, God created woman to be man's helper. The curse brought upon Adam and Eve after the fall solidified this arrangement as God's intent for humankind, with God commanding Eve "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."<sup>50</sup> (Gen. 3:16). Not only are women to serve their husbands, but women are not permitted to lead in any context (1 Tim. 2:12). Women, according to these biblical standards, are second-class citizens submitted to the authority male headship. This is the interpretation of our origin story that has been told over time, and it is the interpretation that has influenced and upheld a patriarchal system of societal and cultural control over women. Patriarchy is not only a Christian manifestation; it is a long-standing societal reality that has permeated every religion, culture and time period. Similarly, the ideology of female subservience is not an inerrant Biblical truth; it is a constructed theology explained through historical developments. Understanding how gender theology was constructed as a reaction against cultural developments demonstrates how

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<sup>50</sup> The irony that Eve's submission is dictated as a result of the fall, and not as a part of God's original creation, is apparently lost on those who defend female submission. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that we should seek to abide by the restrictions levied as a result of a curse, and those who choose to live as if the Kingdom is inbreaking now would rather be inclined to live into the mutuality that is described in Genesis 1 and 2.

the deconstruction of those theologies through embracing cultural shifts towards feminism is representative of the Spirit working to challenge society and the church.

An analysis of sect-like Christianity by Jennifer McKinney examines the development of gender theology through the lens of cultural tensions. A strict religious group that adheres to a sect-like mentality utilizes high tension with the prevailing culture in order to increase allegiance among the members, creating an “us vs them” mentality that strengthens in-group relationships.<sup>51</sup> McKinney states that “one of the most powerful mechanisms through which sect-like groups maintain tension to the larger culture is by adhering to a gender theology that stands in higher tension with the prevailing cultural idea.”<sup>52</sup> According to McKinney’s analysis, what becomes important in the development of gender theologies for strict religious groups is not theological considerations but rather cultural ones; strict religious organizations take up the cause that is in highest tension to the prevailing culture in order to maintain their separateness from the dominant culture. As an example, McKinney explains how in post-Revolution America, many of the established church denominations had adopted a restrictive patriarchal theology, which created a cultural patriarchal standard. As a result, the Methodists and Baptists, sect-like upstarts seeking to insert themselves into the American church, adopted “egalitarian theologies”<sup>53</sup> in order to remain in higher tension with the culture, while also maintaining stricter regulations on behaviors and doctrine. The Methodists and Baptists maintained an egalitarian theology until they grew in power and began to assimilate into the broader culture, disseminating their sect-like tensions and becoming increasingly patriarchal.

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<sup>51</sup> Jennifer McKinney, "Sects and Gender: Reaction and Resistance to Cultural Change" (2015). *Winifred E. Weter Lectures*. 30. [https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/weter\\_lectures/30](https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/weter_lectures/30).

<sup>52</sup> McKinney, “Sects”.

<sup>53</sup> McKinney, “Sects”.

Expanding on McKinney's work, the need for strict religious groups to maintain tension with the culture is tied to the circle of power. Groups that are able to exert their power on the culture do not need to be in tension with it, as conservative Christians in America have traditionally had the ability to shape policy and progress through the dominance of Christianity as the primary religious identity and the intentional integration of Christian values into American politics. But throughout the late 1900s, the role of women continued to increase in America through necessity and societal progress; war-time manufacturing required women to work outside of the home, and an expanding job market permitted women to enter the workforce throughout the 1900s.<sup>54</sup> The increased autonomy of women gave way to a push for the feminist agenda, as women no longer saw themselves as submissive agents in a patriarchal society, and the conservative Christian right began to lose their power to dictate cultural attitudes toward women. By 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment had passed both the House and Senate with a large majority, the 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* provided access to abortion procedures for women and 1975 was declared International Women's year by the United Nations. Even within churches, feminism was taking root: between 1975 and 1985, there was a significant uptick in the number of ordained women in the American church,<sup>55</sup> and "by the mid-1980s, a growing number of conservative Christians considered themselves egalitarians, who believed that the Bible ordained equal roles for men and women."<sup>56</sup> The rise of feminism was not a threat to Mainline churches, who adapted to the shifting culture. But sect-like churches, sensing that their power was diminishing, once again capitalized on the need for a higher tension with the developing culture in order to maintain their own power amidst this shift.

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<sup>54</sup> McKinney, "Sects".

<sup>55</sup> Dowland, Seth. *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 138.

<sup>56</sup> Dowland, *Family*, 137.

