

Abstract


OVERQUEERING THE GOSPEL:
TOWARD A HOMILETICAL THEOLOGY OF BOUNDARY DISSOLUTION

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Thesis under the direction of Professor David Stark

This thesis examines the work of queer theologian Patrick Cheng and renowned homiletician Fred Craddock in order to establish a queer homiletic. Both Cheng and Craddock enjoin their readers to the work of boundary dissolution. Cheng interprets queer theology through the lens of God's radical love, defining it based on its boundary-dissolving characteristics, which are rooted in both queer theory and Christian theology. Likewise, Craddock's revolutionary homiletic identifies boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel message. Considered together, these two important scholars provide a foundation for a queer homiletic based on God's radical, boundary-dissolving love. Such a homiletic is revealed to dissolve boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel message, including boundaries between subject matter and style, listener and message, speaker and message, and an individual's distance from, and participation with, the biblical text. This homiletic is particularly applicable because it illustrates a queer premise of God, which transcends commonly accepted false dichotomies of gender and sexual identity and affirms the personhood of queer preachers.

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Over*Queering* the Gospel:
Toward a Homiletical Theology of Boundary Dissolution

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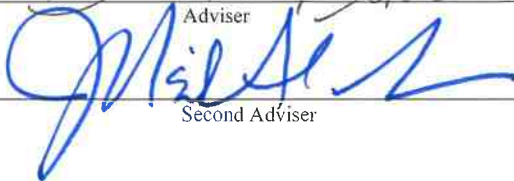
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Introduction

Queer theologian Patrick Cheng writes, “Christian theology is a fundamentally queer enterprise” because of its basis in a divine, boundary-dissolving “radical love.”¹ If this is true, then the dissemination of that theology through preaching must surely be queer as well. Indeed, the unique queer perspectives in Christian theology provide several important lessons, particularly pertaining to gospel proclamation. However, very little scholarly treatment of queer perspectives exists in the field of homiletics. While some scholarship discusses queer theology in broad terms, very little attention is given to how queer theology relates to the practice of preaching. In light of this lacuna, work at the intersection of queer theology and preaching is necessary in order to bring queer perspectives to bear in the field of homiletics. Further research in queer theology and preaching will help to recover and introduce queer voices, and bring to light the unique ways in which those voices subvert traditional boundaries and offer new possibilities of effective, insightful homiletics.

This thesis will argue that reading Fred Craddock’s influential work, *Overhearing the Gospel*, through the lens of Cheng’s queer theology of “radical love,” as he outlines in *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, will reveal the inherently queer characteristics already present in Craddock’s homiletic. Furthermore, greater attention, in general, to the queer elements of preaching will aid in the development of a robust queer homiletic, with the potential to offer perspectives that break down boundaries between

¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), x.

preacher and congregant, subvert problematic binaries that still affect a preacher's voice, and foster respect for the experience of queer preachers.

While there are several ways to understand queerness, this project will focus on one aspect that holds significant potential for preaching and will therefore define queerness, vis-à-vis Cheng, as *boundary-dissolving*. From a homiletical standpoint, Craddock seeks to dissolve boundaries through narrative style and inductive method. While there is some debate about how successful Craddock is in this endeavor, his concern for boundary dissolution makes his work a helpful homiletic conversation partner with Cheng's work.

Reading Craddock through the lens of Cheng, then, will reveal these two scholars' shared concern for eliminating barriers that inhibit human experiences of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Interpreting Craddock in light of Cheng's work will illuminate the ways in which Craddock's homiletic encompasses what Cheng identifies as a hallmark of queer theology: dissolving boundaries. Cheng's work is particularly suitable for this endeavor because his identity as a queer person of color allows him to address some significant oversights in Craddock's work; thus, this study will offer renewed perspective on Craddock's work and provide a foundation on which to build a future queer homiletic.²

The next portion of this introduction will offer an overview of queer homiletics located within conversations about queer theology and homiletics since 1970, the time of

² Two other of Cheng's books, which will not be considered here, are invaluable in the consideration of a queer homiletic. They are *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012), which explores Christ-centered models of the doctrines of sin and grace in response to the experiences of members of the queer community, and *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013), which highlights the voices of queer people of color in order to discover how they impact Christian theology.

Craddock's first major publication. It will also offer brief reflections on how each contribution to the conversation speaks to the theme of boundary dissolution.

Queer Homiletics from Craddock to Today

To begin, it is important to note where queer contributions to the field of homiletics have not been discussed. One prominent place is O.C. Edwards's extensive volume *A History of Preaching*, which does not consider elements of queer theology or queer voices in homiletics at all.³ Although it is an extremely beneficial contribution to the field in many ways, Edwards's work largely focuses on the homiletical influence of straight white men. As such, it represents the kind of myopia that must be overcome in order to expand the diversity of underrepresented voices, including the many important African American voices that Edwards also neglects. While Edwards does not completely avoid issues that affect the gay and lesbian community—he refers to the gay rights movement, beginning with the Stonewall riots in 1969, as evidence of an evolving sexual revolution on which prophetic voices like William Sloane Coffin preached effectively⁴—his biases are evidence of the need for continued evolution in the field, particularly where queer voices are concerned.

Perhaps the most comprehensive scholarly work specifically addressing queer homiletics is Olive Hinnant's book *God Comes Out: A Queer Homiletic*, in which she argues that one of the ways that God reveals Godself, or "comes out," is through the embodied reality of the queer preacher. Hinnant writes that anytime an "out" clergy

³ O.C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 734, 739.

person preaches God's Word, something of God is revealed in the nature of that person.⁵ Just as when a woman or a person of color preaches and their gender or race reveals something about God, so, too, does a preacher's sexuality. According to Hinnant, while the preacher's sexuality is not the central point of the preaching event, the preacher's God-given identity—including their sexuality—does play a role in their preaching.⁶ Hinnant compares the preacher's revelation of their queerness to the "coming out" experience. When the preacher comes out, a closet door opens, she says, to reveal "a gay God who longs to be welcomed into full communion."⁷ Her analysis points to the incarnational nature of preaching, wherein something about God's nature is revealed in the flesh of the preacher, just as it was in Jesus' flesh.

Jacob Myers's brief introductory essay in volume 19 of *Theology & Sexuality* points to several discussions involving queerness and homiletics.⁸ In particular, the first issue of the volume fosters and supports far-reaching discussions of preaching and human sexuality in order to close a gap that has existed far too long between preaching and the human body.⁹

In the issue, Carolyn Browning Helsel discusses how straight preachers can effectively approach queer issues through a lens of transformation rather than

⁵ Olive Hinnant, *God Comes Out: A Queer Homiletic* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 168.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jacob Myers, "Mind the Gap: Homiletics and Human Sexuality," *Theology & Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2013): 3-10. For a discussion of possible methods of sermon development and delivery based on French cultural critique and philosophy, see Myers's "The Erotic Approach: Homiletical Insights from the Work of Georges Bataille," *Theology & Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2013): 36-48.

⁹ Myers, "Mind the Gap," 3.

compassion.¹⁰ Helsel identifies compassion as the straight preacher's common reason for speaking out against heteronormativity and queerphobia, but finds this problematic.¹¹

While she recognizes compassion as a worthwhile and well-meaning motivator for the support of marginalized queer voices, she ultimately labels it as misguided, because such good intentions only preserve the dichotomy between an in-group and an out-group.¹²

By preaching out of compassion, Helsel argues, straight preachers foster the assumption that there exist certain boundaries between groups and that those boundaries will always serve to exclude. Helsel suggests that a better motivation for queering straight preaching should be born out of a celebration of, and gratitude for, the queerness within Christianity and its people, congregations, scriptural texts, and worship.¹³ She writes, "Rather than being motivated by a desire to 'help' 'them,' queer preaching arises out of a celebration of queerness in our midst, sensing the Spirit of God that continues to queer our categories and understandings of God."¹⁴ Although Helsel's exploration of the theme of boundary dissolution is directed at straight preachers, by naming the erasure of exclusionary boundaries as a component of queering preaching, her article supports the theme of this project and calls attention to the need for further investigation.

¹⁰ Carolyn Browning Helsel, "Queering 'Straight' Preaching: Between a Why and a How through the Hermeneutic of (Mis)Recognition," *Theology & Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2013): 11-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13. Queerphobia can be defined as a fear or hatred of people who identify as queer. This includes, but is not limited to, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender nonbinary, intersex, or asexual. It may also include those who are in a process of questioning their sexuality, do not conform to traditional gender norms, or who remain in close allyship with the queer community.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Following Helsel's article in the same issue, Gerald Liu examines how preaching about human sexuality informs a Christian understanding of sexual identities. Liu argues that in order to speak knowledgeably about the expansiveness of human sexuality, Christian preachers must realize that they are inheritors of a homiletical tradition that casts sexuality in rigid homiletical categories like fornication and homosexuality.¹⁵ He says that preachers must reexamine this tradition by considering how generic ways of speaking about sex and gender might reinforce binary thinking that conceptualizes the world only in terms of black versus white or heterosexual versus homosexual.¹⁶

Liu suggests that preachers expand their minds beyond binary thinking by seeking information and advice from people with varying sexual identities, and even encouraging some of those people to preach in order to see firsthand how their identity "fit[s] within the arc of the Good News."¹⁷ Boundary dissolution is inherent to Liu's attempt to transform Christian thinking around sexuality through homiletics, especially in the way that he seeks to combat the rigid categorization of binary thinking around matters of sex and sexuality. However, Liu does not attempt to locate boundary-dissolving characteristics at the heart of a queer homiletic; rather, he treats boundary dissolution as a tangential benefit.

Likewise, pastoral theologian Cody Sanders's contribution to this volume of *Theology & Sexuality* argues that the persistence of microaggressions from the pulpit

¹⁵ Gerald Liu, "Porneia, Homosexuality, and the Need for Homiletic Evolution," *Theology & Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2013): 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

undermines the messages of well-meaning preachers.¹⁸ By exploring how subtly aggressive speech acts are often perpetuated against queer people (even in otherwise welcoming congregations), Sanders advocates for enhanced scrutiny of pulpit discourse in order to understand and identify microaggressions so that preachers can avoid making these subtle, yet harmful, mistakes.¹⁹ He identifies the homiletics classroom as a suitable starting place for these endeavors, and argues for a more critical approach to listening to sermons with the specific purpose of correcting these often-unnoticed offenses.²⁰ Such an approach can be seen as an attempt to address a boundary that exists between the listener and the sermon's content, a boundary that is in this case perpetuated by microaggressions. That said, while Sanders's focus on combating microaggressions is important, it is not an attempt to establish a queer homiletic defined by its ability to dissolve boundaries.

Similarly, Emily Askew and O. Wesley Allen's 2015 text, *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit*, offers a comprehensive discussion of how progressive preachers can attempt to preach about issues of human sexuality in ways that are inoffensive to both those who agree and those who might not agree.²¹ The authors identify ways in which

¹⁸ Cody J. Sanders, "Preaching Messages We Never Intended: LGBTQ-based Microaggressions in Classroom and Pulpit," *Theology & Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2013): 21-22.

¹⁹ Ibid. 21-35. Microaggressions are unintentional yet harmful messages communicated verbally, behaviorally, or environmentally. A microaggression might communicate insensitivity or rudeness in the form of a *microinsult*, such as the juxtaposition of "Christians" and "queer" persons as though the two groups are antithetical to one another. A microaggression might also negate or invalidate the experiences of a particular group through a *microinvalidation*, such as the use of terminology to describe persons with queer identities that the queer community does not generally accept, such as "homosexual" instead of gay or "hermaphrodite" instead of intersex.

²⁰ Ibid., 31-34.

²¹ Emily Askew and O. Wesley Allen, *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

preachers may recognize heterosexism's existence in the pulpit, and offer strategies for counteracting heterosexism while maintaining pastoral responsibility to members of the congregation who might "disagree" with homosexuality. For instance, they explore appropriate homiletical responses to instances of discrimination in the community, and offer means by which clergy might avoid heterosexism in liturgical contexts such as weddings and funerals, where family dynamics and emotions may be complicated.²²

In a different issue of *Theology & Sexuality*, Ken Stone advocates for the usefulness of queer readings of Scripture to various practices of Christian ministry, including preaching, by considering biblical writings that contain claims that would challenge their audience's understanding of their religious tradition.²³ For example, he examines Qohelet as part of a larger Wisdom tradition, a tradition which often taught that wise and righteous living would lead to the reaping of benefits. However, according to Stone, Qohelet challenges that assumption by stating instead that the wise often struggle, while those considered wicked lead comfortable lives. In fact, Stone writes, Qohelet even claims that attending moderately to one's virtues *and* one's vices is sometimes necessary.²⁴

For Stone, this queer examination of Qohelet demonstrates that there are biblical precedents for challenging certain commonly-held beliefs about the traditional practice of Christian ministry. He argues that queer readings of Scripture can serve to challenge worn-out approaches that result from blind adherence to misguided aspects of the

²² Askew and Allen, 79-129.

²³ Ken Stone, "Do Not Be Conformed to This World": Queer Reading and the Task of the Preacher," *Theology and Sexuality* 13, no. 2 (2007): 153, 157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156-57.

tradition.²⁵ Likewise, he demonstrates that queer thought often provides the same service regarding commonly-held ideas about sex and gender. For example, queer thought challenges the notion that binary categories such as male and female are sufficient for human definition and identification. In fact, Stone argues, binary categories create boundaries that shield people from the reality that their differences are much more complex than those categories allow.²⁶ Therefore, reading the Bible through a queer lens can promote interpretation and proclamation that would dissolve such boundaries and promote a more authentic exploration of the complex human nature.²⁷

Christine Smith joins Olive Hinnant in offering a lesbian point of view, positing that Christian preaching is affected by “too many generalizations, universal claims, and assumed truths put forth by voices of power and privilege.”²⁸ She suggests that this type of preaching perpetuates domination over oppressed groups, and urges preachers to recognize the diverse nature of their particular communities by taking stock of how their own social location influences their messages.²⁹ Smith’s work highlights the diversity of opinions that exist among the queer (and ally) communities regarding appropriate advocacy for justice in the church and society, with opinions ranging from pursuing

²⁵ Stone, “Do Not Be Conformed,” 155-57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁷ For further evidence of the of exploration of biblical thought outside the traditional fixed concepts of binary identity see Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006); Ken Stone, ed., *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001); and Robert E. Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

²⁸ Christine M. Smith, “A Lesbian Perspective: Moving Toward a Promised Place,” in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine M. Smith (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 134.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

equal rights under existing structures to completely transforming existing power structures.³⁰

Outline of Chapters

While the preceding survey of literature has offered evidence of the lack of queer perspectives in the field of homiletics, it has also shown evidence of the sincere and fruitful engagement in the conversation so far by those who have undertaken this work. Both of these findings establish the need for continued and increased attention to this important scholarly arena. To that end, the first chapter of this thesis will turn to Patrick Cheng's work in queer theology, which Cheng identifies as the meeting place of Christian theology and queer theory. The chapter will also examine Cheng's arguments for a queer theology based on God's radical, boundary-dissolving love, and will locate these arguments within the broader discussion of queer theory and Christian theology.

