

*The Pizzazz of Creation*  
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones  
Wake Forest Divinity School  
3 April 2008

On March 2, 2007 Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, posted a blog entry entitled “Is Your Baby Gay? What If You Could Know? What If You Could Do Something About It?”<sup>1</sup> He took up the issue of whether gay people are disposed that way because of their genetics. Mohler said that all the scientific evidence, though not yet conclusive, was leaning heavily in the direction that there is a genetic predisposition for sexual orientation. In other words, a leading fundamentalist was accepting the “born that way” argument.

Now, many people might expect that Mohler’s acknowledgment of this science would lead him to change his views on LGBT equality. However he did not change his views. Instead, he argued this:

If a biological basis is found, and if a prenatal test is then developed, and if a successful treatment to reverse the sexual orientation to heterosexual is ever developed, we would support its use as we should unapologetically support the use of any appropriate means to avoid sexual temptation and the inevitable effects of sin.<sup>2</sup>

According to Mohler, Christians are morally obligated to pursue and advocate such treatment “for the greater glory of God.”<sup>3</sup>

That outlandish and appalling argument shows something important that we must keep in mind. Mohler, a strong opponent of abortion and stem cell research, is willing to compromise his views on the sanctity of the fetus in order to accommodate his prejudices against gay people. That blog post should be a startling wake-up call. What has long been the subject of science fiction – parents custom designing their children like their living rooms – might become a reality within this century. And if it does, it could be a serious threat to difference. If a policy like Mohler’s was carried out, it would mean the genocide of LGBT people.

One reason I was troubled by Mohler’s position is that it revealed a conflict in two key virtues of the LGBT community – diversity and freedom. Though members of the LGBT community differ on their views of abortion and genetic research, the leadership has defended a radical and maybe unlimited notion of body freedom. Yet, a radical and unlimited freedom to make decisions about the body, including reproductive choices, would seem to support the freedom of parents to exterminate or modify their gay fetus.

---

<sup>1</sup> Al Mohler, “Is Your Baby Gay? What if You Could Know? What if You Could Do Something About It?” ([www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com), posted 2 March 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Can we think and talk in a way that affirms both freedom and diversity? In searching for a way to respond I remembered my favourite passage in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

In case you don't know *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Dillard is a naturalist. In this book she takes walks and sits by the creek and lies in fields and writes about what she sees and smells and hears and touches and how those experiences of nature cause her to reflect. The book stands in a long line of American naturalist writing that pursues the spiritual significance of the raw wilderness. Interestingly, this was the book that all first semester biology majors had to read at Oklahoma Baptist University when I was a student.

In my favorite paragraphs of the book, her experiences of exploring nature lead her to the following reflection on God and creation:

The world is full of creatures that for some reason seem stranger to us than others, and libraries are full of books describing them – hagfish, platypuses, lizardlike pangolins four feet long with bright green, lapped scales like umbrella-tree leaves on a bush hut roof, butterflies emerging from anthills, spiderlings wafting through the air clutching tiny silken balloons, horseshoe crabs . . . the creator creates. Does he stoop, does he speak, does he save, succor, prevail? Maybe. But he creates; he creates everything and anything.

Of all known forms of life, only about ten percent are still living today. All other forms – fantastic plants, ordinary plants, living animals with unimaginably various wings, tails, teeth, brains – are utterly and forever gone. That is a great many forms that have been created. Multiplying ten times the number of living forms today yields a profusion that is quite beyond what I consider thinkable. Why so many forms? Why not just that one hydrogen atom? The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another, or millions simultaneously, with an exuberance that would seem to be unwarranted, and with an abandoned energy sprung from an unfathomable font. What is going on here? The point . . . [is] that it all flows so freely wild, like the creek, that it all surges in such a free, fringed tangle. Freedom is the world's water and weather, the world's nourishment freely given, its soil and sap: and the creator loves pizzazz.<sup>4</sup>

Dillard presents the theological concept of “pizzazz,” which ties together both diversity and freedom as aspects of the creation as God intended it.

So, I want to develop the theological concept of pizzazz as a way to respond to Mohler. First, let me give a little background on the issues of LGBT identity, addressing Mohler's “born that way” argument. Then I want to demonstrate how diversity and freedom connect with both the LGBT experience and with elements of Christian theology. Finally I'll talk briefly about how, using the theological concept of pizzazz, we can develop a queer affirming Christian theology and practice that responds to the challenge posed by Mohler.