Unable to contain feminism, conservative protestants sought to discredit the movement by weaponizing the Bible to claim that egalitarians “were distorting God’s ordained hierarchy, erasing the clear differences between women and men in both function and authority.”<sup>57</sup> Restrictive gender theology was transformed into an inerrant Biblical truth rather than a cultural response, and thus patriarchy was made to be synonymous with God’s intent for humanity despite a lack of transcendent Scriptural grounding. Anyone who disagreed with this “truth” was portrayed as disagreeing with Biblical authority, and the Bible itself became the harbinger of patriarchal beliefs rather than the church leaders who endorsed these views. As with slavery and abolition, we can see how those who resist feminism appeal to a “plain reading” of Biblical texts that relies on unquestioned authority rather than applied understanding. From this development came other constructed theologies, such as the idea of the God-ordained family structure, which paints an image of marriage as existing between one hard-working male and one child-rearing female.<sup>58</sup> This concept of the family structure would serve to hinder the progress of women not only in Christianity, but also in America as a whole; the crusade that conservative Evangelicals launched against the Equal Rights Amendment as being an anti-family bill prevented its ratification.<sup>59</sup> As the broader culture became increasingly feminist, conservative Christians, mainly sect-like fundamentalists and Evangelicals, became increasingly patriarchal.

The history of gender theology in American Christianity displays the way that cultural tension was utilized to develop and justify patriarchal standards. The fact that Mainline churches became increasingly egalitarian while Evangelical churches became patriarchal cannot be

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<sup>57</sup> McKinney, “Sects”.

<sup>58</sup> There is no standard image of family in the Bible, a text that contains concubines, affairs, infertility and celibacy, meaning that this family-centered theology is constructed from an American cultural ideal rather than Biblical law.

<sup>59</sup> David E. Kyvig, “Historical Misunderstandings and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment.” *The Public Historian*. (Santa Barbara, CA: University of California Press, 1996): 18(1): 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3377881>.

explained by Scripture; it is explained by reactions to cultural development. The Bible has been twisted and interpreted to support both feminism and patriarchy; so rather than only considering what the words themselves say, we must also consider how those words have been used in reaction to these cultural developments.<sup>60</sup> If Christianity, as a whole, embraced a viewpoint that saw God as one who is working through liberating cultural developments, then feminism would become a calling, not a crisis. If God is indeed revealing new truths amidst historical shifts, then the cultural shifts of the 1800s and 1900s, wherein women began to oppose patriarchal submission and demanded greater equality, were evidence of God's spirit working through activism. The church was not unified in their response to this shift; some aligned themselves with the movement while others opposed it. But the feminist movement has undeniably continued to push and shape the church, which is reflected by the steady increase of female leaders in church spaces throughout the last 50 years,<sup>61</sup> as well as the increasing prevalence of feminist theologies. Therefore, even as some churches try to hold on to an idea of cultural separatism, the culture continues to have its effect.

#### Opposition to the Culture: Sexuality and Affirmation

The social justice movement of highest debate in this decade of history appears to be the equality of LGBTQ+ individuals. Though issues of race and gender remain highly relevant to the church and society as a whole, the problem of human sexuality has risen to the forefront of consciousness for many Christians who are being forced to confront the rising reality of sexual diversity in their own communities. The resistance to equality for LGBTQ+ individuals comes

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<sup>60</sup> There is a lot of compelling evidence from Biblical scholars that contextualizes verses that condemn women to explain their cultural grounding and dismiss any intention for broader application. Debates over Biblical interpretation are longstanding, but it is also important to understand how these interpretations exist as a reaction to cultural developments, and not just as a faithful reading of scripture.

<sup>61</sup> <https://eileencampbellreed.org/state-of-clergy/>



from the enforcement of heteronormativity that operates on the basis that anything outside of the male/female binary is against the natural order of God. But within a scattering of Christian spaces, there has been a shift in recent years toward a more affirming theology. This shift has coincided with the rise of the pro-LGBTQ+ movement that has unfolded outside of the church, and with a recent dramatic increase of those publicly identifying themselves within the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>62</sup> A 2017 Pew Research study found that 45 percent of Millennial Protestants favor same-sex marriage compared to just 23 percent of older evangelical protestants.<sup>63</sup> Like the Civil Rights and Feminist movements before it, the LGBTQ+ movement is disrupting churches in a way that is forcing them to confront their own prejudice and oppression. Since the late 1900s, and following a series of legal and political victories for LGBTQ+ communities, the Christian view of sexuality has been shifting, suggesting that there is another movement of the Spirit at work.

For most of the twentieth century, Christians were in harmony with the wider American culture: same-sex attraction was immoral, and homosexuality needed to be policed and punished. The widespread cultural opposition to LGBTQ+ identity created an environment wherein conservative Christians did not feel the need to assert their opinion in the religious and political sphere; homosexuality was considered an “abnormality” by medical associations, laws were imposed to discourage same-sex behaviors and most LGBTQ+ individuals remained closeted.<sup>64</sup> Despite the prevalence of preaching against *homosexuality* today, it was not until 1946, when the Revised Standard Version was released, that the word *homosexual* even appeared in the Bible for

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<sup>62</sup>Jeffrey M. Jones, "LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 7.1% ." [https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx?utm\\_source=twitterbutton&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=sharing](https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx?utm_source=twitterbutton&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=sharing) (accessed March 10, 2022).