The second chapter will examine the claims that Fred Craddock makes in his book *Overhearing the Gospel*, in which he argues, by way of Søren Kierkegaard, that there are certain boundaries that inhibit the effective transmission of the gospel, which Kierkegaard refers to as "illusions." Craddock identifies these illusions as creating problematic distance between subject matter and style, the listener and the message, and the speaker and the message, as well as boundaries of distance and participation that exist within the gospel message itself.³¹ While the second chapter's argument will center on *Overhearing the Gospel*, it will also incorporate other of Craddock's key works and situate them within a broader homiletical conversation by examining his shortcomings,

³⁰ Smith, "A Lesbian Perspective," 136-137.

³¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 9, 16, 32, 37, 49.

and how scholars have addressed them, as well as investigating how his work is being adapted today.

The third chapter will integrate the work of Cheng and Craddock. By drawing out connecting points and spelling out homiletic implications, this chapter will articulate theses for a queer, boundary-dissolving homiletic. Putting Cheng and Craddock in conversation will demonstrate how both authors are inviting us to do similar work: dissolve boundaries. While one scholar approaches this as a twenty-first century queer theologian and the other as a twentieth century straight homiletician, the comparison will demonstrate that they are worthy conversation partners through the conclusions drawn from this analysis, including that the diminution of boundaries is an important principle in queer homiletics.

Finally, a brief conclusion will offer a summation of the main ideas of this thesis, highlighting the common threads between the work of the two authors, and pointing toward potential research questions and implications for the field of homiletics, both now and in the future.

Before proceeding with this study in earnest, it is fitting to pause and acknowledge that this undertaking is one that cannot help but be influenced by the author's social location. My identity as a gay, white, Episcopalian male, will certainly influence my perspective. While my goal is not to privilege certain perspectives over others, I cannot in these limited pages represent the totality of the immense diversity of thought that exists within the queer community. My goal is simply to contribute to the larger conversation surrounding queer theology and homiletics, a conversation which I hope will continue to grow, expand, and thrive.

Chapter 1

Patrick Cheng and Boundary Dissolution in Queer Theology

The goal of this chapter is to explain Patrick Cheng's understanding of queer theology and to locate it within the larger discussion of queer theory and queer theology. What follows is an overview of Cheng's understanding of queer theology, which he locates at the intersection of queer theory and Christian theology. By interpreting queer theology through the lens of God's "radical love," Cheng defines queer theology in terms of its ability to dissolve boundaries, including the boundary between queer theory and Christian theology. However, before turning to Cheng's work, a brief synopsis of the evolution of queer theology leading up to Cheng is in order.

Queer Theology Before Cheng

Cheng's categorical framework for analyzing the work that predates his own is a helpful means by which to consider such an important body of work. Cheng identifies four (roughly chronological) strands of queer theology in order to describe the general trends of scholarship that predate him. They are *apologetic theology*, *liberation theology*, *relational theology*, and *queer theology* proper.¹ While these categories are not mutually exclusive, they nevertheless provide a useful schema by which to examine a diverse field.

Cheng recognizes the first strand of queer-oriented theology as an **apologetic theology**. It is primarily concerned with validating the lifestyles of faithful gay and lesbian Christians. Apologetic theology's chief purpose was to reassure gays and lesbians that they did not need to change their sexuality in order to be accepted by God or the

¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 26.

church.² Among the first to write on this topic was the Anglican priest Derrick Sherwin Bailey, whose 1955 book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* examined the church's views of homosexuality throughout history. Bailey understood homosexuality to be "unalterable" rather than the choice of the individual. Therefore, he argued, the church's exclusion of gay people should not be tolerated.³

In 1960, Robert Wood, an openly gay Congregationalist minister, published *Christ and the Homosexual (Some Observations)*. Wood encouraged the church at large to rethink its stance on homosexuality, and to show acts of love toward gay and lesbian persons. Later in the same decade, the YMCA published a book seeking to present an "unbiased understanding" of homosexuality.⁴ Norman Pittenger, an Anglican process theologian, followed with a booklet entitled *Time for Consent? A Christian's Approach to Homosexuality*, which urged the church to "alter its attitude toward homosexuals."⁵

Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott published *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response* in 1978, arguing for Christian acceptance of gays and lesbians based on Jesus' acceptance of the outcasts of his day.⁶ John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, published in 1980, included historical arguments for accepting homosexuality in the church. The church's

² Cheng, 27.

³ Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955), 168, 173.

⁴ H. Kimball Jones, *Toward a Christian Understanding of the Homosexual* (New York: Association Press, 1966), 11.

⁵ Norman Pittenger, *Time for Consent? A Christian's Approach to Homosexuality* (London: SCM Press, 1976), vii.

⁶ Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

condemnation of homosexual acts, he said, was not widespread until the late middle ages, and thus was not a cornerstone of the faith but rather an adaption that could, and should, be reversed.⁷

Cheng identifies gay **liberation theology** as a second strand in the evolution of queer theology. Like Latin American and black liberation theologies, queer liberation theology identified freedom from oppression as the heart of the gospel message.⁸ Gay liberation theologies focus on freedom from heterosexism and homophobia, relating them to events in salvation history, such as the Exodus narrative.

As an example, *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*, a collection of essays on liberation themes, discussed, among other things, the necessary relationship between Christian liberation and gay liberation.⁹ Likewise, George Edwards's *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective*, published in 1984, employed arguments from biblical theology to support the liberation of gays and lesbians.¹⁰ A decade later, Richard Cleaver, in *Know My Name: A Gay Liberation Theology*, asserted that only direct participation by non-expert gays and lesbians in the creation of liberation theology could lead to such a theology truly freeing the community.¹¹ In other words, true liberation, he said, depended

⁷ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 301-2.

⁸ Cheng, 30.

⁹ Giles Hibbert, "Gay Liberation in Relation to Christian Liberation," in *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*, ed. Malcolm Macourt (London: SCM Press, 1977), 91.

¹⁰ George R. Edwards, *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984).

¹¹ Richard Cleaver, *Know My Name: A Gay Liberation Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 12.

on personal queer engagement rather than the mere consumption of work developed by experts in the field.

The third evolutionary strand of queer theology that Cheng identifies is **relational theology**, which was primarily developed by lesbian theologians in response to a dearth of queer-oriented theology relating to women's issues. Cheng defines relational theology as theology focused on finding God in the midst of a relationship with another person.¹² Carter Heyward's *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* represents a milestone in relational theological thought. Following Audre Lorde,¹³ Heyward argues that the erotic is sacred because God, instead of existing outside of sex or gender, is "immersed" in "gendered and erotic particularities" and found in the relationship that women have with their bodies and the natural world.¹⁴ Also in the realm of relational theology is Mary Hunt and Elizabeth Stuart's work on the theology of friendship, in which they locate God as abiding in the most intimate of human connections.¹⁵

Some male theologians were also influenced by relational theology. Gary David Comstock argued for friendship as an appropriate relational framework through which to interpret one's relationship with Jesus, particularly over and above seeing Jesus as one's

¹² Cheng, 33.

¹³ See Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed., eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 73-77.

¹⁴ Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), 103.

¹⁵ See Mary Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) and Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (London: Mowbray, 1995).

master.¹⁶ Likewise, Marvin Ellison explored a Christian sexual ethic based on the “godly power of loving body touch.”¹⁷

The fourth and final strand of theology that Cheng locates in the evolution of queer theology is **queer theology** itself. Based on the work of queer theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this strand of theology challenges commonly held views of sexuality and gender identity.¹⁸ Queer theorists specifically reject the notion that sexuality and gender identity are fixed, essentialist concepts, favoring instead their definition as constructed concepts resulting from societal discourse. Cheng’s own words best describe this current evolutionary strand of queer thought:

A constructivist view of sexuality and gender identity doesn’t deny the fact that there are individuals who are born with same-sex attractions and/or gender variant identities and who remain that way throughout their lives. It does mean, however, that the cultural meaning and significance of such sexual attractions and gender expressions are fluid depending upon a particular time and place.¹⁹

Queer theologies are important not only because they expand beyond a lesbian/gay binary to include bisexual and transgender theologies, but because in doing so, they attempt to deconstruct common understandings of human binaries in favor of more fluid perspectives of sex and gender, such as might better be described as points along a spectrum or continuum.²⁰ While Cheng’s own theology is located in this strand of

¹⁶ See Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology Without Apology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1993).

¹⁷ Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 120.

¹⁸ Cheng, 35. See also Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Judith Butler, “Critically Queer” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald Hall and Annamarie Jagose (London: Routledge, 2013), 18-31; and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

¹⁹ Cheng, 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

queer theology proper, efforts to challenge prevailing cultural and theological ideas about the essentialist nature of sexuality and gender identity can be traced back nearly fifty years to Mary Daly's 1973 text, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Daly argued that the harmful nature of the heterosexual-homosexual binary was primarily based on its patriarchal origins and its reinforcement of destructive sex roles within relationships.²¹ In other words, because fixed categories such as *heterosexual* and *homosexual* define a person based on the sex or gender of their partner, Daly deemed them superficial and labeled "homosexual" as a term of intimidation used to exclude anyone who dare to deviate from common psychological norms.²²

In the decades following Daly's publication, discussions of queer theory have become more integrated into queer theology. Robert Shore-Goss's *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* is based on queer theory, although, as Cheng notes, it does not escape the narrower view of lesbian and gay identity.²³ However, by the late 1990s, Mark Jordan's *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* more fully employed insights from queer theory in order to warn readers against the shortcomings of the lesbian/gay dichotomy and the negative impacts that accompany the tribal mindsets it reinforces.²⁴

²¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 24-27.

²² *Ibid.*, 27.

²³ Cheng, 37. See Robert E. Shore-Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

²⁴ Mark Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 163.

Another prominent voice in this strand of queer theology is Marcella Althaus-Reid, who has a reputation as a particularly shocking queer theologian, with many readers arguing that her book *Indecent Theology* fully lives up to its name.²⁵ In her work, Althaus-Reid discusses French-kissing God and wearing corset-laced leather boots to do theology. Her work paved the way for other cutting-edge publications such as Shore-Goss's *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*, which offers a more definitive treatment of the relationship between queer theory and queer theology than his earlier work.²⁶ Likewise, Elizabeth Stuart's *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* presents a more comprehensive history of LGBT theology, and Gerard Loughlin's edited collection, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, contributes to knowledge of the intersection of queer theory and Christian theology.²⁷ Additionally, over the past two decades, scholarship speaking directly about transgender identities and relationships, including the problematic male/female binary, has become more widely available.²⁸

Cheng's Queer Theology

Having situated Cheng within the context of the larger scholarly conversation on queer theology by examining relevant works that came before him, it is appropriate to

²⁵ See Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²⁶ See Robert Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

²⁷ See Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003) and Gerard Loughlin, ed. *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

²⁸ For scholarship specific to the transgender experience, see Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *Trans/formations* (London: SCM Press, 2009) and Leanne McCall Tigert and Maren C. Tirabisi, eds., *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004).

turn now to an examination of Cheng's own contributions to the field. Cheng lays out his understanding of queer theology using the Trinitarian framework of the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed. Following this creedal model, he organizes his chapters by the doctrines of the three persons of the Trinity. First, he discusses God, the "sending forth of radical love;" then, Jesus Christ, the "recovery of radical love;" and finally, the Holy Spirit, the "return to radical love."

Cheng begins by defining theology as "talk about God," and, if only for simplicity's sake, labels queer theology as "queer talk about God."²⁹ However, definition of the word "queer" requires explanation: while the word itself may be difficult for some people to hear, given its all-too-frequent use as a derogatory term, Cheng notes that it has been adopted by many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) members of the academic community to label their perspectives in an attempt to reclaim the word from its negative connotations.³⁰

Cheng defines the word "queer" in three ways. First, he says, the word is often used as an umbrella term to describe members of marginalized sexual orientations or gender identities. Second, the use of the word can be viewed as a transgressive act in and of itself, especially when it is used as a verb.³¹ For instance, "to queer" something is to engage with a methodology that challenges traditional authority and interrupts blind adherence to the status quo in favor of recovering and empowering marginalized voices.³²

²⁹ Cheng, 2.

³⁰ Ibid. For further discussion, see Carter Heyward, "We're Here, We're Queer: Teaching Sex in Seminary," in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 78-96.

³¹ Cheng, 6.

³² Ibid.

Third, as in the final strand of queer theology, queerness can be defined in light of queer theory, which, as stated above, challenges traditional ideas about the binary nature of sex and gender. In other words, the underlying theory of this discipline is “queer” because it attempts to deconstruct boundaries between rigid binary categories such as gay and straight, or male and female, which theorists like Foucault and Butler have identified as social constructs rather than unalterable facts of human existence. They deem such categories as social constructions largely because they define a person’s identity solely in regard to certain sexual acts in which they participate.³³ Furthermore, these scholars consider the classification of a minority group based on a specific set of actions as problematic because such a classification is arbitrary, and in fact no more telling, as Cheng points out, than a person’s “hat size or preferred brand of soda.”³⁴ While it is true that a group of people seeking legal rights or political power might benefit from highlighting certain essentialist characteristics, it is ultimately problematic because it is through such essentialist categorizations that societal forces maintain power and control over minority groups.³⁵

After establishing theology as talk about God, Cheng presents three working definitions of the word queer. They are (1) an overarching term for those in an LGBT community, (2) a term that identifies transgressive action taken in order to subvert the

³³ Cheng, 6-8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

status quo, and (3) a mechanism by which to erase boundaries around rigidly-constructed social categories.³⁶ Next, Cheng offers three possible definitions for “queer theology.”

First, he says, queer theology can mean talk about God by and for members of the LGBT community. Any theological perspectives written by or for individuals who identify on this spectrum might be considered examples of this “umbrella” definition.³⁷ Second, queer theology can mean talking about God in an effort to transgress society’s commonly accepted gender and sexuality norms. Cheng contextualizes this definition with the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song about a God who humbles the mighty and exalts the lowly.³⁸ He further identifies this definition with the work of scholars like Marcella Althaus-Reid, due to the provocative language and imagery that she uses to provoke seemingly unimaginable theological perspectives.³⁹

Third, Cheng defines queer theology as talk about God that seeks to dissolve boundaries. It is this definition of queer theology that joins queer theory’s critique of the socially constructed binary categories discussed above, such as sexual orientation and gender identity, to Christian theological concepts. Cheng argues that Christian theology itself is queer because it challenges and deconstructs binary categories that seem unchangeable, such as life and death, or human and divine.⁴⁰ Cheng states his

³⁶ Cheng, 9.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁹ Ibid., 9-10. See also Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*; and Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴⁰ Cheng, 10.

understanding of a queer theology that dissolves conventional human understandings of common binary categories:

Christian theology is fundamentally a queer enterprise because it focuses upon the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Jesus Christ, all of which are events that turn upside down our traditional understanding of life and death, divine and human, center and margins, beginnings and endings, infinite and finite, and punishment and forgiveness. As with the case of queer theory, it is in Jesus Christ that all of these seemingly fixed binary categories are ultimately challenged and collapsed.⁴¹

According to Cheng, “radical love” is the mechanism by which the boundaries of binary thinking are dissolved. He defines radical love as “a love so extreme that it dissolves existing human boundaries, whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God.”⁴² Cheng believes that such radical, boundary-dissolving love lies at the heart of, and connects, both Christian theology and queer theory. Radical love lies at the heart of Christian theology because Jesus’ incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension eradicate human-conceived dichotomies between life and death, time and eternity, and the human and the divine.⁴³ Likewise, radical love exists at the heart of queer theory because queer theory challenges perceived boundaries with respect to sexuality and gender identity, revealing them to be social constructions rather than essentialist, or fixed, concepts.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Cheng, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, x.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4. Cheng does not understand radical love as an excuse to reject laws or societal and ethical norms. Rather, he invokes St. Paul’s definition of love in 1 Cor. 13:4-5 as patient and kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. Such a notion of radical love invokes sane and safe behavior that is consensual, and never exploitative or violent.

