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Queer Bodies in the Body of Christ

Victoria Featherston¹

Queer theologian Lynn Tonstad powerfully states that “Christianity has a reputation for hating the body, valuing the soul over the body, and seeking to control the soul over the body.”² It is helpful to note that Tonstad draws from Augustine and Descartes’ claims concerning the conflict between “soul and body” and demonstrates how both can be harmful to those who are marginalized.³ In my understanding, the church has historically shamed and policed bodies that are non-conforming, such as female, Black and Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC), and Queer bodies. These constructs were created by those in power: “white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-gender, men” and enforced by the church as a whole.⁴ The sacred text then became a weapon for shaming those not in a position of privilege.

This idea of normalizing discussions of sexuality and the church can be contested. Those who do not experience the policing of their bodies by the church will not necessarily see this as problematic. In a conversation with my contextual placement supervisor on October 8, 2021, Rev. Dr. Kimberlynn Mueller-McNabb told me that it may be out of a sense of “political politeness,” as there is a sense of body shaming in general in the Church whereby folks are not comfortable with their bodies. Perhaps this shame one feels toward one’s own body is directly related to Tonstad’s concept of Christianity seeking “control” over the body.⁵ Elizabeth Edman expands on this further:

We exist in bodies that constantly remind us both of the ways that we are connected to each other and of the ways that we are separate from others, different from others. Our bodies are capable of interacting powerfully with other bodies, bringing us closer to ecstasy, to the sacred. They can also sustain damage, and do damage.⁶

Growing up in a small town, I felt a strong sense of shame connected with my sexual orientation and with sex in general. It was as though there was a no-talk rule about discussing one’s sexuality publicly within the church. It was not even that being attracted to the same sex was shameful, but rather being attracted to anyone. I would be inclined to think that it has more to do with Western society’s construct of shame. Lenny Duncan offers that

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² Marie Linn Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 18.

³ Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 18–20.

⁴ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, “Guest Lecture: Intersectional Theology” (lecture, Martin Luther University College, Waterloo, ON, September 30, 2021).

⁵ Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 18.

⁶ Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know about Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* [e-book edition] (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 35.

the church has “made sex dirty and [has] reduced human wholeness and love to the physical act of sex. We no longer see our sexuality as God given and therefore good.”⁷

Within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, pairing Lenny Duncan and Tonstad’s words highlights the experience of being shamed and hiding in plain sight within one’s congregation. One is taught that each of us is “justified by faith,” but this can suddenly become invalidated upon revealing one’s true self.⁸ And when speaking with others outside of a congregational context, some voiced this same experience. I have friends who left the church because they felt as though they were not welcome due to their sexual orientation or gender identity/identities. The question becomes: How do we, as a church, move past policing or boxing in those who are different and make way for vibrant faith communities? When I was fourteen and still very much in the closet, the Bishop from British Columbia came to visit my home congregation in Southern Ontario. A member asked him his feelings on same sex marriages, and the Bishop shuffled uncomfortably. I decided I would never come out to my own congregation after hearing a member of it speaking in such a hateful way towards the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Fortunately, there were several of St. Luke’s pastors who expressed acceptance of those who were different. The question then becomes: How do I, as an aspiring faith leader, destigmatize sexuality in the church as these pastors tried to do?

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada’s 2020 Annual Report, despite the “global pandemic,” the “three task forces” “continued” to meet, one of which was the “Task Force Addressing Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia.”⁹ The goal of this taskforce is to “allow the ELCIC to grow in compassion and understanding for all of God’s children who are pushed to the margins and do not experience full-on inclusion in our church.”¹⁰ However, the onus is placed on congregations in order to create spaces of dialogue.¹¹

As the Bible has been used to further marginalize people, an occasional more constructive reference in a sermon or a Bible study may be helpful. For instance, Jesus does not condemn same sex relationships. When Jesus encounters an opportunity for sexual shaming, he chooses not to. In his dialogue with the Samaritan woman who had been married five times and was living common-law,¹² he does not judge her but encourages her understanding of him as the Messiah.¹³ Jesus accepts her as a woman of faith in both body and soul.

Tonstad challenges, empowers, and grants me permission to take some of the harmful ideologies I heard from those in my community and place them in context. Her book also allows me to examine where this “controlling of the body” may still occur in Christianity.¹⁴

⁷ Rev. Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 79.

⁸ Romans 5:1, NRSV.

⁹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Living Our Faith: 2020 Annual Report in Mission for Others* (Winnipeg, MB: ELCIC, 2020), 10–11, https://elcic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ELCICAnnualReportfor2020_WEB-HIRES.pdf.

¹⁰ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Living Our Faith*, 11.

¹¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Living Our Faith*, 13.

¹² John 4:17–18, NRSV.

¹³ John 4:26, NRSV.

¹⁴ Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 18.

In Newfoundland, where I currently live, these hurtful ideologies (“anti-abortion” and “anti-gay”) have recently been voiced by a Pentecostal minister.¹⁵ He preached this as Gospel.¹⁶ There is no easy solution for the issues that Tonstad raises, especially when people sincerely believe what they have been taught since childhood. Change will require both courage and patience on the part of the pastor to guide individuals and congregations to openness and love.

¹⁵ CBC News, “Anti-LGBT, Abortion Views at Bonavista Church Persist in Certain Groups, Says Former Minister,” CBC, September 16, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/bonavista-church-anti-lgbtq-views-1.6173857>.

¹⁶ CBC News, “Anti-LGBT, Abortion Views.”