<sup>63</sup>Jeff Diamant, "Though Still Conservative, Young Evangelicals are More Liberal than their Elders on some Issues ." <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/04/though-still-conservative-young-evangelicals-are-more-liberal-than-their-elders-on-some-issues/> (accessed March 10, 2022).

<sup>64</sup> Dowland, *Family*, 160.

the first time.<sup>65</sup> But by the 1990s, after the gay rights movement had begun to take off and cultural opposition to LGBTQ+ individuals began to lessen, the campaign against *homosexuality* was formally included within the Evangelical Christian agenda. Building on their resistance to feminism, the Christian right had created a movement centered around family values and the traditional family structure, and opposing the legitimacy of same-sex relationships and gender fluidity, which violates the male/female binary of marriage, folded into that political agenda<sup>66</sup>.

Biblical verses that condemn same-sex attraction have been contextualized and explained by Biblical scholars seeking a more inclusive theology: verses used to condemn LGBTQ+ individuals make no mention of marriage or conventional relationships between those of the same gender. Commonly used verses from Genesis, Leviticus, Corinthians and Timothy refer to acts of sexual assault or an exploitative relationship between a man and child, which is evidenced by an examination of the context and original language.<sup>67</sup> So as with the issues of feminism and gender equality, opponents to LGBTQ+ equality must appeal to a decontextualized sense of Scripture and an appeal to the ideals of a traditional family model. It is becoming evident that one marker of opposition to social justice movements is a misapplication of scripture that relies on a “simple” reading of the Bible, meaning an interpretation that does not include contextual analysis. But though there are documented examples of female leaders in the Bible for counter-reference, there is no formalized evidence of same-sex relationships in the canon.<sup>68</sup> This is where an understanding how the law changes becomes important; the Biblical canon demonstrates that not every condition of the human experience can be formally explained or

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<sup>65</sup> The word *APXENOKOITAI* can be broken down to mean "the ones (masc.) who lie/sleep with". This particular word, as used in the Bible, refers to a sexual action, not to an identity or orientation.

<sup>66</sup> Dowland, *Family*.

<sup>67</sup>For more information, I recommend *UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality* by Colby Martin.

<sup>68</sup> There has been theological discourse regarding Matt. 8:5-13 wherein a Roman centurion asks Jesus to heal his male servant (*παῖς*), which could be translated to refer to a male lover. Other theologians have recontextualized the relationships of Ruth And Naomi and David and Jonathan through a lens of romantic partnership.

documented in a specific historical period or context. That is why the law must continue to evolve and change as the people of the Bible continue to evolve and change. Whether or not one agrees with a more inclusive view of sexuality and gender, one cannot deny that American society as a whole is progressing towards a more fluid view of sex and gender that matches an increasing identification of those within that community. The discriminatory laws and policies that once kept people in the closet have been abolished, meaning that people feel freer to express the fullness of their sexuality. If revelation is not stagnant, and God continues to see the necessity for Biblical law to change as the needs of God's people change, then it is not unreasonable to claim that a new standard for same-sex attraction and gender fluidity has been established by the prevalence of LGBTQ+ identification today.

LGBTQ+ inclusion is the most recent social justice movement that is challenging the church, and even now, one can perceive the movement is shifting from firm opposition to negotiated resistance. The laws that once condemned LGBTQ+ identity in America have been abolished, which has allowed for a freer expression of sexuality that is taking root within and outside of the church. Churches are already beginning to fracture over the issue of sexuality, as exemplified by the marriage debate that arose with the Presbyterian Church and in the more recent proposed split between the United Methodist Church and the Global Methodist Church. In 2014, the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA) voted to allow ordained pastors to perform same-sex marriages, though no one was formally required to align themselves with the position. In doing this, the PCUSA decided to affirm that “strongly differing convictions about sexuality and faithful sexual relationship are granted equal standing within this denomination.”<sup>69</sup> This change, however, only took root within one denomination of the

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<sup>69</sup> "Sexuality and Same-Gender Relationships," <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/sexuality-and-same-gender-relationships> (accessed March 25, 2022).

Presbyterian Church, as other demonstrations stand in conflict with the PCUSA in regards to their policies on same-sex marriage.<sup>70</sup> This inner-denomination split is also unfolding within the Methodist domination, as in 2020, conservative members of the United Methodist church announced their resolve to branch off into the Global Methodist Church, citing that they wanted to take a more strict stance against the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>71</sup> The impact that sexuality is having in church formation is not insignificant; it is evidence that there is a movement building that churches are resisting. This is why LGBTQ+ inclusion fits into the model of social change.