Having now examined Cheng's helpful frameworks for tracing queer theology's historical evolution and having explored its definition, it is fitting to discuss the substantive doctrines of Cheng's queer theology. However, before continuing, it is worth pausing briefly to note that Cheng understands queer theology, like other types of theology, as drawing on four principal sources: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.⁴⁵ Cheng believes that responsible theology is the result of a synthesis of these four sources, and he considers each of them best understood with due respect to the influence of the other three. Although different Christian traditions have given rise to a diverse range of believers who weigh each source differently,⁴⁶ each source impacts the following examination of Cheng's queer theology.

Radical, Boundary-Dissolving Love

As previously stated, Cheng uses a Trinitarian framework to explore his understanding of queer theology based on the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. As such, his chapters are organized relative to the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He defines an aspect of God as "the sending forth of radical love," Jesus Christ as, "the recovery of radical love," and the Holy Spirit as "the return to radical love."

God: Sending Forth Radical Love

Cheng defines radical love as a love so extreme that it breaks down existing boundaries. According to Cheng, not only is God the definition of such love, but God is continually sending forth that love. Cheng considers God as the sending forth of radical

⁴⁵ Cheng, 11.

⁴⁶ See Cheng, 11-22 for a brief examination of how these four sources of theology are weighted by different Christian traditions and examples of queer theologies that stem from each source.

love by examining four classical theological doctrines of God: (1) revelation, by which God “comes out” as radical love; (2) God (the first person of the Trinity) who is radical love itself; (3) God (the Trinity) which is an internal community of radical love; and (4) creation, which is God’s outpouring of radical love.⁴⁷

The first way in which God sends forth radical love is through divine **revelation**.⁴⁸ Christians traditionally claim to have knowledge of who God is by several means of revelation, two of which are Scripture and reason. As the word of God passed down from generation to generation, Scripture plays a sacred role in a Christian’s relationship with God, but it does not stand alone. For example, Christians believe that the world around them is the handiwork of God not only because Genesis chronicles God’s creation of the universe, but also based on their ability to reason. Furthermore, by observing the natural world, one may discern the basic principle of cause and effect. If every effect has a cause, then, by working backward, one might wonder about the origin of the very first cause and ultimately identify that cause as God.⁴⁹

Cheng adds experience as a central tenant of queer theology’s discussion of revelation. Based on queer experience, Cheng argues that, through revelation, God “comes out” as radical love.⁵⁰ In other words, God’s revelation is self-disclosure akin to the coming out process by which queer persons reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity to another. Much in the way that the boundary between a queer person and

⁴⁷ Cheng, 44-67.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 44-45.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

another is dissolved when the queer person comes out, by reaching toward humanity in revelation, God dissolves the boundary between the human and the divine.⁵¹

Cheng also identifies God's revelation as evidence of radical love because it dissolves the boundary between the powerful and the weak.⁵² By "coming out" as a vulnerable infant and a mendicant preacher, God dissolves the boundary between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak. By eating with tax collectors and touching the unclean, God brings together society's most privileged and most reviled. Likewise, God's revelation dissolves boundaries between knowing and unknowing.⁵³ According to the principles of apophatic theology, God can never fully be known. However, God does reveal certain things about Godself to humanity. In this way, a relationship with God is analogous to a relationship with a childhood friend who comes out as transgender, thereby dissolving the boundary between what is known and unknown.⁵⁴ Cheng also suggests that perhaps the queerest conceptualization of God is as "radically unknowable." That is, like queerness itself, God cannot be defined in positive terms, but only by what God is not.⁵⁵

Next, Cheng considers God, **the first person of the Trinity**, as radical love itself. As queer people dissolve boundaries between fixed categories such as male and female or heterosexual and homosexual, God's radical love dissolves boundaries between the

⁵¹ Cheng, 46.

⁵² Ibid., 46-47.

⁵³ Ibid., 47-48.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 54-55

categories of humanity and divinity and life and death.⁵⁶ One way that Cheng explores this boundary dissolution is through Elizabeth Stuart's notion of *parody*. Stuart defines parody not merely as identical repetition, but as an "extended repetition with a critical difference" that in some way "freshly embodies" the subject.⁵⁷ For instance, queer theologian Theodore Jennings parodies God's omnipotent nature by superimposing queer sexual roles onto God and King David, suggesting that God can be viewed as "top" in a homosexual relationship. God's dominant sexual role is analogous to YHWH's relationship with David (and by extension Israel) in which YHWH is seen as a warrior chief and David as his companion.⁵⁸

Another way Cheng interprets God as radical love is as a divine performer in a drag show. According to Cheng, viewing God in drag dissolves "the boundaries that prevent us from rethinking God's divine attributes in queer ways."⁵⁹ For some, the all-powerful attributes of God, such as omniscience and omnipotence, hinder a queer understanding of God. For instance, theologian Robert Williams has asked why an all-knowing, all-powerful God would allow the suffering of HIV/AIDS to persist.⁶⁰ In light of this question, Cheng suggests thinking of God's attributes as performative, much like queer theory's interpretation of gender, rather than as essential to God's being.⁶¹ In other

⁵⁶ Cheng, 51.

⁵⁷ See Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies*, 108.

⁵⁸ Cheng, 52; see also Theodore W. Jennings, "YHWH as Erastes," in Stone, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, 36-74.

⁵⁹ Cheng, 53.

⁶⁰ Robert Williams, *Just as I Am: A Practical Guide to Being Out, Proud, and Christian* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 100.

⁶¹ Cheng, 54.

words, like a drag queen or king, God preforms omnipotence, but omnipotence is not a fixed characteristic of God.⁶²

Cheng continues his discussion of God as the sending forth of radical love with the doctrine of the **Trinity**, which he identifies as an internal community of radical love.⁶³ Through radical love, the Trinity breaks down boundaries between sexual and non-sexual relationships. To explain how, Cheng relies on Elizabeth Stuart's argument that the Trinity represents "passionate friendship."⁶⁴ Stuart argues that passionate friendship is consistent with the ideals of ancient Christians who emphasized their connection in the body of Christ over their biological family connections. Such friendship is modeled on the *perichoresis*, often conceptualized as a type of divine dance, of the three persons of the Godhead, which represents a community of deeply intertwined, passionate friends. As members of the body of Christ on earth, Stuart says that Christians are included in this divine, Trinitarian dance. By virtue of their inclusion, Christians are a part of the community of passionate friendship, a community which renders the boundary between sexual relationships (which the church has long permitted only between married heterosexuals) and non-sexual relationships (which are available to members of all genders) artificial.⁶⁵

⁶² Indeed, although omnipotence and omniscience have become theological labels laid upon God, Scripture itself does raise questions about these attributes. For instance, Gen. 18:16-33 depicts God as responsive to Abraham's requests regarding the fate of Sodom and Gomorra. Likewise, in Exod. 32:11-14, God yields to Moses' argument concerning the harm that God plans to bring upon the people of Israel. Both of these passages point not to an all-knowing God, but rather to a God whose actions are affected by engagement with other characters in the story.

⁶³ Cheng, 56-61.

⁶⁴ See Stuart, *Just Good Friends*, 240-44.

⁶⁵ Cheng, 57.

Cheng also references Gavin D’Costa, who understands the relational nature of the Trinity based on Hans von Balthasar’s conception of each person of the Trinity as pure act and pure receptivity. If each person both gives and receives the nature of God, then each of them can be considered masculine and feminine in their divine sexual nature.⁶⁶ Such a view is in keeping with a performative understanding of gender and sexual identity, and it sanctions sexual relationships in which one or more person identifies as transgender or “versatile” (both a “top” and a “bottom”) as long as the relationship represents an overflowing of love to the wider community.⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Cheng explains Althaus-Reid’s conceptualization of the Trinity as a polyamorous being, reflecting the nature of its three-way relationship.⁶⁸ Understanding the Trinity as a divine orgy dissolves the boundaries between binary sexuality and gender as well as pair-bonded, monogamous relationships.⁶⁹ Such a depiction of God represents a multitude of human sexualities, including those expressed within polyamorous relationships.⁷⁰

Next, Cheng identifies the doctrine of **creation** as God’s outpouring of radical love. Having just established the Trinity’s inherently relational essence, it is clear that God did not need to create the universe in order to fulfill God’s own need for community, but rather that doing so was God’s choice.⁷¹ Cheng recognizes this choice as further

⁶⁶ See Gavin D’Costa, “Queer Trinity,” in Loughlin, *Queer Theology*, 272-79.

⁶⁷ Cheng, 58.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ See Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 57-59.

⁷⁰ Cheng, 59.

⁷¹ Ibid., 62.

evidence of God’s radical, boundary-dissolving love. In creation, God dissolves the dualism of the flesh and the Spirit. By separating mind and spirit, some throughout history have demonized the flesh, favoring instead the Platonic view that the spirit’s abstract form is part of a “higher” world over and above bodily reality. For the most part, Christians have rejected this view, instead believing that God created the world *ex nihilo*, or, out of nothing.⁷² Therefore, since everything that God created—or simply, *everything*—is good, then humans, including their sexuality and gender identity, share in creation as members of the body of Christ, to whom all creation belongs.

If all people are sharers in the created order through the body of Christ, then a further unhelpful binary is dissolved: that of humanity and creation. Understanding queer Christians as full members of the created order is important not only because it affirms different sexualities and gender identities, but because it is a reminder that not only are all people stewards of creation’s diversity, but that each person is the created result of the erotic nature of the cosmos. Joining plants, animals, and natural resources, all of God’s children take their place as members of the same body that was once birthed and yet still is birthing creation into being through an “evolutionary cosmic orgy.”⁷³

Jesus Christ: Recovering Radical Love

Next, Cheng examines the inherent queerness of the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, whom he identifies as the one who recovers radical love for queer people.⁷⁴ Cheng understands the doctrine of sin as the human rejection of God’s

⁷² Cheng, 63.

⁷³ Donald L. Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 179.

⁷⁴ Cheng, 70.

radical, boundary-dissolving love, Jesus as radical love's embodiment, and the doctrine of atonement as the way in which creation is reconciled to God's radical love.⁷⁵

To begin, Cheng examines the doctrine of **sin**. Many queer people have been called sinners for their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. However, a legalistic view of sin, i.e., "If you break God's law, you will be punished" is reassuring even to some queer theologians.⁷⁶ It is reassuring because it dissolves its own sort of false boundary, that is, one between good people and bad people. In light of St. Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of "original sin"—that sin has been passed down generation to generation through sexual intercourse ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—no one is exempt from sin. Thus, if everyone is touched by sin, and everyone breaks God's law, then there is no special damnation for queer persons; they are not a special kind of sinner.

Cheng proposes that sin is better understood as the rejection of radical love. Rejecting God's radical love reinforces the boundaries that radical love dissolves, especially with regard to sex and gender. By refusing to participate in the dismantling of the rigid categories that define, and divide, humanity, one participates in essentialism, which is to sin.⁷⁷ For example, to reject the experience of bisexual or transgender people because their identities do not coalesce around the fixed categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality or female and male is to reinforce these constructed categories as the only

⁷⁵ Cheng, 70-85, 94-97. See also 87-92 for a discussion on how Jesus' mother Mary is considered the bearer of radical love because of her radical "yes" to God.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

legitimate identities. Cheng argues that only by challenging the essentialist nature of such stubborn binaries can one experience the grace of the One who embodies radical love.⁷⁸

The incarnation is perhaps the most easily identifiable component of the radical nature of Christianity. God loved the world so much that God became flesh in **Jesus Christ**.⁷⁹ Cheng considers Jesus to be the embodiment of boundary dissolution.⁸⁰ In Jesus, humanity and divinity are no longer mutually exclusive categories, but are united as one. In addition to erasing divine boundaries, Jesus also dissolves social, sexual, and gender boundaries as well. As noted above, Jesus' earthly ministry is replete with examples of the dissolution of social boundaries, from his vulnerable infancy to his outcast dinner companions. He touches lepers and converses with social pariahs such as the Samaritan woman at the well. However, Jesus as a sexual-boundary-dissolver may be a bit harder to imagine. Nevertheless, Cheng aids in the effort to do so.

As discussed above, although many might understand categories like "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" to be perfectly natural, queer theorists define them as arbitrary social constructs. Likewise, Jesus' embodiment of radical love eschews binary ways of thinking. Cheng again points to the work of Althaus-Reid, who conceptualizes Jesus as bisexual.⁸¹ She does so not by imagining his sex life, but highlighting his way of life. Jesus, like the notion of bisexuality itself, she says, "rejects

⁷⁸ Cheng, 74.

⁷⁹ John 3:16 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁸⁰ Cheng, 78.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

hierarchical, binary constructive organized thought.”⁸² In other words, by constantly challenging conventional either/or ways of thinking, Jesus embodies bisexuality.⁸³

Just as bisexuality challenges the heterosexual/homosexual binary, transgender discourse challenges the gender-based binary notion of male and female. After all, St. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that “there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁸⁴ Cheng cites the work of Eleanor McLaughlin, who considers Jesus in terms of transvestite culture, which dissolves the boundary between male and female through cross-dressing, thereby “making ambiguous what society tried to define rigidly.”⁸⁵ McLaughlin argues that this is the same kind of boundary-dissolving behavior that Jesus engages in by spending time with the sick and the needy because, like cross-dressing, it challenges essentialist binaries.⁸⁶ In a similar vein, Justin Tanis argues for the transgender nature of Christ. Like a transgender person, Jesus is an outcast who is harassed in public and alienated from his family. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus embodies the reality of a transgender person who undergoes gender reassignment surgery and wakes up both the same and different; a part of them has died, but another is brought to new life.⁸⁷

⁸² Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 114.

⁸³ Cheng, 81.

⁸⁴ Gal. 3:28.

⁸⁵ Cheng, 82.

⁸⁶ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies: Re-Dressing the Tradition,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 139-41

⁸⁷ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theologies, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 142-43.

Cheng also asserts that the doctrine of the **atonement** is crucial to an understanding of the radical love that is at work in Jesus Christ. The atonement, Cheng says, rejects scapegoating and dissolves the boundary between insiders and outsiders.⁸⁸ René Girard describes scapegoating as a process in which competing societal factions erupt in violence that takes on a scapegoat instead of the root of the problem. Those caught up in the system begin to believe that once the scapegoat is eliminated, order will be restored. Jesus, who Girard identifies as the ultimate scapegoat, is sacrificed as an innocent, helpless victim to anger-fueled societal violence.⁸⁹

Thus, as a scapegoat, Jesus identifies with the queer community in a distinct way. Queer people experience scapegoating, both individually and at large. Cheng cites his personal experience of being bullied in elementary school because of his desire to play four-square with girls at recess instead of kickball with other boys.⁹⁰ There is nothing inherently wrong with such an innocent decision, but because others perceived him to be different, they bullied him. Likewise, the queer community is continually scapegoated. As recently as January of 2020, extremist evangelical radio host Rick Wiles blamed the queer communities' efforts to "transgender" children for the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, saying it was God's "death angel" sent as punishment.⁹¹ Although

⁸⁸ Cheng, 94.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 94. For a discussion of the ways in which queer people serve as societal scapegoats, see Chris Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacrament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 20-24.