---

<sup>4</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974; reprint, New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 139-40.

If you don't read much queer theory, then you may not know that for decades there has been a debate in the gay community about issues of identity. The core camps are the essentialists and the constructivists. The essentialists argue that sexual orientation and/or gender identity are essential qualities of a human person's identity. The constructivists argue that categories like sexual orientation and gender are fluid -- that they change over time in various cultures and even in a person's lifetime. This group argues that these categories are more often cultural and social constructs.

I, and plenty of others, happen to think it's a little of both. Some people do seem to be genetically disposed one way or the other. There is also clear evidence that when a society is friendly toward same-sex relations, that a far larger percentage of the population will participate. For example, take ancient Greece where male same-sex relations were common and honored elements of society. A majority of men seem to have participated. Does that mean there were more gay people then or does it mean that the category gay has shifted meaning over time?

For many decades now, gays and lesbians have marshaled the argument, "We were born this way" in order to persuade people to support our human and civil rights. It has been very persuasive to more moderate people who, convinced that our sexual orientation or gender identity was not a choice, chose to extend compassion and equality.

But it is odd that the LGBT community used this argument. Why? Because the born-this-way argument first arose in the 19th century with the rise of medical and psychological science as a way of treating LGBT people as different from or even less than "normal" or "straight" people. These early sexologists created the term "homosexuality" and used it to refer to something they considered a disease or disorder, an abnormality. Because homosexuals were born different than normal people, then homosexuals could be treated differently. The early sexologists for the first time pathologized sexuality.

Remember that for prejudiced people, being born a certain way does not lead to feelings of compassion or rational arguments for equality. White supremacists know that black people are born that way. Sexists know that women are born that way.

Prior to the pathologizing of sexuality, it was not common to see one's sexuality as a core element of one's essence. It's not even clear that most people would have understood that they had some characteristic called a "sexuality" that was distinct from the rest of their personality. I would refer you to the work of Michel Foucault in his three volume *The History of Sexuality*.<sup>5</sup> Sexual pleasures were dealt with in the same way as all other pleasures. In fact, in most ancient writers, food and eating are problematized in a similar fashion to sex. It is clear how overblown the discourse around sex has become when you consider that in contemporary society we do not moralize about food and eating anywhere near as much as we moralize and politicize sex.

Sex was primarily a matter of pleasure. European societies created rules as to what was too much or too little pleasure and which pleasures were proper and improper.

An example of this traditional view which focuses on behaviour rather than identity appeared in the May 2007 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, in an article entitled "The Kingdom in the Closet," in which Nadya Labi, writes about men in Saudi Arabia who sleep with other men. According to her article, it is quite widespread though not talked

---

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988-1990).

about. However, if any man actually considers himself “gay,” meaning that his sleeping with men is a key element of his personal identity, then he is oppressed, even by other men who sleep with men. It is the men who identify as gay who are executed under Saudi law, not, generally, the ones who simply sleep with other men.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century in Western cultures, it seems that the contours of the argument shifted. The gay community began claiming that because we were born gay, we therefore deserved compassion and equality. Our foes began arguing that it was something we chose, and because it was something chosen, we did not deserve equal standing under the law.

The whole argument around this issue is flawed, I think. Both sides seem to imply that how one chooses to live one’s life is *not* a freedom protected by law. This is quite odd since religious beliefs and actions are highly protected by American law, and one’s religious beliefs and actions are not predetermined by a Methodist, Reform Jew, or Sufi gene.

My take on this question is that it doesn’t matter whether someone is born “this way” or chooses to live their life “this way,” both biological difference and the freedom to live one’s life as one chooses should be protected by American law. There is no excuse for mistreating people and denying them their civil and human rights because of what sex they are attracted to, what gender they identify as, or what gender they express themselves as. It is really that simple.

The debate on these issues is beginning to shift again, as evidenced by Mohler’s blog post. We find ourselves, now, in the middle of an intense and important ethical debate that connects issues like LGBT identity and equality with the issues of abortion and body rights and the ethics of genetic research and therapy. One thing that bothers me is that I don’t think the larger LGBT community has developed much of a discourse that can handle this shift in the public debate. This paper takes a beginning step in that direction.

I find this particularly pressing as a pastor who must regularly help people both with their own ethical decision-making and with confronting prejudice from the wider community. One of my many roles is teaching my congregation how to think about and talk about these sorts of issues when they find themselves confronted by people.