Therefore the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community is following the pattern established by abolition, Civil Rights and feminism; a firm opposition to inclusive theology gives way to a church-wide theological debate that ends with a more liberating stance taking root in many congregations. The statistical rise in acceptance for LGBTQ+ communities in recent years suggests that LGBTQ+ inclusion is following this trend, and that means that topics of gender and sexuality will only become more prevalent in church spaces as the movement into church-wide resistance takes form.

The message to be pulled from this exploration of the historical development of theology in issues of justice is that the Christian consciousness is evolving as society shifts towards liberation. It is critical to see issues of social justice as a theological issue because it is only through theological conservatism that many of these groups have found themselves under an oppressive regime in the first place. White Christians spread the message of a decolorized savior, the ideology of complementarianism hindered the progress of women and the Christian view of sexuality vilified LGBTQ+ communities. Thus it follows that a spirit of theological liberation

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<sup>70</sup> Other denominations include the Presbyterian Church in America, Evangelical Presbyterian Church and Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>71</sup> Meg Anderson. "United Methodist Church Announces Proposal to Split Over Gay Marriage ." <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/04/793614135/united-methodist-church-announces-proposal-to-split-over-gay-marriage> . (accessed March 25, 2022).

must take root in order for justice to be achieved in its fullness. That spirit can already be observed through the influence of social justice movements on Christian theology. Even if these movements form in non-religious spheres of influence, they have come to shape religious ideology. Anti-racism, feminism and LGBTQ+ equality are all issues that have divided churches in recent years, and not because they are antithetical to the message of Christ, but because they represent a movement of the Spirit that is pushing the church to reexamine how it is applying the word of God. Social justice movements should be understood as an external manifestation of the internal work of the Holy Spirit in our society.

### The Character of God

At the heart of this theology on social justice is the heart of God. One cannot argue that God is moving us toward something that opposes God's very being, and so an understanding of the character of God is necessary in order to clarify and justify what movements can be seen as Spirit-driven social justice movements. For example, the present white supremacist movement, centrally located in groups like the Proud Boys, cannot be seen as representative of a work of the Spirit. These groups, operating from violence, racism, and terror, are unquestionably in opposition to the character of God. While we may be able to identify what is not of God in stark examples like that of white supremacy, it can sometimes be more difficult to identify what is of God.

For a moment, then, let us consider Biblical examples of God's character. Our limited human understanding prevents us from attaining complete knowledge of God, and therefore one can never hope to fully explain the character of God. But themes throughout scripture give us insight into the heart of God. James Cone writes "the consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh's concern for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor

and unwanted in society.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, there are many verses in the Bible that speak on a concern for the poor and oppressed, and within that concern, God demonstrates God’s character. For example:

*God desires justice*

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8 NRSV)

Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. (Jer. 22:3 NRSV)

For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. (Psalm 37:28 NRSV)

*God is good*

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’;<sup>4</sup> and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Exod. 33:19 NRSV)

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; (1 Tim. 4:4 NRSV)

The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him, (Nahum 1:7 NRSV)

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. (Gen. 50:20 NRSV)

*God is merciful*

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” (Psalm 86:15 NRSV)

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<sup>72</sup> Cone, *Black*, 2.

*And, ultimately, God is love*

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:8 NRSV)

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:4-5 NRSV)

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 26-40 NRSV)

When Jesus gives his answer about the greatest commandment, He intentionally puts love at the center. Love is such a simple word, but in lived experience, we know that people experience and practice love in many different ways; thus developing a love ethic based in the teachings of Jesus can become complex and nuanced. But we can begin to identify some of the core characteristics of love according to Jesus, and in doing so, we also see a clearer picture of the characteristics of God, who is love. in *Kingdom Ethics*, Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee identify four characteristics of love based on the teachings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount and from the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

1. Love sees with compassion and enters into the situation of those in bondage
2. Love does delivering deeds
3. Love invites into community with justice, freedom and a future
4. Love confronts those who exclude<sup>73</sup>

These characteristics of love, those that undergird kingdom ethics according to Stassen and Gushee, are steeped in the practice of liberation. These characteristics are not just about a personal experience with God, they are about how we live in the context of our communities

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<sup>73</sup> David P. Gushee and Glen Harold Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 340-341

when our freedom is dependent on another. Love, therefore, is an active pursuit of liberation for all. So when we say that God is love, we do not just mean that God demonstrates an affection for all of creation; we mean that God is actively involved in the liberating process that delivers us from the shackles of injustice.