⁹¹ Jason Lemon, "Christian Pastor Claims Coronavirus is God's 'Death Angel,' Blames Parents 'Transgendering Little Children,'" *Newsweek*, January 28, 2020, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/christian-pastor-claims-coronavirus-gods-death-angel-blames-parents-transgendering-little-1484473>.

scapegoating still exists, in the atonement God offers a divine dissolution of the boundaries that separate in-groups and out-groups.

Holy Spirit: Returning Radical Love

Cheng next turns to his discussion of the Holy Spirit, which he characterizes as the return to God's boundary-dissolving, radical love.⁹² Cheng asserts that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit assists God's people in returning the radical love that God offers to them back to God and their neighbors. Cheng further considers the church as an external community of radical love and the sacraments as a foretaste of radical love.⁹³

Cheng understands the **Holy Spirit** as a sort of divine compass, or GPS, constantly guiding God's people toward their final destination, which is radical love. Cheng understands this destination to be a unification of all creation with God. Similarly, by understanding the Holy Spirit as "gaydar," the innate sense that queer people joke guides them towards other queer people in the room, the Spirit can be seen as an agent in the dissolution of the boundaries that separate God's people from the love of God and their neighbor.⁹⁴

The Spirit also dissolves the boundary between spiritual and sexual desire. Cheng refers to Sarah Coakley's work at the intersection of divine and sexual passion as evidence of the strong connection between spiritual desire for God and sexual desire for another person. Coakley identifies prayer in which one truly cedes control to God as

⁹² Cheng, 100.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 100-13, 120-30. See also 114-19 for Cheng's discussion of the saints, which he identifies as examples of the breaking through of God's radical love, and 131-37 for his consideration of the "last things" as the horizon of radical love.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

analogous to the cessation of control in the throes of sexual passion.⁹⁵ Robert Williams's humorous story of a friend's anonymous tryst serves as an example of the dissolution of a boundary between spiritual and physical passion. In the midst of an intense orgasm, Williams's friend began to engage in "glossolalia," the practice of speaking in tongues. Unable to differentiate between passion for God and passion for another man, he prayed ecstatically and spontaneously while totally unaware.⁹⁶

Once thought mutually exclusive, according to Cheng, one boundary between sexuality and the church was dissolved through the Spirit-led founding of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), a Christian denomination open to all, but "founded by and for LGBT people."⁹⁷ Likewise, the Holy Spirit dissolves boundaries between public and private discourse of sexuality. As Cheng says, dialogue of queer sexual preferences has typically been reserved for times of private conversation. However, openly-gay Roman Catholic theologian James Alison sees the Spirit as a dissolver of the boundary between public and private sexual discourse through the process of coming out of the closet. Alison identifies the Holy Spirit as a gentle presence who comforts queer people as they struggle in solitude, which enables them to confront their feelings of shame in order to be liberated to an honest understanding of themselves.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Sarah Coakley, "Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality," in *The Holy Spirit: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 45.

⁹⁶ Williams, *Just as I Am*, 204.

⁹⁷ Cheng, 103.

⁹⁸ James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 208-13.

Cheng also explores the Holy Spirit's radical love as it pertains to the specific doctrine of the **church**. From its earliest days, he says, the church has been a radical way of being in community because its members are united as the "body of Christ," which embodies radical love by dissolving the boundaries that typically fragment the population such as those between biological families, social classes, physical abilities, races, queerness, nationalities, or political affiliations. Similarly, the unique family groups that many queer people choose, such as friend groups, intimate partners, or even surrogate parents, are church-like communities of radical love in that they represent the dissolution of those same traditional societal boundaries.⁹⁹

Cheng also identifies the radical work of the Holy Spirit in the **sacraments**, which he says dissolves the boundary between present reality and eternal destiny. In this way, the sacraments are a foretaste of an eschatological unification with God's radical love, which Cheng likens to foreplay as a foretaste of sexual pleasure.¹⁰⁰ In his work, Cheng considers both baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments most Protestants identify, as well as the traditional Catholic sacraments of confirmation, reconciliation, matrimony, holy orders, and anointing of the sick. What follows will focus on baptism and the Eucharist.

As the church's initiation rite, in baptism one is traditionally understood to die to one's old life of sin and death and to be born into new life in Christ. Baptism joins Christian initiates to Jesus' death on the cross so that they might be raised with him in

⁹⁹ Cheng, 106. Indeed, many safe spaces, groups, and events within the queer community are described in this way. For example, an attendee at a drag brunch may hear a performer welcome them "to church."

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

glory. Chris Glaser understands the process of coming out as analogous to baptism because in it a queer person dies to their old life and is reborn into a new, more liberated self.¹⁰¹

Elizabeth Stuart locates queerness in baptism because she argues that baptism erases the distinctions of sexuality and gender, along with other identity markers, and instead emphasizes membership in the body of Christ above all.¹⁰² If the theology of baptism is to be taken seriously, then no one can be excluded from the church based on any identity marker, all of which are subsumed by membership in the body of Christ, which, as St. Paul wrote, is every identity marker!¹⁰³ Baptism also serves as a good reminder that no essentialist identity—whether it be gay, straight, black, white, introvert or extrovert—can ultimately define any person.¹⁰⁴

Cheng also sees the Eucharist as a manifestation of radical love because it dissolves boundaries between the binary categories of sex. Pointing again to Elizabeth Stuart, he explores how a traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist can symbolize this. In a traditional setting, the priest wears a chasuble, which is a nongendered garment, and faces eastward, in the same direction as the people, thereby erasing the priest's gender. Additionally, in the consecration, the priest who acts "in the place of Christ," transforms Christ's body into the genderless elements of bread and wine. Furthermore, the assembled body of Christ reflects a diversity of identities, each of

¹⁰¹ Glaser, 12.

¹⁰² Stuart, "Sacramental Flesh," in Loughlin, *Queer Theology*, 67.

¹⁰³ See Gal. 3:28.

¹⁰⁴ See Mark Jordan, "Baptizing Queer Characters," in *Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 163.

which is subsidiary to their identity as members of the body of Christ.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, the Eucharist also anticipates the eschatological life, dissolving not only the boundaries between the earthly categories like male and female, but boundaries between mortal and heavenly realms, as well.

Conclusion

Cheng's queer theology is based on God's radical, boundary-dissolving love. Cheng explains his theology using the Trinitarian framework of the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed. He discusses God, "the sending forth of radical love;" Jesus Christ, "the recovery of radical love;" and the Holy Spirit, "the return to radical love." Cheng says that God "comes out" as radical love through divine revelation; God (the first person of the Trinity) is radical love itself; God (the Trinity) is an internal community of radical love; and that God pours out God's radical love through creation. Cheng describes Jesus as the one who recovers radical love by overcoming sin, which is the human rejection of God's boundary-dissolving love, by embodying radical love in the flesh, and by reconciling creation to God's radical love through his death and resurrection. Cheng characterizes the Holy Spirit as assisting humankind in responding to the radical love of God through love of God and neighbor. He also says that the Holy Spirit empowers the church as an external community of radical love and makes the sacraments a foretaste of the same.

This chapter has explored Cheng's understanding of queer theology, which he locates at the intersection of queer theory and Christian theology. Cheng interprets queer theology through the lens of God's "radical love," which he defines as love that dissolves

¹⁰⁵ Stuart, "The Priest at the Altar: The Eucharistic Erasure of Sex," in Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, *Trans/formations*, 136.

boundaries. Likewise, the previous pages have located Cheng's work in the evolution of queer theology and shown its relationship to other work in the broader discussions of queer theory and queer theology. It is now time to turn to an analysis of the homiletical theory of Fred Craddock.

Chapter 2

Fred Craddock and Boundary Dissolution in Preaching

By many measures, Fred Craddock's work has been influential in the field of homiletics. It shaped a generation of preachers, and scholars still grapple with its insights and shortcomings. On one hand, Craddock is credited with introducing a new paradigm in American homiletics, that of the inductive, narrative preaching method. On the other hand, Craddock's work has been critiqued for neglecting the insights of African American preaching traditions.¹ One aspect of Craddock's work that is yet to be considered, and which offers potential insights for preaching today, is its queer interpretation, specifically in light of the ways that Craddock seeks to dissolve boundaries. Having traced the development of queer theology and explored it through Patrick Cheng's lens of God's radical, boundary-dissolving love, it is fitting now to focus on an analysis of the boundary-dissolving characteristics of Craddock's homiletical theory in order to draw out the queerness inherent in it, and examine how its adaptation might further the development of a queer homiletic.

To that end, this chapter will explain Craddock's arguments in *Overhearing the Gospel*, which establish, by way of Søren Kierkegaard, that there exist certain boundaries that inhibit the effective transmission of the gospel.² Kierkegaard's term for these boundaries is "illusions." Craddock identifies these illusions as problematic boundaries affecting the relationships between subject matter and style, between listener and

¹ Dale Andrews, "New to Whom?" in *Preaching Prophetic Care: Building Bridges to Justice*, ed. Phillis-Isabella Sheppard, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 299-301.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002).

message, and between speaker and message. He also identifies the boundaries of distance and participation, which exist within the gospel message itself.³ This chapter will examine how these boundaries inhibit the effective transmission of the gospel and highlight the homiletical strategies that Craddock suggests for their dissolution. To begin, Craddock's scholarship will be situated within the broader homiletical conversation of the latter half of the twentieth century, and its shortcomings and adaptation potential for today will be examined.

Craddock in Context and Critique

Craddock was among the earliest contributors to a school of thought that would become known as the *New Homiletic*.⁴ This new way of thinking about preaching represented a paradigm shift chiefly concerned with refocusing the preacher's attention on the hearer of the sermon. In addition to Craddock, homileticians such as Charles Rice, Henry Mitchell, Eugene Lowry, and David Buttrick shaped the New Homiletic by promoting the use of inductive and narrative sermonic forms built on imagistic and storied language in order to create for the hearer an experience of the gospel.⁵

Through the 1950s, most American preaching was didactic in nature. The preacher's goal was to instruct the listener in the major themes of the Christian faith. In order to effectively teach, preachers strove to write sermons that were logical, orderly,

³ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 9, 16, 32, 37, 49.

⁴ O. Wesley Allen, Jr., ed. *The Renewed Homiletic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 7-8. This phrase was first coined by David James Randolph in a paper delivered at the first meeting of the Academy of Homiletics in 1965.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

and balanced, akin to an essay or a lecture.⁶ In response to growing frustration with the ineffectiveness of this method, H. Grady Davis published *Design for Preaching* in 1958. In it, he argued for sermons as dynamic, living organisms, and established the idea of the sermon as an event in time, emphasizing a method of induction to engage listeners by appealing to their personal experience.⁷ Davis's understanding of sermonic form was less akin to a lecture prepared for the purpose of disseminating doctrine than it was to a short story designed to delight listeners with an experience of the gospel.

By 1971, Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority* offered an even more groundbreaking approach in preaching methodology. Following Davis, he argued that deductive practices should be forsaken in favor of inductive approaches that would lead the listener on a rhetorical journey, guiding them to form their own conclusions rather than simply adopting those of the preacher.⁸ Additionally, Craddock suggested that during sermon preparation, preachers should always keep in mind the particular experience they wanted to evoke in the listener. For Craddock, identifying with his hearers' personal experience was vital to the task of communicating the Word of God.⁹

In *Overhearing the Gospel*, Craddock further investigated the possibilities of narrative preaching by way of Søren Kierkegaard's observations about nineteenth-century Denmark. Kierkegaard recognized that Denmark was flooded with Christian

⁶ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 2.

⁷ Long, 3; Andrews, 299. See H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1958), 161.

⁸ Long, 3. See Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

⁹ Andrews, 299-300; Craddock, *Authority*, 59.

knowledge, and yet he found the Danes lacking in terms of personal engagement with their faith.¹⁰ In the book, Craddock compared Kierkegaard's Christian context to the Christian context of the United States in the 1970s. The two settings were far from identical, but Craddock suggested preaching strategies to address the experiences of the hearer as a way of speaking to their shared concerns.

While Craddock's contributions are invaluable and widely respected, his narrative methods do not escape critique. In *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Thomas Long explores some of those critiques as he considers the lasting impact of narrative preaching.¹¹ Long broadly characterizes critiques of narrative preaching in three categories: those stemming from the theological right, those stemming from the theological center, and those stemming from the theological left.¹²

James Thompson, a right-of-center theologian, alleges that narrative methods suffer from their assumption of a widespread, knowledge-rich Christian culture that no longer exists. He argues that narrative preaching neglects theological education in favor of stylistic endeavors, thereby reducing the extent to which listeners are invited to think rationally about their faith.¹³ Similarly, those inhabiting the theological middle criticize narrative preaching methods for taking Christian knowledge for granted, a thing many

¹⁰ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 19.

¹¹ See Long, 7-18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ See James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 9-14.

say that no preacher can afford to do in a climate of theological ignorance.¹⁴ In this vein, Charles Campbell finds that narrative preaching is often too superficial, focusing not on the kinds of specific stories that inform a life of faith but rather on imaginative vagaries that do little to orient listeners to the heart of the gospel, Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Long asserts that scholars who find themselves theologically left-of-center tend to level the harshest critiques of narrative preaching. Many such critiques warn that certain characteristics of the narrative style can lead to potential abuses of power. John McClure argues that the story-telling methods of narrative preachers, which favor the preacher's own experiences of the sacred, can serve to ignore or erase the specific experiences of a diverse group of hearers. McClure argues that narrative preachers portray their experience as universal, meaning that the listeners must contort their own perspectives in order to fit into the speaker's privileged mold.¹⁶

Critique of Craddock's work also includes suggestions that he neglected insights from African American scholarship. For instance, Dale Andrews contends that an understanding of the New Homiletic as original "evidences the nature of hegemony that leads cultures in dominance to define broadly human history based only in the experiences of that cultural dominance."¹⁷ While the narrative characteristics of the new homiletic might be new to the white community, Andrews argues that they are by no

¹⁴ Long, 9.

¹⁵ See Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 192-93.

¹⁶ See John McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 81.