Let’s begin with diversity.

You are probably familiar with the ever lengthening acronym for what used to be known simply as the “gay community.” The most recent complete acronym that I saw in print was LGBTIQSSAY. That lengthy list of letters stands for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, queer, questioning, straight-sympathetic allies youth movement. When I read this off in humour once at an Oklahoma City Pride Board of Directors meeting, I was told I had left out the number 2. When I asked what that was for, I was told it was for Two Spirit people, which, if you are unaware, is a term that some Native Americans use to refer to those who embody gender and sexual difference in their traditions.

Empirical observation reveals that creation is filled with diversity and difference. Some things are downright strange and wild.

---

<sup>6</sup> Nadya Labi, “The Kingdom in the Closet,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2007.

I would encourage you to read *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* by Stanford biologist Joan Roughgarden. She writes,

Biological rainbows interfere with any attempt to stuff living beings into neat categories. Biology doesn't have a periodic table for its species. Organisms flow across the bounds of any category we construct. In biology, nature abhors a category.<sup>7</sup>

I like that final phrase, "nature abhors a category." And she further states,

Indeed, whenever one looks deeply into any biological category, a rainbow is revealed. The living world is made of rainbows within rainbows within rainbows, in an endless progression.<sup>8</sup>

In her book Roughgarden presents a cornucopia of diversity. Some examples include species which change sex, species with more than two sexes, species with more than two genders, species with same-sex relationships, species that form multiple sexual partner families. Did you know that female hyenas have a penis? Did you know that there are intersexed bears which give birth through the penis? Did you know that life long same-sex pairings occur more often than opposite-sex life long pairings in bottle nose dolphins? Did you know that there are more species which are hermaphroditic than there are species which are not?

If someone really wants to get into the argument of what is natural or not, GREAT! Nature's clearly on the queer side of that argument.

We humans like to fabricate categories that have a larger statistical probability and label them as "normal," but simply put these categories are constructs of human observation and not absolutes found in nature. Nature is filled with rainbows of diversity and difference.

Even *homo sapiens* are not as easily categorized as we usually think we are. All of us had female characteristics at the earliest stages of our fetal development and all of us had the potential to develop either as female or male. There is a complex relationship between multiple biological factors that helps to determine our biological sex.

Plus, there are more than two sexes for *homo sapiens*. There are at least five different categories of intersexed human beings. If you don't know what "intersexed" is, it is those who have some anatomical features traditionally considered male and some traditionally considered female. Variations can occur in external genitalia, internal plumbing, or reproductive organs, or some mix of those. So there are a variety of different possibilities, falling into five categories. You could say, then, that there are at least seven different sexes for the species *homo sapiens*.<sup>9</sup>

One example is 5-alpha reductase deficiency. It occurs primarily in the Dominican Republic, particularly the village of Salinas and has been documented in

---

<sup>7</sup> Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 280-305.

popular culture in Jeffery Eugenides' Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Middlesex* and in the character of Dr. Quentin Costa on *Nip/Tuck*. Particularly in the Dominican Republic, where they are known as Guevedoche, those with 5-alpha reductase deficiency may be born with female primary sex characteristics and raised as girls only to be surprised at puberty when their testes descend and they develop a penis and other primary male sex characteristics. Yes, there are human beings who do not develop a penis until puberty.<sup>10</sup>

So, it is interesting to note that according to federal law in the United States, only two of our seven sexes are allowed to marry legally. Therefore, if you aren't one of those two legally recognized sexes, you'd better try to pass as one of them.

Acknowledging the diversity of creation is just one step to enlightenment, because it is possible to recognize difference and still attempt to pathologize it. Michel Foucault writes in his 1970 essay "Madness and Society,"

Thus for me it was a matter not of knowing what is affirmed and valorized in a society or a system of thought but of studying what is rejected and excluded.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault revealed how societies create and then exclude difference. LGBTI people have demonstrated this feature of society in our lives and even our bodies. It is particularly evident in the case of intersex people. The legal code and medical science try to force the five other sexes to conform to one of the two expected sexes.