This is not a summation of God's being, but rather glimpses into who God is and who God is calling us to be. So as we consider issues of race, gender and sexuality, there will always be a debate surrounding the interpretation of verses and the application of doctrines. Biblical scholars will continue to argue their positions on transcendent and temporal laws, revelation and discernment, inerrancy and subjectivity; but what should be at the heart of every debate should be the heart of God. Instead of only asking if something aligns with a verse, one must also ask whether something aligns with the person of God. Our practices must be just, fair, good, merciful and, above all else, loving. These are the characteristics of God that should ground Christianity, and these are also the characteristics that ground social justice movements that have moved us from oppression into liberation. Conversely, anything that leads to the neglect of our neighbor cannot be considered Godly. It is important to remember that when we are discussing social justice movements, we are not just discussing policies and agendas; we are discussing human beings who have been created in the image of God. The work of transformation that is taking place in the church is deeply important for the future thriving of all people, and it should not simply be dismissed as the liberal agenda or a cultural fad. That which moves us to love our neighbor deeper and better is the revelation of God.



## Conclusion

This paper has sought to examine how theology, history and culture intertwine into evidence of God's divine spirit at work. God communicates through revelation, but the way that we encounter God's revelation takes different forms. One way that we can see God's revelation is through the unfolding of a historical narrative. Therefore, social justice movements, which often mark a significant shift in history, can be interpreted as a revelation of God. The theological work that must be done is to uncover what God is communicating through those movements. James Cone argues that revelation always moves us towards liberation, and his thesis can be supported by Biblical evidence. Social justice movements seek to disrupt oppression and injustice, thus they fit squarely into the movement of God towards freedom. This theme of liberation is picked up in the ways that laws change and evolve over the course of the Biblical narrative. The law is not stagnant, but the character of God is: Biblical laws change when they become oppressive due to cultural and societal shifts, and the changing of the law reflects a necessary evolution that seeks to liberate people from the chains that law can enforce when laws are unable to adapt to the human condition. God does not seek to keep people in chains, but rather to free them. Therefore, to say that any one law in the Bible that can be contextualized within the time period is prescriptive for all human history betrays the nature of Biblical law. Social justice movements, similarly, seek to challenge laws that oppress. Finally, God does not need to operate outside of culture; God is capable of transforming the culture. If all of society seems to be pushing towards one goal, both within and outside of the church, then that may be interpreted as evidence of God's spirit at work in the culture. Anti-racism, women's equality and LGBTQ+ inclusion are rising movements in both secular and church spaces; the culture is crying out for a change because God is moving us towards liberation. Despite

opposition and resistance, the church is undergoing a deep transformation that is divinely inspired by the movements that are bringing the kingdom of God into the present.

So as a final note, it is important to state that discomfort is not always a sign of negative progress. Rather, the discomfort of the church in addressing these social justice movements is critical to their importance. There is a resistance to change that is prevalent in any structure or system, and without resistance, the full impact of the change would not be realized. The revelation of God should be uncomfortable because God challenges our understanding of truth. God interrupts our human reality with God's divine Spirit. The people of God throughout the Bible were rarely comfortable. In fact, it was in their times of comfort that God entered the story to push them to grow: Moses was comfortable in Midian before God commanded him to return to Egypt, Abraham and Sarah were comfortable growing in their old age before God interrupted them with a child, Jonah was comfortable spreading the word of God to his neighbors before God sent him to his enemies. Discomfort is often a sign that the Spirit is at work. Therefore the model of societal change that can be observed within these social justice movements, moving from opposition, to resistance, to transformation, is a model that displays both the discomfort and growth that is necessary for people of God striving to follow God's commands.

Theologians must be also willing to embrace discomfort and risk. In a world where people are suffering under the violence of oppressive theologies, we cannot be tempted by apathetic constructions of God. James Cone writes:

Christian theology cannot afford to be an abstract, dispassionate discourse on the nature of God in relation to humankind; such an analysis has no ethical implications for the contemporary forms of oppression in our society. Theology must take the risk of faith, knowing that it stands on the edge of condemnation by the forces of evil.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Cone, *Black*, 18.

To propose a theology of social justice movements, based on the conclusion that God is using cultural shifts to bring about new revelations about law, belonging and justice, may appear to be a theological risk. But it is the kind of risk that we as Christians must be willing to take in the face of these forces of violence, oppression and hate that have twisted our present theological understanding. The spirit that moves us towards justice in our individual lives is the same spirit that is moving our communities to liberative ideologies, and it is only through a more communal and holistic approach to revelation and justice that we can truly understand how God is working in society today.