¹⁷ Andrews, 300.

means foreign to communities with histories of orality and folk preaching, such as the African-American community. Black preaching traditions, he says, have always included strong elements of “induction, narrativity, story-telling, phenomenological experience, the preaching event, a happening, an encounter, a movement, hearer participation, hearer response, or the exigency of contemporary language and immediate experience.”¹⁸

Andrews suggests that oversight of this tradition is due to a lack of education on black preaching methods, which are missing from most seminary curricula and are instead predominantly taught through homiletical apprenticeships within black churches.¹⁹

Henry Mitchell’s 1970 book, *Black Preaching*, which addressed narrativity and induction in the black church tradition, was developed and published at roughly the same time as Craddock’s *As One Without Authority*.²⁰ Mitchell’s book discusses the uniqueness of black preaching, both historically and in his modern context. He points to foundational elements of black style such as intonation, repetition, figures of speech, poetics, story-telling, and song, all of which draw on the experience of the listener—as well as Biblical precedent—in order to promote a more effective hearing of the gospel.²¹ While Mitchell’s *Black Preaching* was published one year earlier than *As One Without Authority* was published nationally, Craddock had published his book locally at Phillips University one year earlier, meaning that he and Mitchell developed their thoughts

¹⁸ Andrews, 300.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁰ Henri H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1970).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 162-177.

concurrently.²² While this means that Craddock likely lacked the awareness of Mitchell's thoughts before he published *As One Without Authority*, it does not excuse the lack of attention to the contributions of black preachers that persisted in the dominant literature on narrative preaching in that period.²³

More recently, scholars like John Holbert and Alyce McKenzie have critiqued and built upon Craddock's work. In *Preaching Old Testament: Proclamation and Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Holbert applies Craddock's method to Old Testament preaching. To this end, he explores the rich narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible and discusses not only the need to mine the theology of such texts, but, echoing Mitchell, also examines how their narrative forms can be examples of effective communication techniques.²⁴ Holbert wrestles with the open-ended nature of a method like Craddock's indirect, narrative approach. He understands the virtues of Craddock's indirect method for eliciting action from within the listener rather than simply providing information.²⁵ Indirection, Holbert argues, leaves the sermon open-ended and encourages the hearers to draw their own conclusions, making the likelihood of resultant action greater than if conclusions had been provided directly by the preacher.²⁶ Open-endedness in preaching might also be considered a pitfall if the listener were to discern a theologically problematic conclusion.

²² Allen, O., 12.

²³ Another significant contribution to the New Homiletic developed around this time was Charles Rice's *Interpretation and Imagination: The Preacher and Contemporary Literature* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1970). Of the three books published in this short time, it cannot be denied that Mitchell's received the least critical and public attention.

²⁴ John Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament: Proclamation and Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 14-15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

However, Holbert argues that the chief goal of narrative preaching is to engage the listener, not to ensure that they reach a specific conclusion. He determines that narrative methods are ultimately more effective than conventional sermons, which often do not successfully engage the hearer and from which hearers are still able to perceive meaning that the preacher did not intend.²⁷

Additionally, McKenzie has reimagined Craddock's narrative work in light of the contemporary impact of social media. In her book *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners*, she contemplates how narrativity cultivates images that evoke powerful responses in a day and age when most listeners are constantly surrounded by images on phones, tablets, and computers.²⁸ McKenzie argues that "scene is the new story" by examining the culture's fascination with scenes. Whether it be one brief clip on YouTube or the narrative arc of a television series, scenes capture the imagination and pique the interest of many modern listeners.²⁹ In order to establish the importance of the scene, McKenzie traces the rise of narrative preaching in the New Homiletic. Scenes, she argues, are small but vital units of a larger story that promote a positive experience for the contemporary listener's shortened attention span.

Having addressed some of the key critiques and expansions of Craddock by looking at the rise of narrative preaching methods and their continued use in the contemporary pulpit, it is appropriate now to turn to more in-depth examination of

²⁷ Holbert, 50-51.

²⁸ See Alyce McKenzie, *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Craddock's inductive method and how such a method dissolves boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel message.

Naming the Boundaries

Turning to Craddock's contributions in *Overhearing the Gospel*, this chapter will now consider the problematic boundaries, or, in Kierkegaardian terms, the "monstrous illusions" that Craddock identifies as affecting Christian communication. First, concerning preaching methodology (or a lack thereof), Craddock identifies a boundary between the rhetorical elements of content and style, a perceived barrier that separates the *what* of preaching from the *how* of preaching. Craddock further considers boundaries between the listener and the message, the speaker and the message, and an individual's distance from, and participation with, the biblical text. Each of these boundaries ultimately needs to be dissolved in order to gain an effective hearing of the gospel.

Between the *What* and the *How*

"There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one cannot directly communicate to the other."³⁰

Craddock takes this quotation from Kierkegaard as his "text" for the book's discussion. Although Craddock considers different parts of Kierkegaard's statement throughout the book, he starts with a discussion of the primary question it raises: "How does one person communicate the Christian faith to another?"³¹ His analysis begins—as only Craddock's can—with an imagery-laden reflection on the importance of the first word of the question, the *how* of preaching. Craddock's primary concern is the tendency

³⁰ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

of those in the academy and the church to look down their noses at questions of method, form, and style (the *how*) when compared to questions of subject matter and content (the *what*). The following humorous excerpt illustrates the boundary between content and style:

How has been made to stand out in the hall while *what* was being entertained by the brightest minds among us. What is the truth? What do we believe? What is being taught? Those are the worthy questions, and who among us would suffer the embarrassment of interrupting the discussion with “But how can we . . .?”³²

Craddock understands the boundary between the *how* and the *what* as a major reason for the poor quality of preaching, as Kierkegaard did.³³ Craddock suggests that the academic environments in which preachers are formed are prone to such a high level of concern for discovering truth that they neglect questions concerned with how to effectively communicate truth to others. Those who devalue the *how*, says Craddock, assume that any truth worth knowing will find its own way into personal and societal consciousness.³⁴ Craddock disagrees, writing, “Whatever the cause, the plain fact is, it is a tragic error to assume that the truth is its own evangelist.”³⁵ He identifies the problematic boundary between content and style, between the truth and an appropriate expression of that truth, as one between concept and capacity. For example, it is one thing to talk about the *concept* of love and another thing to have the *capacity* to love.³⁶ Put differently, if the truth of love is to be discovered, it is not by defining love, studying

³² Craddock, *Overhearing*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8

love, or talking about love that one will discover it; the discovery can come only through the experience of loving. The truth is only discovered when content meets form and concept meets capacity. Thus, in order to promote an effective hearing of the gospel, the boundary between the *how* and the *what* must be dissolved.

Craddock uses parabolic form to illustrate his point. In the parables, style and subject matter join together to communicate truth. If the parable is chosen as the appropriate vehicle for communicating a certain message, then that message cannot be separated from its parabolic form. “How they do is what they do, and what they do is how they do it.”³⁷ In essence, a listener would not be able to hear the same truth if it were communicated in a different form. For instance, a singer sings their message. To separate the message from the song is to alter both *how* the message is communicated and *what* the message is. Matter and manner are inextricably linked. Experiences are defined in large part by how they will later be communicated.³⁸ This is true in a variety of situations, Craddock argues, pointing out that no person can glimpse the Statue of Liberty for the first time or coax a child into taking her first steps without giving thought to communicating that experience to someone else.³⁹

Craddock is by no means dismissing the importance of content, but he is arguing that the mere relaying of information is not enough to get the gospel message *heard* by those who are already familiar with it. In order “to effect a new hearing of the word,”

³⁷ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

attention must be paid to form.⁴⁰ While Craddock concedes that it is possible for stylistic endeavors to negatively affect subject matter if they are situationally inappropriate or overwrought, he opposes the idea that artistry of address compromises truth of subject matter, and dismisses the notion that attention to form and style will detract from the content of the message. In fact, he argues, the opposite is true. Form enhances the message, and the effective Christian communicator must pay attention to it.⁴¹

Between the Hearer and the Message

After considering the boundary between the *how* and the *what* of preaching, Craddock considers another boundary that inhibits the effective hearing of the gospel “in a Christian land.” This boundary can be defined in terms of what Kierkegaard called the listener’s “illusion of participation” with the subject matter.⁴² In the land that Kierkegaard deemed Christian—nineteenth-century Denmark—one could safely and reasonably assume a basic familiarity with the gospel due to its ubiquity. Nearly everyone went to church, nearly everyone had been baptized, and thus, nearly everyone had some familiarity with basic Christian precepts. However, this same familiarity had a downside: many churchgoers, sermon listeners, and students of the Bible wrongly assumed that because they were so involved in Christianity, they had nothing left to learn from it.⁴³ This is the “illusion of participation” Kierkegaard warned against.

⁴⁰ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

When listeners operate under this illusion of participation, a boundary arises between them and the message. After all, why should anyone listen to the gospel if all that the gospel had to offer had already been gleaned? This attitude, largely unintentional on the part of the hearer, is one that Craddock recognized as well, noting the tendency of many listeners to behave as though they had been occupying the same pew since St. Paul himself came to town preaching Christ. As a result, these listeners are prone to receive the gospel message with an attitude of “Here we go again” rather than a mind that is open to hearing and learning something new. Craddock’s task and challenge, then, is to help listeners hear what they have already heard, learn what they already know, even as if for the first time.⁴⁴ In this way, gospel insights are both old and new, simultaneously recovered from information already known and experienced for the first time.

Kierkegaard’s Denmark did resemble Christendom to a great extent. Church and state were linked to such a degree that churches received the support of taxes, ministers received government salaries, and baptism and citizenship were nearly synonymous.⁴⁵ Yet although the church’s membership rolls, buildings, and bank accounts were enormous, its passion for the gospel was not. Kierkegaard described the gospel in this context as a mere “piece of information.”⁴⁶ While the United States of the late 1970s, in which Craddock wrote, was not Christian to the same extent, Craddock did note several similarities, including the fact that many people called themselves Christians as a cultural

⁴⁴ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

matter of course.⁴⁷ Even those Christians that did regularly attend to the rituals of the faith were often engaged only on a superficial level of *concept* and not a deeper, more experiential level of *capacity*.⁴⁸

As a piece of information, the gospel could be discussed, questioned, or commented upon. However, just because gospel topics enter a conversation—*Did you read the essay on St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans? What did you think of the sermon last week? Will you be in church next Sunday?*—does not mean that the conversation is actually Christian. Critically examining the implications of certain translation issues or discussing whether or not miracles are real may be important to a life of faith, but one cannot receive the Word of God through the acquisition of intellectual or abstract concepts alone, even if they are biblical. One also needs an experience of the gospel, some feeling of it or identification with it.⁴⁹ In fact, dealing only with general concepts or ideas of the mind is a boundary that impedes the listener from hearing anew the provocative, astounding, and life-changing nature of Jesus’ teachings.

Craddock is also concerned with listeners who have a superficial relationship with the Christian faith, believing that these superficial believers lack the necessary appetite for the gospel, and therefore are unable to hear it.⁵⁰ Many of them are unaware of what it means to hunger for the knowledge of the Christian life because they have always been

⁴⁷ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

fed just enough information to keep them from being hungry.⁵¹ Uninterested in a steady diet of Christian engagement, they are content to snack on the few morsels of it that happen to fall in their path. Even those who regularly engage in Christian study and ritual can be affected by the illusion of participation if their preconceived notions cloud their ability to receive a new hearing.⁵² Thus, Craddock writes, it is the task of the preacher to guide hearers

down the corridors of their own minds, seeing anew old images hanging there, images that have served more powerfully than all concepts and generalizations in shaping them into the feeling, thinking, acting beings they are; to pronounce the old vocabulary so that someone hears a new cadence in it.⁵³

Here Craddock defines the principal goal of his method not as the proclamation of completely new information, but as aiding the hearer in the excavation of knowledge which already exists somewhere within them.

Between the Speaker and the Message

Having located the boundary between content and style of the message, as well as the boundary between the gospel message and the hearer made numb to it by repeated exposure to Christian language and liturgical practice, Craddock now considers the boundary between the speaker and the message.⁵⁴ “If Christianity may be called a story,” he asks, “what is the relationship of the teller to the story?”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Some argue that a certain amount of distance between the teller and the story is necessary in order for the teller to effectively communicate the story's truth to the listener, such as when a critical distance from the biblical text is necessary in times of study. Such a distance is not a boundary to effectively communicating the gospel, Craddock writes, explaining that "[Kierkegaard] is saying that the way to understand and to communicate the Christian faith is through disciplined participation in that faith."⁵⁶ Clear research resulting from honest scholarly engagement with the text is part of disciplined participation.⁵⁷ The true boundary for the speaker, like the listener, would be the inability to engage with the core of the message. By engaging the text critically, a speaker dissolves the boundary between themselves and the text through disciplined participation, which is necessary for dissolving the boundary that hinders the hearing of the gospel message.

However, critical engagement is not the only aspect of disciplined participation in the faith. A preacher becomes qualified to talk about hard concepts of the faith—humanity and divinity, penitence and forgiveness, death and resurrection—not by reading a book, but by experiencing them through a pattern of living based on obedience and sacrifice to God's word. This is not merely practicing what one preaches, but also engaging in patient study, as well as regular prayer and worship, in order to gain access to the living Word.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

Craddock acknowledges that study, prayer, and worship can foster a personal, insular relationship between an individual and God: “For if my work is for and toward God, do I not have to fight the tendency to regard people as intruders on this private (God and I) enterprise? If I teach and preach in a sense on my knees, what are all these people doing here?”⁵⁹ In other words, to what extent is preaching made personal by being the result of private study? Is the personal nature of it a boundary that inhibits the listener’s ability to hear it? It should not be, Craddock says, reminding preachers that their qualities as tellers of the gospel affect the way that their listeners will hear them. If, for example, the speaker is not fully engaged in preparation or present in delivery (such as might be evidenced by an over reliance on quotations and clichés) then listeners will disengage.⁶⁰ Patient submission to the Word, however personal it may feel, is the antidote, Craddock says, because such submission enables the teller to dissolve the boundary that separates them from the message, in turn enabling them to effectively share the message with others.⁶¹

The speaker’s participation in a life of faith, then, is essential to effectively communicating the gospel and overcoming any boundary of nonparticipation. “Christian truth,” Craddock writes, “is simply not transmitted objectively as a thing, a statement, a piece of information, autonomous and unrelated to speaker and hearer.”⁶² He echoes Aristotle’s notion of ethos, arguing that the truth is influenced by the credibility of the

⁵⁹ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 39.

one who speaks it: “There is something nonsensical about the truth in the mouth of one whose life has no evidence of participation in that truth.”⁶³ Thus, a lack of participation in a gospel-centered way of life on the part of the speaker is a boundary that directly effects its communication. True credibility is established by a preacher who walks the path of Christianity alongside the listener, not by one who stops along the way and shouts encouraging words to those who forge ahead.

Between Distance and Participation

Craddock next considers boundaries that may hinder Christian communication from within the Christian story. Here he speaks of the message in terms of the Christian story as mediated through the Bible. When approaching the Bible, Craddock recalls the “twin essentials” of good communication—distance and participation.⁶⁴ Distance from the text is necessary to guard against the temptation to discount tradition in order to establish the relevance of the text for the more immediate context.⁶⁵ Likewise, participation in the scriptural text is part of what makes it a living Word, relevant for continued Christian living. However, both distance and participation can create barriers to hearing the preached word. Participation often leads to anti-intellectualism, in which readers will hear whatever is comforting to them and conducive to their needs in the moment rather than probing for a deeper truth. Boundaries of distance occur when the reader is confronted with the realities of the biblical context, including strange languages,

⁶³ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 39.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

remote places, unfamiliar names, and ancient practices, which make it difficult to enter the story simply because of a lack of knowledge.⁶⁶

Craddock believes that these boundaries of distance have been exacerbated in part by a major shift in the field of biblical criticism. Specifically, he identifies this as a shift away from a literary focus to a historical focus, which has divorced form and content. Historical critique, while not a bad lens, he argues, separates the *what* from the *how*.⁶⁷ Scholars in this arena tend to discount the form in which information is presented in order to get to the technical root of the information itself. Doing so, Craddock says, is particularly irresponsible given the Bible's practice of marrying content to literary form. He reminds his reader that the meaning of biblical poetry or parables cannot be gained apart from consideration of the form in which it appears.⁶⁸ One cannot fully participate in the story unless one understands the importance of the content based on the manner in which it is expressed.

By prioritizing facticity, Craddock argues, historicism placed such an emphasis on proving whether or not certain events *actually happened* that it left no room for excavating divine truth from a living Word.⁶⁹ By emphasizing objectivity, historical critique minimized the tradition of interpretation and the shared meaning-making of the biblical narrative, which was never intended to prove the accuracy of specific events but rather to communicate truth about God's relationship with humanity. Historical

⁶⁶ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 49.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

investigation is useful and indeed necessary, but without a notion of participation in the living Word, one's distance from the text becomes a problematic boundary.⁷⁰ If distance and participation both aid and hinder our hearing of the story, then the solution to dissolving these boundaries can be found not in rejecting either of them or elevating one over the other, but in balancing the literary and the historical appropriately.

Proposing an Indirect Method

To begin a discussion on proposed methodology, it is helpful to restate Craddock's and Kierkegaard's shared goal: to enable a more effective communication of the gospel so that the hearer might be prompted, stirred, or released to do more than simply remember information or commit descriptions of it to memory.⁷¹ Because Craddock believed that his own context for preaching and teaching mirrored Kierkegaard's (to the extent that each was confronted with listeners who had been continually exposed to Christianity), he sought to borrow from Kierkegaard's primary method of communication, which was one of indirection. While Kierkegaard was primarily a writer, Craddock believed that his method was also applicable to effective oral transmission of the gospel.⁷²

Kierkegaard understood indirect communication as communication for "eliciting capability and action from within the listener."⁷³ This was in contrast to direct communication, which he regarded as best for the transferring of information, and

⁷⁰ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 59-61.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 70.

therefore most appropriate for communication within disciplines related to history and the sciences. Kierkegaard viewed indirection as a more appropriate method for communicating Christianity because he viewed God's fleshly revelation in the person of Jesus as a form of indirect communication: in Jesus, God was incognito, eliciting faith rather than overwhelming with it.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Kierkegaard valued an indirect approach because he found it to be the most suitable for his context. As has been established, there was no lack of *information* in Denmark, his "Christian land." Something else was lacking, and that something could not be directly communicated.

Kierkegaard identified this "something else" as the "innate realization of the significance of what was already known."⁷⁵ This truth "already known" was the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, which had been passed along in the form of information through direct teaching and preaching methods. However, according to Kierkegaard, the dissemination of that information through direct methods led to a *knowing about* that truth, rather than any *experience of* its significance. In order to dissolve the boundary between knowing and experiencing, an indirect method of communication was necessary to "stir up" the information that was known so that the listener could experience it on a deeper level.⁷⁶ Such a method of indirectness draws out the listener's thoughts and feelings by considering their experiences, and rhetorically places the listeners in situations from which they can learn that which they already

⁷⁴ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 70.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

know.⁷⁷ It is from Kierkegaard's indirect method that Craddock develops his approach to preaching, designed to enable a new hearing of a Word already known and yet not fully realized.

The Experience of the Listener

Craddock's indirect method is one of "overhearing," and it is based on the listener's experience. He begins his consideration of the listener's experience by establishing his intent to build on Kierkegaard's method of indirectness: "If I may call the reader of Kierkegaard a listener, the word that best describes the listener's experience is *overhearing*."⁷⁸ Craddock builds on Kierkegaard's authorial practice of indirectness, arguing that such a principle can be applied to the preaching event as well.

Craddock describes overhearing as an important, significant, and common way to gain knowledge. He bases the term "overhearing" on Kierkegaard's work, writing, "Kierkegaard's value lies precisely in the fact that he had the uncanny ability to see into life and human relationships and observe the way things are. The reader of Kierkegaard says, 'Of course; why did I not see it? Life, the world, people are really like that.'"⁷⁹ Craddock enjoins his reader to consider the practice of overhearing not as a new method of communication, but as one that has been effective in everybody's experience.⁸⁰

For example, Craddock says that reading a book is a type of overhearing, in that the author does not address each specific reader. Rather, the author has written to

⁷⁷ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 79, 82.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

someone else, to no one in particular, or to everyone. The reader has the chance to reflect, accept, reject, and resolve in their own way and time.⁸¹ Many experiences in worship are also overheard. For instance, Craddock notes that congregants often benefit from overhearing a “children’s sermon” that is addressed directly to a group of children (and which adults often remember better than the actual sermon). Other examples include pastoral prayers and choral anthems that are addressed to God, letters from St. Paul that are addressed to early Christian communities, wedding vows that are exchanged between a couple, or a minister’s words of comfort to family members at a funeral.⁸² Likewise, thousands of people sit in dimly lit concert halls and theaters to watch performances not addressed to them, but which might cause them to think through matters that affect their lives in very meaningful ways.⁸³ The result of such experiences is often that overhearing leads to the hearing of something already known in a totally new or unexpected way.

When one reads or listens to one of St. Paul’s letters, Craddock argues, it is best to stand back and let Paul discuss the matters at hand with his intended recipients. If the listener allows this to happen, then that person will learn a great deal precisely because the text reaches out and draws the hearer in as a spectator and a participant. In this way, the hearers distance themselves from the text as a way of participating more fully in it.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 90.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 93-94.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

The goal, then, of Craddock's method of overhearing is to preserve both distance from, and participation with, the text.⁸⁵ Overhearing preserves distance from the text in order to maintain the historical integrity of it, and it promotes participation with the text because Scripture is the living Word of God and listeners must be able to interact with it to find meaning for their the present life of faith.⁸⁶

Craddock exhorts the reader to reconsider cultural notions suggesting that direct communication is the best way to lead to understanding. Although many people have been "conditioned for decades to regard confrontation and direct address as the only communicative styles with honesty, integrity, and effectiveness," the importance of overhearing should not be dismissed, because it is only through this kind of indirect communication that imaginations are engaged and the mind begins to grapple with issues bigger than itself.⁸⁷

The Method of the Teller

In order to succeed, the teller must approach the method of overhearing through effective use of both distance and participation. As Craddock points out, when speakers too eagerly and sincerely desire listeners' participation in a direct way, it often makes the listeners uncomfortable.⁸⁸ Listeners are more comfortable learning from the experiences of others. If distance establishes a comfort level that is conducive to an effective hearing, then elements of participation shrink that distance so that listeners may experience it in a

⁸⁵ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 98.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 106. Here Craddock is undoubtedly referring to predominately white speakers and listeners.

more personal, relevant way in their own context. Both distance and participation are then integral to dissolving the boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel.

There are numerous examples of this kind of overhearing based on distance and participation in the gospels. For instance, the parables that have a narrative arc, such as the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the publican, and the workers in the vineyard, provide distance between the message and the listener.⁸⁹ They achieve this through the use of the third person, the use of the past tense, and the depiction of anonymous characters whose life situations are distinct from the life experience of the listeners. However, these parables enlist participation by drawing listeners in and compelling a reaction, as if to say, “Life is that way; I am that way; I have done that, felt that, thought that.”⁹⁰

As a means to achieving an overhearing, Craddock first discusses the importance of the speaker’s trust in both preparation and delivery: “To deliver a message for overhearing, the speaker needs to trust fully in the message to create its own effect, trust the listener to exercise freedom responsibly, and trust the process, however fragile and accidental it may appear, to be powerful.”⁹¹ He adds that a preacher’s voice, hands, posture, and face will all speak to their level of trust. Because looking directly at the listeners gives the impression that one is talking *to* and not *with*, Craddock says that it is best to avoid direct eye contact in order to create a relaxed atmosphere in which

⁸⁹ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 106.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

preachers talk to God, themselves, or an imaginary group of listeners.⁹² To that end, second person pronouns are not to be used. Furthermore, Craddock reveals relevance—the arbitrary placing of a text into a current situation—as a false idol.⁹³ As an example, he points to the use of sermons that are edited before publication in order to eliminate any hint of their original context. Craddock says that it is only through overhearing the sermon in the original context, even if the original context is not directly applicable to one's circumstance, that one can garner meaning from it.⁹⁴ As mentioned above, such is the experience of Christians today when they experience the letters of St. Paul.

Craddock eschews direct methods of communication because such methods do not increase the preacher's control over the message by providing enhanced clarity and precision.⁹⁵ In fact, he says, the listener benefits more from an indirect method because it requires preachers to forgo their speaking preferences for the sake of advancing the gospel. Jesus is an example of this, Craddock says. His parables do not represent the kind of deep, theological treatises that today might earn tenure or renewed contracts. Rather, they exemplify the kind of stories, humor, questions, and answers that were necessary to meet his disciples where they were.⁹⁶ These techniques might not have always made Jesus seem like the smartest person in the room, but Craddock labels him an effective communicator because his indirect methods allowed his messages to be *heard*. Such a

⁹² Craddock, *Overhearing*, 108.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

method of indirectness may bruise the preacher's ego when it fails to impress a listener who favors traditional evidence of scholarship, but therein lies an important self-sacrifice necessary for the success of the method.⁹⁷

Craddock also identifies structure as an important component in the success of his method. To effect the best hearing, the preacher must use a narrative structure, which "is told with distance, and sustains it in that the story unfolds on its own, seemingly only casually aware of the hearer, and yet all the while the narrative is inviting and beckoning the listener to participation in its anticipation, struggle, and resolution."⁹⁸ This structure is not meant to exclude or replace rational argument within Christianity. On the contrary, Craddock understands that reason keeps sentimentality in Christianity from supplanting indispensable critical thought.⁹⁹ Nor is a narrative sermon one long story or a compilation of stories. Rather, a narrative sermon is one that has a

scope that ties the message to the larger community; it means the message has memory and hope; it means to be life-size in the sense of touching all the keys on the board rather than only intellectual or emotional or volitional; it means conveying the sense of movement *from* one place *to* another; it means having this movement on its own, as though that presence of the listeners were not essential to its process; it means thinking alongside the hearers.¹⁰⁰

Likewise, narratives are not summaries of commentaries, but instances in which events are recreated so that the listener can get a sense of character development and an unfolding of events. This method fosters a reexperiencing of events that elicits emotion

⁹⁷ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 110-11.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

and imagination.¹⁰¹ Narratives are successful at provoking sustained attention, says Craddock, because they are the nature of life itself: “The form fits.”¹⁰² All communities have stories in which their members live and make meaning, and the Christian story is one large enough—with enough memory and enough hope—to provide a context for the listener’s personal narrative.¹⁰³

Conclusion

This chapter has explored Craddock’s method for “overhearing” the gospel. Craddock accepts Kierkegaard’s notion that there exist certain illusions that prohibit Christians from experiencing an effective transmission of the gospel message, and describes these illusions, here called boundaries, as affecting several relationships. He notes particularly the relationships between the content of the message (or story) and the method of its communication, between the listener and the story, and between the speaker and the story. He also identifies boundaries of distance and participation, which occur within the story itself. Ultimately, Craddock finds the consideration of the experience of the listener to be a crucial component for an effective hearing of the gospel. Having explored the work of Cheng and Craddock, it is time to put the two of them in conversation in order to discover the implications that their work has for a queer homiletic.

¹⁰¹ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 117.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

Chapter 3

Toward a Queer Homiletic

The first two chapters of this thesis have explored Patrick Cheng's queer theology and Fred Craddock's homiletical theory, respectively. Both authors enjoin their reader to the task of boundary dissolution. This chapter will offer an integrative and reflective discussion of these two previous analyses, putting Cheng and Craddock in conversation in order to discover what a queer homiletic reveals about effective preaching.

To review, Cheng's work in *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* has provided insight into a queer theology based on God's "radical love," which Cheng defines in terms of its ability to dissolve boundaries. Cheng understands queer theology to be rooted in queer theory, which critiques binary categories that at first seem unchangeable.¹ Such binary categories are not only categories of sexuality and gender identity, they are also theological categories concerning humanity and divinity, life and death, and heaven and earth.² Cheng argues that the dissolution of the boundaries of these essentialist categories is made possible through the radical love of God, particularly as seen in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second-coming of Jesus Christ.³ His definition of queer theology connects queer theory's critique of socially constructed binaries, such as heterosexual/homosexual and male/female, to Christian theological concepts, which are inherently queer because they challenge and deconstruct

¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 10.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 11.

inflexible binary categories, such as those listed above.⁴ Thus, queer theology is a theology that understands conventional human notions of both sacred and secular binaries to be dissolved in Jesus Christ.⁵

Likewise, Craddock's work in *Overhearing the Gospel* leads to an understanding of his narrative preaching method of "overhearing" which dissolves boundaries that inhibit a listener's fresh hearing of the gospel message. Craddock identifies these boundaries as existing between subject matter and style, between listener and message, between speaker and message, and between an individual's distance from, and participation with, the biblical text.⁶ Such boundaries, Craddock says, prohibit the listener from truly experiencing the gospel message. Taken together, Cheng and Craddock set the stage for a queer homiletic based on the radical, boundary-dissolving love of God.

Defining a Queer Homiletic

Craddock's homiletical theory is largely based on Søren Kierkegaard's premise that the sermon's listeners are familiar with basic Christian precepts which lay dormant in their hearts and minds, a situation that cannot be safely assumed today. Kierkegaard said, "There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one cannot directly communicate to the other."⁷ To identify this lacking "something" Craddock calls for a narrative preaching method that provokes an experience of the gospel within the listener. Yet by 2009, preaching scholar Thomas

⁴ Cheng, 10.

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 9, 16, 32, 37, 49.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

Long observed that the changing homiletical landscape could no longer be defined as one of sleeping Christendom, needing only to be awakened by evocative stories.⁸ Indeed, due to a diminishing base level of biblical familiarity, the needs of listeners have changed over time. Because of this, narrative methods that promote story-telling may no longer be the prevailing homiletical method; nevertheless, narrative methods remain relevant in a myriad of ways.⁹ One of the crucial preaching tasks of the present time is the development of a queer homiletic that can recover, nurture, and sustain queer voices and queer perspectives. Even though Fred Craddock's narrative method may no longer be cast in a leading role on the American homiletical stage, it can still play a critical role in the production of a queer homiletic as a boundary-dissolving costar alongside Patrick Cheng's queer theology. Combining Cheng's theology of God's radical, boundary-dissolving love and Craddock's method for dissolving the boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel has the potential to yield an effective and robust queer homiletic that can provoke action in the life of the hearer.

A queer homiletic can be understood as a homiletic of boundary-dissolution based on God's radical love. If the diminution of boundaries is an important principle for a queer homiletic, then radical love is the chief boundary-dissolving agent. *Therefore, a queer homiletic can be defined as one that reveals God's radical love by dissolving boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel so that all listeners, queer and otherwise, can experience the living Word of God.*

⁸ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 18.

⁹ For a discussion of some of these ways, see Long, 18-26.

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the ways in which a queer homiletic dissolves the boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel by revealing radical love to be the living Word of God. This discussion will be fueled by the work of both Cheng and Craddock as it has been discussed in the previous chapters.