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## Appendix

Honors Research Symposium Presentation

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Seattle Pacific University

The ideals of the kingdom of heaven is a popular image in Christian thought, but when we speak of that kingdom, we are often speaking of it in future tense. When we only speak of the kingdom of God in the future tense, we are more apt to overlook the inbreakings of the kingdom that are happening now. That is why I say that the kingdom is now and not yet. The kingdom of God collided with Earth through Jesus, and while it is true to say that the kingdom of God, whatever that may be, is not fully realized, it is also true to say that God is working through that kingdom even as we sit here today.

So then we must ask how is God working? How does the Kingdom of God appear?

I would argue that the kingdom present in the very things that challenge our sense of truth. In the things that make us as a society uncomfortable. This unrest is the result of the now and the not yet coming together in an infinite tension, grinding together in two different directions.

And the unrest that I am most concerned with is the unrest caused by social justice movements. These are the movements that disrupt our culture and push us beyond our comfort zones. The moments where God appears to us like a burning bush and demands that we challenge the powers that we have been running away from. Like the prophets calling out the wicked rulers, these movements hold the powers of Earth accountable to a divine sense of justice. And therefore, I argue, that social justice movements, and the way they impact and shape the church, are manifestations of God's divine revelation for the sake of the coming kingdom.



And because I am a Pentecostal at my roots, I believe that it is the Holy Spirit working through us that prompts us to partake in these actions and movements that bring liberation.

The broad scope of my project is concerned with developing a theological and historical framework from which to view social justice movements and their impact on the church. First, I would like to establish some theological groundwork, and then I will move into explaining how we can apply these principles to social justice movements in the context of Christianity. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how I believe God is making space for every body and experience in the context of God's kingdom, and as humans, it is our divine duty to listen to where the Spirit is leading us and participate in these movements.

This thesis hinges on an understanding of God's self-revelation as a catalyst for liberation and social change. When I speak of God's revelation, I am speaking of the ways in which God communicates important and existing truths to society in ways that disrupt our current understanding. God is not necessarily creating new realities, but rather revealing an existing truth that is beyond our human understanding. I do believe there is space for the personal revelation of God in our inner spiritual lives, but I also want to emphasize that God reveals things at a societal level as well. Also, we have to move past the rampant individualism of Christian practice in order to live into a more radical faith.

The theory on the revelation that served as the basis for my project comes from James Cone, arguably one of the most influential Black Liberation Theologians of our time. Cone writes that God's revelation always moves us towards liberation: "There is no revelation of God without a condition of oppression which develops into a situation of liberation." There are stories that

illustrate this, but for the sake of time, I want to focus on how Biblical law functions as a space of liberation.

I know we do not often associate law with liberation, but I would argue that in Scripture, the way that law changes over time actually provides us with a model of understanding God's liberating nature. I am actually a firm believer that the Bible itself holds the key to more liberating patterns of Christian thought, even though it is the very text that has been abused and taken out of context to do harm. That is because there is an argument for Biblical inerrancy that lends itself to Biblical stagnancy. That is to say, there is this generalized understanding that the unchanging nature of God lends itself to an unchanging Bible. However, this understanding does not account for the ways in which the Bible contains revisions even within itself. It is my belief that the Bible is a living document, and over the course of Biblical record, societal, cultural and religious shifts led to changes in the Biblical laws once documented in the Torah. These changes do not reflect a fickle God, but rather a God who sees the need for evolving laws to address evolving realities. And so if we believe that the Bible is the story of God's people, and we are still living that story, then laws must continue to evolve to reflect our realities as well.

I would like to introduce two terms in my discussion of law: transcendent and temporal. Temporal law applies to a law that is grounded in a specific historical context. A transcendent law, however, carries meaning beyond a specific point in time and should apply within any context.

Throughout the Bible, we can see examples of temporal laws changing in ways that move people towards a more liberating state of being. For example, in Numbers, we read the story of Zelophehad's daughters. Israelite inheritance law established that land would be divided amongst the tribes and passed from fathers to sons. But somewhere along the journey, Zelophehad passed

away without a male heir, leaving his five daughters behind without a claim to their father's property. Rather than accept this injustice, his daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, take their case to Moses, and explain that the situation is unjust. Moses takes their petition to God, and God agrees with the women's claim. This leads to a change in the law to include daughters as recipients of inheritance. So this story does not paint a portrait of a rigid, unchanging God, unwilling to adapt to the evolving needs of God's people; rather the God portrayed in this story recognizes that some laws must be altered when the law itself is creating injustice.