Toward a Queer Homiletic: Dissolving Boundaries

As noted in the introduction, Cheng writes, “Christian theology is a fundamentally queer enterprise” because of its basis in a divine, boundary-dissolving “radical love.”¹⁰ As such, the dissemination of that theology through preaching must surely be queer as well. An awareness of this idea is important for two primary reasons. First, it makes clear that the development of a queer homiletic is not simply a hobby for those who might be interested in such an undertaking; rather, because of who God is, queerness is located at the very heart of Christian theology and preaching. Second, it establishes that the queerness of Christian theology contributes to the queerness of preaching by illuminating God’s radical love not only through the theological content of the message but also through the means by which the message is communicated. The following discussion will consider how a queer homiletic reveals God’s radical love by dissolving the boundaries between subject matter and style, between an individual’s distance from, and participation with, the text, between the preacher and the message, and between the listener and the message.

Between Subject Matter and Style

In a queer homiletic, a theology of radical love blends the content of the sermon and its form. In this way, *a queer homiletic dissolves the boundary between subject*

¹⁰ Cheng, x.

matter and style by revealing radical love to be the living Word of God. As analysis of Cheng has shown, boundary dissolution through radical love lies at the heart of Christian theology.¹¹ For example, he says that radical love is found in the following: the boundary-dissolving attributes of the Trinity as a whole; each coeternal person of the Trinity; traditional doctrines like revelation, incarnation, and resurrection; the earthly church, which is the body of Christ; and the sacraments. Thus, radical love is present in the subject matter of the sermon whenever these and/or a multitude of other concepts of Christian theology are discussed. For instance, during the Christmas season, when incarnational theology takes center stage, God's boundary-dissolving characteristics are on full display as God becomes flesh in the person of Jesus, thus dissolving the boundary between humanity and divinity.¹²

Likewise, by choosing to become flesh as a vulnerable infant, God dissolves the boundary between the powerful and the weak.¹³ In this way, God not only transgresses the seemingly fixed boundary between God and humankind, but also upsets a more tangible boundary in the human condition by upending the human notion of what true power looks like: power is not a gallant warrior on horseback, but a tender newborn, defenseless against the world. Preaching that disseminates these doctrines is inherently queer because the theology it espouses reveals the radical, boundary-dissolving love of God. However, a queer homiletic is not only queer because of its theological content. Queerness is also present in the radical love revealed in the form that the message takes.

¹¹ Cheng, x.

¹² *Ibid.*, 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

In order to understand how radical love is revealed in the form of the message, it is first necessary to understand how radical love is revealed through the queer experience. Cheng's understanding of God as the "sending forth of radical love" gives his reader a sense of the inherent queerness of God.¹⁴ By identifying Scripture, reason, and experience as essential components of God's "coming out" story, Cheng identifies divine revelation as evidence of radical love.¹⁵ Consequently, God is not only revealed through Scripture and reason, but also through personal experience, including queer experience. Cheng argues that the self-disclosure, by God, of divine attributes previously unknown to humankind is akin to the coming out process.¹⁶ When a queer person comes out, a boundary between that person and the person to whom they come out is dissolved, much like God dissolves a boundary between the humanity and divinity in the revelation of Jesus Christ.¹⁷

For example, by coming out to an accepting and affirming friend or family member, a queer preacher might have an experience of God's radical love through the other's acceptance of them. Conversely, if a preacher comes out to a person who is unsupportive, then the preacher might have a traumatic experience of rejection which is wholly opposite of God's radical love. However, if a preacher in the latter situation eventually does come out to a person or group of people who show that preacher the unconditional acceptance of God's radical love, then the preacher will experience the

¹⁴ Cheng, 44.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

dissolving of a boundary previously reinforced by a negative experience. As a result, queer preachers who have gone through the coming out process experience God's radical love in a distinctive way. Not only do queer preachers know that God is love (and that God's love is an embodied, human reality) because of God's revelation through Scripture;¹⁸ they also know it because of a personal experience of that love through the process of coming out, which can be understood as its own type of revelation.¹⁹

Because God's radical love is revealed in the experience of queer preachers in the coming out process, queer preachers are able to communicate that love in an especially effective way. By evoking something of their own experience of the radical love of God, queer preachers are well suited to promote within their listeners an experience of that same love. This is not to say that queer preachers are closer in proximity to God's love than their non-queer listeners; to do so would be theologically unsound. However, the queer preacher's experience of the revelation of radical love enables the queer preacher to help other listeners experience it. This is especially beneficial for listeners who are unaware of how God's radical love is present in their lives. While a preacher's experience will not necessarily evoke or even connect directly with the experience of the listener (after all, no two people share identical experiences), sharing a queer experience with a congregation of mixed gender identities and sexual orientations will build connection through radical love because sharing the queer experience helps listeners understand and empathize with the experiences of others. Such empathy engenders in the

¹⁸ See, for example, 1 John 4:8 and John 3:16.

¹⁹ Cheng, 45.

listeners a radical love of neighbor based on their renewed perspective of God's radical love for them.

Additionally, God's identification with queer experience can be understood as a rebuke of the traditional view that "some things are best left unsaid," especially regarding sexuality.²⁰ On the contrary, God affirms the goodness of queerness by revealing Godself through queer experience. Such revelations are evident through the coming out process as well as through the love that queer people show to others in sexual, romantic, and non-intimate relationships. Queer preachers are able to engender an experience of radical love within the listener as a result of these and other experiences of the boundary-dissolving characteristics of the love of God. They do this not only by disseminating inherently queer Christian teaching, but also by doing so in a way that promotes an experience of radical love. While this may be accomplished through storytelling, it does not have to be. For instance, by interpreting Scripture through the lens of queer experience, the queer preacher participates in God's radical love and brings that love to bear on both the content and the communication of the sermon.

What's more, by virtue of their experience, the queer preacher is an embodied reality of God's radical love. Radical love is not only inherent in the scriptural content of the sermon or the preacher's interpretation of it, but it becomes part of the particular sermonic event because it is brought to life in the identity of the queer person and proclaimed to specific listeners in a specific context. Therefore, embodiment also dissolves the boundary between form and content. Following James Weldon Johnson and Thomas Troeger, homiletical scholar Luke Powery considers the sermon to be more than

²⁰ Cheng, 46.

mere words, but a word that takes on human form.²¹ He writes, “Preaching is an embodied practice, theology in flesh and bones.”²² Preaching cannot be separated from the form in which it is delivered. Form not only concerns methodological structures or stylistic issues, but an ontological reality. Queer preachers bring to the preaching event the embodied reality of radical love. In this sense, it is part of their very being. Again, it is important to note that such love does not belong to queer preachers alone. It is common to all who were created by God in the image of God.

Between Distance and Participation

Not only does a queer homiletic dissolve the boundary between subject matter and style, but it also *reveals radical love by dissolving the boundary between an individual’s distance from, and participation with, the biblical text*. It does so by recognizing distance and participation as the potentially harmful boundaries that they are. However, following Craddock’s example, a queer homiletic dissolves the boundary between distance and participation by recognizing both distance and participation as essential communication aids. Therefore, a queer homiletic is one that recognizes the distance necessary for an individual to faithfully participate in the biblical text, thus enabling the individual to experience God’s radical love through participation in the living Word of God.

To discuss the Christian story is to discuss the Bible, the fundamental Christian text that tells the story of salvation history culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Bible is the chief means of revelation and the foundation of

²¹ Luke A. Powery, “Embodying the Sermon,” in *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 184.

²² *Ibid.*

the church's core doctrines of faith. However, as Craddock clarifies, boundaries that present difficulties in communicating Christian truth can arise from within it. Such boundaries, according to Kierkegaard, are not caused by a lack of information but by "something else" that impedes an "innate realization of the significance of what was already known."²³ Craddock identifies these boundaries as distance and participation.²⁴

The main reasons that Craddock considers distance from the text a boundary for the hearer are perhaps fairly apparent: the text was originally written in a faraway time, in a faraway place, in a foreign language, and in unfamiliar terms that describe a cultural context very different from that of the contemporary hearer.²⁵ Such chasms across time and space are boundaries that make it difficult for the hearer to participate in the story.

However, distance is not alone in limiting an effective hearing of the gospel message. Participation can also be a boundary to the hearer, especially when it leads to anti-intellectual tendencies.²⁶ Anti-intellectual participation occurs when hearers gather from the text whatever is most comforting to them given their particular needs in their particular context. Such participation, Craddock says, becomes problematic because it ends up being participation in the personal story of the hearer rather than in the Christian story. As a result, the listener who is satisfied with the meaning that they have gleaned from the surface of the text fails to probe for deeper truth.²⁷

²³ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Craddock believes that boundaries of distance are intensified in part by reliance on the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation because such criticism is too quick to discount the form in which information is offered, favoring instead the pursuit of the technical meaning of words and phrases.²⁸ According to Craddock, however necessary it may be, a preoccupation with whether or not certain events are historically accurate leaves little room for experiencing the true and the living Word of God.²⁹ He views historical criticism (or at least those historical critical approaches that seem to ignore the text in favor of an elusive reality that lies behind it) as a particularly problematic interpretive lens given the Bible's penchant for making meaning through the joining of the subject matter with the literary form in which it is presented. Such is the case, for example, with biblical poetry and the parables of Jesus; their meaning cannot be grasped apart from the manner in which it is presented.³⁰ Furthermore, Craddock contends that the historical critic's emphasis on objectivity has led to a deemphasis on the role of the biblical narrative in meaning making, which was never intended to describe specific historical events but rather to communicate larger truths about God's relationship with creation.³¹ For example,

imagine one person tossing out Shakespeare's *Othello* because there is no historical evidence that there ever was a Moorish general in the service of Venice, while another person embraces it as "true" because a rare footnote in an ancient history of Italy proved that a Moor once so served.³²

²⁸ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³² *Ibid.*

However, while Craddock identifies both distance and participation as threats to effective Christian communication, he also recognizes them as “twin essentials” of Christian communication.³³ For instance, an appropriate distance from the text helps the hearer fight the temptation to invent meaning that, while suitable for a contemporary context, would be absurd when the text’s historical context is taken into consideration.³⁴ Likewise, participation in the Scripture as the living Word, far from being anti-intellectual, makes the divinely-inspired Word relevant to the life of the contemporary Christian. In other words, historical inquiry is necessary to achieve faithful participation in the living Word, but without participation, historical research presents a problematic boundary which inhibits gospel communication.³⁵ Thus, if distance and participation both aid *and* hinder a hearing of the Christian story, then the boundaries that they create can only be dissolved by paying due attention to the virtues of each. The preacher’s primary task is to get the living Word *off* of the page and into the ears and hearts of the listeners, not to discern exactly how the words got *onto* the page in the first place. Historical critique is essential to this task, but only insofar as it aids participation in a fuller meaning with the text, a meaning that engages not only the mind but also the heart and the will.³⁶

A queer homiletic is uniquely suited to provide due attention to elements of both distance and participation due to the fact that queer people experience an automatic

³³ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 59-61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

distance from the biblical narrative because of their queerness alone. For example, there is no biblical confirmation of queerness in the ancient world. There are no explicit depictions of queer life in the Bible in the same way that there are explicit depictions of life involving commonly accepted social norms. Acknowledging this distance as an existing boundary is crucial for a queer homiletic. For instance, at God's instruction, the patriarch Abram takes Sarai as his wife. There is no analogous story involving a same sex relationship. Likewise, in the story of Jesus' birth, Mary, a woman, is engaged to Joseph, a man. There is no similar representation of a same-sex betrothal in any of the gospels, or indeed, in the entire canon. This lack of the depiction of queer relationships is not surprising, given that a primary goal of these stories is the propagation of the lineage of the principal agents of salvation history. However, that does not negate that fact that an obviously queer experience, a reality in the contemporary cultural context, is not present in the biblical texts.

While there is no obvious depiction of the queer experience in the biblical text, there may well be queer elements that exist within certain biblical stories. Cheng points to the conception of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit as evidence of Mary's defiance of gender roles and biological barriers.³⁷ Similarly, Sarai's suggestion that Abram take Hagar as a lover so that he might have a child, in addition to representing the polygamous culture of the ancient near-east, could represent the queering of a traditional sexual relational boundary between husband and wife. However, queer interpretations of Scripture are the result of an interpreter's own critical distance, which enables the interpreter to plunge beneath a story's surface in search of deeper meaning. In other

³⁷ Cheng, 90-92.

words, such interpretations are the result of in-depth theological analysis precisely because queer life was not evident on the surface of the text.

Another aspect of queer distance from the biblical story is found in texts containing explicit condemnations of queer activity, such as those prohibiting sexual relationships between persons of the same gender.³⁸ As a result of the inclusion of these passages in biblical literature, many Christians consider queerness to be sinful.³⁹ As such, generations of queer people have been made to feel unworthy of God's love. Yet, aside from being rhetorical fodder for those who advocate so-called "traditional" understandings of gender roles and sexual behavior, such condemnatory texts may actually provide the critical distance necessary for queer readers and hearers of the Word to begin authentic and intentional participation with the text.

Although at times the collective Christian consciousness has functioned as though the world of the Bible is a world of white faces and Western logic, it is not. The biblical world is, in fact, a multi-national, multi-racial world featuring a range of characters with a variety of abilities, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. But while other minority and/or oppressed groups are portrayed within the biblical story, there is no concrete evidence of queer people within the story itself. This specific distance-related boundary of non-representation within the biblical corpus is distinctive to the queer community. This is not to say that women, people of color, or the disabled are adequately represented

³⁸ Lev. 18:22; Lev. 20:3; Rom. 1:26-27.

³⁹ For evidence of this reality in the public sphere, one need look no further than the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primary during which Pete Buttigieg, the first openly gay presidential candidate to receive national delegates in a major party primary, criticized President Donald Trump for assaulting the Christian values that Trump so often claims to uphold. Many Christian supporters of the president dismissed Buttigieg's comments outright based on his sexual orientation, identifying his lifestyle as contrary to biblical teaching.

in the biblical text by today's standards of inclusion, nor is it to say that the representation of members of those groups in the Bible gives the reader an accurate depiction of their lives today. It is simply to say that queer experience is unique in that it is not overtly depicted in the biblical texts at all.

If Jesus had attended a same-sex wedding at Cana or called an openly-gay disciple, then perhaps a different hermeneutical lens would be required. Yet while the Bible does not overtly include stories such as these, Cheng's theological framework, particularly his conception of Jesus Christ and the Trinity, helps demonstrate how the Bible reveals radical love that is relevant to the queer experience nonetheless. For example, Jesus is the embodiment of boundary dissolution.⁴⁰ In him, humanity and divinity have been forever united. At the same time, Jesus dissolves social, sexual, and gender boundaries, as well. When considering that Jesus associated with the social outcasts of his day, it is not hard to imagine him attending a same-sex wedding today. Indeed, *he* was one of the outcasts of his day, in a way that resonates with the modern queer experience. As Justin Tanis points out, Jesus was harassed in public and estranged from his earthly family.⁴¹ Furthermore, Jesus represents an aversion to binary ways of thinking, rejecting commonly held either/or dichotomies.⁴² Indeed, he dissolved the boundary between the rigidly defined social customs by spending his time with the sick

⁴⁰ Cheng, 78.

⁴¹ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theologies, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 142-43.