Another example that specifically relates to gender and sexuality can be seen in laws regarding Eunuchs. In Mosaic Law, Eunuchs were prohibited from entering the temple. Deuteronomy says "no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord" (Deut. 23:1 NRSV). This is a biblical example of somebody being excluded from full participation in the people of God because of an aspect of their gender identity (the absence of a sexual organ). But in Matthew, Jesus challenges this law by saying "there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:11-12 NRSV). Jesus even acknowledges that it may be hard for some people to accept this fact, as He is challenging the social order: not only are Eunuchs to be allowed in the temple, but now Jesus introduces the idea that someone could even be born a Eunuch. Jesus upends gender expectations, hinting that the way someone is born, in regards to their gender and sex identity, does not exclude them from the Kingdom. We see this theology at work in Acts when Phillip encounters the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts. Rather than shunning this man for his sexuality, Phillip shares the gospel with him and baptizes him.

In these examples, the Bible does not remain stagnant in the face of injustice; there are changes to the law that must occur. These changes create space for liberation to take the place of oppression. The other category of law, transcendent laws, do not change in this way; but transcendent laws align with God's character and are thus inherently liberating; laws like loving your neighbor, caring for the widow and orphan, doing justice in unjust situations. These, I would say, are transcendent commands that underlie what it means to live into the kingdom of God. And so temporal laws, adjusting to changes in cultural and societal expectations and norms, change along a continuum of these kingdom values.

Central to my overall argument is the belief that God works through and transforms the culture that we live in. I do not believe that God is apathetic to cultural shifts, rather I think God transforms both the church and broader culture in a way that aligns with these kingdom values and transcendent laws.

So there are three social justice movements that I want to focus on: abolition and civil rights, the rise of feminism and LGBTQ+ inclusion and equality. Arguably, these are three of the biggest social justice movements of the last 150 years. I would say that they all center on biological aspects of people's identity that have been assigned different societal values based on power and control. And, within all three of these movements, the church has been one of the main perpetrators of oppressive thinking. As a side note, we may want to expect better from Christians as a whole, but followers of God participating in the institutional oppression of the poor and vulnerable is as old as the Scripture itself. Amos and Isaiah were eviscerating the rich and powerful for their crimes before it was trendy. That is why every generation requires prophetic action to hold the powerful to account. But I digress:

As we talk about these social justice movements and their influence on the church, I want us to talk about them in terms of this model: opposition, resistance and transformation. I would argue that every social justice movement, when it intersects with the church, flows through a rough approximation of this model. This represents the tension I talked about at the beginning; the present reality clashes with the coming kingdom and this friction is formed.

So I came up with this model while I was writing the second part of my paper, and when I showed it to my advisor, she actually helped me locate this within a specific Biblical story that I think is helpful when discussing it. I think one of the best and most quoted examples of a liberating movement in the Bible is the Exodus, and I think this model fits that story quite well. So I am going to talk about this model in that context:

So there will first be a firm opposition to the movement, taking place in both the wider culture and church. This is often represented by a broad moral objection in society as a whole and reinforced by a conservative theological approach. During the period of opposition, there are often laws and legal restrictions on an oppressed group that prevents them from experiencing the fullness of their humanity within broader American society. Though there may be a small resistance beginning to form within the broader culture, the church as a whole does not react to this movement because of the perceived widespread opposition. So in the Exodus story, this is at the beginning of Moses and Aaron's interactions with Pharaoh, when his heart is hardened and he refuses their request. Pharaoh is able to assert his power and control to maintain the oppression of another.

Then there will be resistance to the movement; as the broader culture begins to accept the movement, the church must decide whether to adopt or resist the Spirit that is at work. Resistance often forms as societal laws that once restricted the group begins to change, and the

oppressed groups are now able to express themselves more fully within society. During the period of resistance, churches and denominations begin to split their allegiance to the movement. Again, in Exodus, this when Pharaoh wavers between promising the Israelites' freedom and reenforcing their enslavement. He understands the need to librate them, yet he remains chained to an oppressive mindset that prioritize his own power over the liberation of others. Pharaoh only recants his promises when the effects of the plague are gone, and Pharaoh is able to reassert his control, which demonstrates how resistance is ultimately an expression of one's desire to maintain their power in the face of shifting structures.

Finally, there will be a transformation in the broader church. The culture has changed, and the church, for the most part, has changed alongside it. This does not mean that the root cause of the issue has been solved. There is a need for a continued push toward social justice. But the church has accepted the Spirit of the movement that is at work. This is when Pharaoh relinquishes his control and the Israelites are set free, and therefore their status is transformed. But still, the need for continued reform is represented by the fact that even after Pharaoh sets the Israelites free, he still sends an army after them into the Red Sea. Those who hold power are always hesitant to relinquish that control fully.

So, I would argue that of the three movements that I mentioned earlier, each one is in a different part of this model, which I will explain briefly.

So Abolition and civil rights has, for the most part, moved into transformation. Christians did once use the Bible to justify slavery and segregation, but throughout the course of the last 150 years, there has been a liberating shift that took place. The Bible itself did not change, but something in the way Christians read that Bible did, and much of that change originated from social justice movements (especially movements that started in the Black church). But even

today, we know the work is not complete. Racial inequality and justice is still a contentious topic in secular and religious spaces. But I would still say that most Christians today would admonish the kind of Biblically-justified racism that permeated 60 years ago, which is still transformation.

The next movement, feminism, is in the phase of resistance. It seems that the Christian church is split in regards to the full equality of women in society and the church. Categories like egalitarianism and complementarianism have come to define this resistance. Much of the Christian opposition to feminism actually came out of a strong reaction to the influx of women in the workplace following World War 2. Feminism was gaining ground in Christianity until the Christian right launched an offensive against it under the guise of protecting the nuclear family. So as women gained more autonomy in broader society, the church, in a quest to maintain their power and control, asserted stronger boundaries on women. This is what the phase of resistance looks like.

And finally, LGBTQ+ inclusion, I would say, is still in the phase of opposition, but is moving towards resistance as cultural support of the movement grows. The 2015 Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* marked the end of legal discrimination against LGBTQ+ in terms of marriage, but there are still other legal battles to be fought, especially when it comes to religion and sexuality. However, some church denominations have already begun to split over issues of gender and sexuality, such is the case with the United Methodists and Presbyterians. The beginning of these church splits, I believe, marks the transition in resistance, though there is still a lot of work for the church to do in this regard.

So what do these movements and these phases have to do with revelation and law?

It is only through theological conservatism and a narrow application of scripture that many of these groups have found themselves under an oppressive regime in the first place. In

America, it is an often unfortunate reality that Christians have defined what is culturally acceptable and unacceptable, but they have done so by oppressing the most vulnerable in society, not unlike the wicked and corrupt kings that we read about throughout the Bible. Therefore I believe that it must take a new theology, one that invokes revelation and the transformation of Biblical law, to communicate the necessity of Christians participating in these movements as prompted by the Spirit. I don't think it is enough to say that God might not hate women or God might not hate the LGBTQ+ community. Would it have been enough for God to simply say "I might not want the Israelites to be enslaved?" Systemic injustices require new laws and new revelations that create new possibilities. And not to be blunt, but anyone who says that God does not work in systems and structures has not read the Bible for more than 20 minutes.

So yes, I do believe that Bible verses about women and LGBTQ+ folks can be contextualized, but I also believe that these verses are just generally constrained by these temporal laws that were always intended to evolve with an evolving society. There is no way that Biblical authors, humans limited by human understanding, could write a text that would be applicable to a society as far removed from ancient Israel as the one we are currently in. But the existence of injustice has always been present, and God has always been working to address it. Just as Moses rewrites the inheritance laws and Jesus changes the laws about Eunuchs, I believe that God is rewriting the laws of belonging in front of our very eyes. But God must speak to us in ways that make sense in the context of modern society. We might not have a singular prophet proclaiming our sins from the mountaintop, but we do have protests and marches and petitions. We have these movements that hold rulers accountable and challenge injustices. And I think that is why social justice movements are divine acts of revelation from God. They accomplish what the prophets sought to do; they challenge unjust authority and assert kingdom values.



These movements are not cultural fads or a secular war on religion. These movements are the very embodiment of the character of God: love, justice, mercy, and righteousness. This is getting preachy, but I truly believe that God is at work through that protestor with a bull horn on the front lines of a Black Lives Matter protest. Through the student standing up the Board of Trustees with a pride flag draped around their shoulder. That is as much an embodiment of God as anything else in this world. And that is why I believe that the church has to move into this space of transformation; the rest of society is not going to wait for you to catch up to the work God is already doing.

## PHASES OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

<p><b>OPPOSITION</b></p> <p>Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. (Exod 7:13)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• takes place in both the wider culture and church</li> <li>• broad moral objection and restrictive theological ideals</li> <li>• laws and legal restrictions on a group that prevents an oppressed group from experiencing the fullness of their humanity within broader American society</li> <li>• the church as a whole does not react to this movement because of the perceived widespread opposition</li> </ul>
<p><b>RESISTANCE</b></p> <p>Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "this time I have sinned; the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong" (Exod 9:27)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broader culture begins to accept the ideals of the movement</li> <li>• church must decide whether to adopt or resist the Spirit at work</li> <li>• societal laws that once restricted the group begins to change the oppressed groups are now able to express themselves more fully within society</li> <li>• churches and denominations begin to split their allegiance to the movement</li> </ul>
<p><b>TRANSFORMATION</b></p> <p>During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested." (Exod 12:31)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the broader culture has changed</li> <li>• the church, for the most part, has also accepted the ideals of the movement</li> <li>• the church has demonstrated a willingness to change their opinion and align their theology with the Spirit of liberation that is at work</li> <li>• does not mean that the root cause of the issue has been solved and that social action is no longer necessary</li> </ul>