⁴² Cheng, 81.

and the impoverished.⁴³ Likewise, the Risen Christ continues to dissolve the boundaries of identity markers to this day. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁴

There are, however, important differences between Craddock’s homiletic and the queer homiletic being proposed here. For Craddock, boundaries of distance and participation are methodological issues, but for the queer preacher, distance and participation are ontological realities. Because queer preachers do not find any direct affirmation of their lives in Scripture, and in fact even encounter texts used to condemn their humanity, for them distance becomes the bad news and participation becomes the good. In other words, for queer preachers, unexamined distance can lead to problematic misunderstandings in which surface-level meanings of words or phrases are misinterpreted without the proper context. Such misinterpretation could lead to alienation, not only from the text, but from the church, and the faith.

Ontological distance operates on a different level than what Craddock considers in his critique of historical criticism. Because this distance is about the very identity of queer people, it must be combined with the good news of participation in order to be redeemed in new ways of preaching. Similarly, participation in a queer homiletic is not simply the pietistic, self-assuring reading of the text that Craddock warns against. Rather, it reveals a deeper level of participation that affects the very being of the queer preacher, and in fact, all preachers. It goes beyond asking, “How does this text speak to me?” in

⁴³ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies: Re-Dressing the Tradition,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 139-41.

⁴⁴ Gal. 3:28.

order to reflect on how the inherent queerness of God impacts the identity of the preacher.

Elizabeth Stuart is a helpful partner in such reflections. She argues that Christians are a part of the Trinity by virtue of being members of the body of Christ on earth.⁴⁵ Therefore, Christians participate in this divine dance, which includes them in the “passionate friendship” of the Godhead. This idea not only validates queer people as being made in the image of God, but also solidifies the importance of queer participation in the Christian message. Therefore, not only do queer preachers participate in the words on the page through textual analysis of Scripture, but also, as mentioned, they embody, along with all other Christians, what it means to be alive in Jesus, the true and living Word of God.

Cheng’s conception of the Trinity also demonstrates how a queer homiletic reveals radical love through divine participation. Cheng defines the Trinity as an internal community of radical love.⁴⁶ Through radical love, the Trinity breaks down boundaries between sexual and non-sexual relationships. To explain how, Cheng recalls Stuart’s depiction of the Trinity as passionate friendship.⁴⁷ Stuart argues that passionate friendship is consistent with the ideals of ancient Christians who emphasized their connection in the body of Christ over their biological family connections. Such friendship is modeled on *perichoresis*, which is often conceptualized as a type of divine dance in which the three

⁴⁵ See Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 240-44.

⁴⁶ Cheng, 56-61.

⁴⁷ Stuart, 240-44.

persons of the Trinity continually participate.⁴⁸ This relational action is representative of the passionate friendship they share, thus revealing radical love.

A queer homiletic recognizes the distance created by the non-representation of queer identities in the biblical text as a boundary, and acknowledges the boundary as a useful starting point for enabling faithful queer participation with the text as the living Word of God. The non-representational distance invites queer preachers to “step back” from the text in order to locate queer perspective within it. Likewise, queer participation in the Trinity through the body of Christ, the living Word, makes possible the experience of radical love.

Between the Preacher and the Message

As evidenced above, the queer preacher has an ability to elicit effective revelation of the gospel by dissolving the boundary between an individual’s distance from, and participation with, the biblical text. The dissolution of this boundary has the potential to help hearers who are themselves distanced from the text by virtue of the chasm between the original biblical context and the modern hearer's world. In order to fully dissolve this boundary, queer preachers must, as Craddock suggests, give themselves wholly over to the task of getting their sermons heard.⁴⁹ In this way, *a queer homiletic dissolves the boundary between the preacher and the message.*

The boundary between preacher and message is dissolved by virtue of the queer preacher becoming a servant of the Word, which involves offering a personal self-

⁴⁸ For a discussion of *perichoresis* as “reciprocity” and “interpenetration,” see David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 89.

⁴⁹ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 110.

sacrifice in the message itself. Craddock says, “If I genuinely give myself, my faculties of mind and heart, to effect something, to generate, or to activate something within the listeners, then my message and not just my life in some general sense will function as such a servant.”⁵⁰ In this same vein, queer preachers make a homiletical sacrifice by giving of themselves, including their queer identity, to ensure an effective hearing of the gospel message. Such a sacrifice is, again, not merely methodological but ontological.

Contrary to Craddock’s notion that one’s message and not just one’s life will be servants of the Word, a queer homiletic provides the opportunity for preachers to realize that *their lives and not just their messages* are servants of the Word. The sacrifice comes not from queer preachers merely offering something of their faculties in order to evoke an experience from within their listeners, but from queer preachers establishing their very identity as rooted in a God who is inherently queer. For instance, if the listeners know that the preacher is gay, then the very presence of the preacher is a message in and of itself, thereby making the preacher a living embodiment of the message. By linking their identity to God’s, the boundary between queer preachers and the message is dissolved by the radical love that comes from God. By the dissolution of this boundary, radical love is revealed in the form of a God who is deeply and intimately connected with all of humankind, regardless of the essentialist categories that humans create around gender and sexual identity.

The dissolution of the boundary between the preacher and the message may involve revealing uncomfortable personal truths or committing to beliefs that listeners may reject. By identifying as queer, queer preachers become vulnerable, which in turn

⁵⁰ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 109.

opens the queer preacher up to greater scrutiny and criticism. This vulnerability is powerful evidence of a sacrifice that, while never equaling the sacrifice that Jesus made throughout his ministry, constitutes a similar willingness to face rejection and condemnation. Jesus not only sacrificed, as Craddock points out, by using narrative rhetorical methods as a means of giving himself wholly over to the story in order to be a tool for his listener's effective hearing, he also offered his whole self to procure everlasting life for all people.⁵¹

Through participation in God's radical, boundary-dissolving love, the preacher's ontological nature is revealed through the vulnerability that accompanies the sacrifice they make. Such an act of vulnerability is made possible by God's radical love, which dissolves the boundary between the human and the divine.

Between the Preacher and the Listener

It is appropriate at this juncture to clarify the preacher-listener relationship. A queer homiletic is not meant to be a homiletic with which only queer people can identify, but rather one that is beneficial to all Christians. Although a queer homiletic is developed out of the queer experience, it is not limited to queer listeners, nor is it meant to exclude any preacher or listener who does not identify as queer. To do so would be to reinforce another unhelpful binary category. On the contrary, *a queer homiletic dissolves the boundary between the preacher and the listener*. A queer homiletic might be more accessible for queer persons, but if, as has been established through Cheng's theology, God's very nature is queer, then it will be important for all Christian preachers because of the inherently queer nature of Christianity.

⁵¹ Craddock, *Overhearing*, 109-11.

A comparison to another marginalized homiletical lens is helpful here. For example, a feminist homiletic might establish women's ways of preaching based on their experiences of marginalization and oppression in a gendered pulpit. Similarly, it might emphasize a woman's ability to highlight certain so-called "feminine" aspects of Christian theology and the Bible, such as intimacy, connection, relatedness, and cooperation, and bring them to bear on preaching.⁵² However, an emphasis on characteristics such as these does not establish a feminist homiletic as only applicable to female hearers, nor does it determine that only female preachers can highlight such qualities. On the contrary, feminine perspectives apply to all listeners and are accessible to all preachers, perhaps particularly those who would not be predisposed to recognize the such concepts through their own lens.

Likewise, a queer preacher is well suited to emphasize boundary dissolution. While this emphasis may stem from the queer preacher's identity, it is not applicable only to queer listeners. Rather, it enables all listeners to experience God's radical love, regardless of how they identify. In fact, since queerness is central to the Christian understanding of God, the queer preacher's theological approach cannot be considered unique. However, its virtue is not found in uniqueness, but rather in its success in communicating the radical, boundary-dissolving love that is God's living Word to any listener, regardless of the listener's gender identity or sexual orientation.

Queer preachers find success in communicating God's radical love in their very being. This is to say, a queer preacher's approach is ontological rather than simply

⁵² See Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 22-42.

methodological. The queer preacher connects to the listener not simply through narrative craft as Craddock does, but also through a deep dependence on the good news of participation, chiefly realized by virtue of the fact that the preacher and congregation are part of the body of Christ. Stuart's understanding of participation in the body of Christ is again applicable, in that such participation establishes the preacher's identity firmly in Christ, whose radical love dissolves the boundary between the preacher and the listener. A queer homiletic expands Craddock's narrative homiletic from a *method*, which creates an experience, to a *way of being*, engendering a fuller recognition of the fundamental experience in which Christians already participate: the body of Christ. This vital and shared experience of participation in the body of Christ reveals that the preacher and the listener draw their identity from the same queer God.

As argued above, if listeners are aware that the preacher is queer, then the preacher's very presence is a sermon, but knowledge of the preacher's queerness also means that the preacher is united with the listener. As discussed in the introduction, Olive Hinnant has written about the importance of the "out" preacher to a queer homiletic. Hinnant argues that God "comes out" through the embodied reality of the queer preacher, in whose nature God reveals something about Godself.⁵³ A preacher's sexuality is by no means the central component of the preaching event, but the preacher's way of being, which includes gender identity and sexual orientation, does impact it. Hinnant's analysis points to the incarnational nature of preaching, in which something about God's nature is revealed in the flesh of the preacher, just as it was in Jesus' flesh. Such a revelation of the

⁵³ Olive Hinnant, *God Comes Out: A Queer Homiletic* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 168.

radical love of God dissolves the boundary between the preacher and the listeners, each of whom discovers their ultimate, non-essentialist identity in Christ.

Conclusion

After briefly reviewing the insights acquired from a study of Patrick Cheng's queer theology and Fred Craddock's homiletical theory, this chapter has engaged their scholarship in order to reveal how their work sets the stage for a queer homiletic based on the radical, boundary-dissolving love of God. Both Cheng and Craddock speak to the necessity of boundary dissolution, which is the basis for a queer homiletic. A queer homiletic dissolves boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel in order to reveal God's radical love so that all listeners, queer and otherwise, can experience the living Word of God. Specifically, this chapter has discussed how a queer homiletic reveals radical love by dissolving the boundaries between subject matter and style, between an individual's distance from, and participation with, the text, between the preacher and the message, and between the listener and the message.

Conclusion

Very little scholarly treatment of queer perspectives exists in the field of homiletics. While existing scholarship discusses queer theology in general, a very small amount of attention is paid to how queer theology impacts gospel proclamation. In light of this void, this thesis has explored the intersection of queer theology and preaching in order to bring queer perspectives to bear in the field of homiletics, and has revealed the benefits of placing Patrick Cheng's queer theology and Fred Craddock's homiletical methodology in conversation.

Cheng defines queer theology in terms of God's radical, boundary-dissolving love, which "dissolves existing human boundaries, whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God."¹ Queer theology challenges and collapses conventional human understandings by focusing on the inherent queerness of Christian doctrines such as the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Events such as these upend traditional understandings of common binaries such as, life and death, humanity and divinity, center and margins, beginnings and endings, infinite and finite, and punishment and forgiveness.²

Craddock identifies effective preaching as inhibited by boundaries between subject matter and style, listener and message, speaker and message, and boundaries

¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), x.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

within the text itself, such as those between distance and participation.³ According to Craddock, such boundaries are precipitated by the preacher's inability to preach the gospel in a way that the listener can truly hear, a concept he based on the work of Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote, "There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one cannot directly communicate to the other." While Kierkegaard may have been able to assume an abundance of Christian information in his context, scholars like Thomas Long have recognized such an assumption as problematic in the present day. Nevertheless, boundaries to effective preaching persist, and innovative solutions are necessary for the modern Christian to fully participate in the living Word of God.

One valuable solution to modern boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel is found in the development of a queer homiletic. Reading Craddock's homiletic through the lens of Cheng's theology unmask the queerness inherent in the Christian theological tradition, as well as in the homiletical methodology of the past several decades, and has illumined the path toward a queer homiletic based on the radical, boundary-dissolving love of God. Therefore, using Craddock's work to identify barriers to effective preaching, and Cheng's work to envision a way forward that overcomes those barriers by dissolving boundaries, this thesis crafts a robust queer homiletic with universal application to preachers and listeners, both queer and otherwise.

This queer homiletic, based on God's radical love, dissolves boundaries that inhibit an effective hearing of the gospel message, including boundaries between subject matter and style, listener and message, speaker and message, and an individual's distance

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 9, 16, 32, 37, 49.

from and participation with the biblical text. This homiletic is particularly applicable and useful in that it recognizes and illustrates a queer premise of God, which transcends the false dichotomies of male/female, gay/straight, divine/human, life/death, and unlocks the potential for the listener to recognize the radical love of God which dissolves the boundaries between God and humankind. Just as God sent Jesus to overcome the barriers caused by the social constructs in his time (as is illustrated through the gospel), a queer homiletic prompts preachers and their listeners to overcome contemporary social constructs.

For this reason, a queer homiletic has the potential to impact both current and future preaching by challenging and collapsing assumptions about conventional boundaries in order to empower preachers and their listeners to question many of the essentialist binaries to which they have become accustomed. Furthermore, this homiletic encourages hearers to reject the view that sexual and gender identities are fixed concepts, and instead to view them for what they are, constructs of societal discourse.

Understanding sexual attraction and gender expression as fluid notions enables listeners to expand their cultural worldview through queer theology. However, challenging earthly binaries is only one potential benefit of a homiletic rooted in queer theology. Not only does it upend binary thinking by deconstructing common understandings of gender and sexual binaries in favor of a more indefinite perspective on sex and gender, it also expands the theological, religious, and spiritual boundaries that often inhibit a hearer's relationship with God.

In addition, a homiletic based on God's radical, boundary-dissolving love has several positive implications for future homiletical study. For example, continued

exploration of the possibilities of a queer homiletic will foster the development of new queer voices. In the past several decades, acceptance of queer people has become normalized in many mainline Protestant denominations, paving the way for persons of varying sexual and gender identities to serve the church openly in both lay and ordained capacities, including in the pulpit. This important progress is cause for much rejoicing, and yet without expanding scholarly investigation of the relationship between queer thought on Christian theology, queer preachers will remain without the critical lenses necessary to explore how queer theology impacts the Word proclaimed. Such exploration is critical for a queer preacher to understand how their ontological realities impact their Christian experiences and inform the unique nature of their gospel-centered life.

In addition to illuminating the unique ways in which queer voices subvert traditional boundaries, more study in this arena will offer new possibilities of effective, insightful homiletics as related to queer identity. Continuing to explore and define queerness liturgically is important work for members of the body of Christ. The work this thesis provides, as well as what has come before it, has only scratched the surface of what must be done in order to adequately mine the riches of this important topic. Further exploration of what boundaries inhibit a relationship with God or the effective hearing of God's Word would be invaluable. Additionally, while this study has focused on the importance of boundary dissolution in a queer homiletic, it will be important to ask what other foundational aspects of queer identity might undergird an effective queer homiletic.

Finally, moving forward in the development of queer homiletics will require collaboration with helpful homiletical partners. Secular queer theorists, feminist theologians and homileticians, as well as womanist scholars, scholars of theology of the

disabled, and queer theologians of varying identities, will be necessary conversation partners in these efforts. Scholars in these subfields have been engaged for decades in research and writing about how marginalized and oppressed identities impact theological perspectives in terms of both theory and practice. By working together, scholars across the theological academy, and the church, can help combat the anti-intellectualism of those who seek a God of exclusion rather than the God of radical, boundary-dissolving love.

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