Mainstream medicine, for instance, forces the human body to conform to its conceptions of male and female. It pathologizes these five other variations of human bodies. One out of 2,000 humans is born intersex. The primary method for "correcting" the human body is IGM or intersex genital mutilation. Around 1000 are performed each year on newborn children. If the genitals of a newborn are "ambiguous," then the genital protrusion is measured. If it is 3/8 of an inch or less, it is declared a clitoris and the child is pronounced a girl. If it is 1 inch or longer, it is declared a penis and the child is pronounced a boy. If the protrusion falls between 3/8 of an inch and one inch, then the child is diagnosed as intersex and surgery is recommended to "fix" the biological error. This fixing usually means cutting back to 3/8 of an inch, so that the child can be raised as a girl.<sup>12</sup>

Nevermind that the child could be a healthy female with a large clitoris or a healthy boy with a small penis.

Notice the rampant sexism here. A girl cannot have a large clitoris, yet we would never declare a boy to have too large a penis requiring us to cut it off. There is also the sexism that a boy cannot live a meaningful life with a small penis, so better to raise him as a girl.

Also nevermind that the child might be one of the five human sexes that is neither male nor female.

Sometimes these surgeries even occur without the parents' knowledge.

---

<sup>10</sup> "5-alpha-reductase deficiency" in Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), accessed 10 March 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1998), 335.

<sup>12</sup> Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2004), 71-82.

Psychological trauma can result upon reaching puberty and developing a gender or sexual identity that is different from the sex one was assigned at birth.

According to the Letter to Colossians, “in Christ *all* things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . – *all* things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him *all* things hold together.” Connecting biological science with Christian theology, then, we can see that the cosmic body of Christ is filled with “rainbows, within rainbows, within rainbows.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the creation that is incorporated into Christ is filled with diversity and difference. That would imply that the cosmic body of Christ exhibits the pizzazz Annie Dillard was writing about.

Christian theology should teach us to celebrate diversity rather than pathologizing difference. And this queer analysis will apply to far more than LGBTI people. We should be more careful about judging something to be a disorder or handicap that needs to be eliminated or fixed. For example, persons with Down’s Syndrome are not a genetic disorder needing to be eliminated. They are simply a part of the human rainbow -- a part of the blessed diversity of creation. Or, for another example, bipolar people possess brains that are wired differently. Why do we see a different form of brain wiring as a “disorder”?

The urge to see all difference as a disorder, syndrome, or handicap must be stopped, because when examining creation, there simply is no category that is “normal.” We are all each unique and diverse and part of God’s pizzazz. It’s about time that we admit that each and every one of us falls along spectra of mental, physical, emotional, and sexual ability and disability.

I submit that the diversity of the natural order reveals that creation is queer, which means we are all queer. There shouldn’t be any problem affirming that all people are, in fact, queer. The old English word “queer” simply meant “different,” and was used in the phrase “there is naught as queer as folk,” which meant that each and every one of us is unique and different in our own way. Each and every one of us, then, exhibits part of God’s pizzazz.

Therefore, any attempt to create invasive, pre-natal procedures that would rid the world of God’s diversity is an affront to Christian theology.

Now what about freedom? As Annie Dillard pointed out through empirical observation, a wild freedom pervades creation and is intimately connected with its value of diversity. Let’s explore what freedom means in the LGBT community and how that understanding might connect with Christian theology.

About a month ago the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund released a YouTube video that included an audio recording of a speech given by Oklahoma State Representative Sally Kern to a small Republican club in Oklahoma City. In the speech Rep. Kern warned that the one thing destroying this nation was the assault on the “preferential treatment to Christianity” upon which she said our country was founded. For her the main culprits are politically active LGBT people who are raising money to fund

---

<sup>13</sup> Col. 1:16-17.

candidates they support and oppose candidates they do not. She says that in order for the LGBT community to succeed they must destroy Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

The section of her speech that aroused a national outrage was this one:

What they're trying to do is send a message of intimidation to those people who are taking a stand for traditional marriage and against the homosexual lifestyle. They want to silence us, is what they want to do. And it's happening all over the state. You know, the very fact that I'm talking to you like this, here today, puts me in jeopardy. Okay, and so, so be it. Okay, and I'm not 'anti', I'm not gay bashing, but according to God's word that is not the right kind of lifestyle. It has deadly consequences for those people involved in it. They have more suicides and they're more discouraged, there's more illness, their life spans are shorter. You know, it's not a lifestyle that is good for this nation. Matter of fact, studies show no society that has totally embraced homosexuality has lasted more than, you know, a few decades. So it's the death knell for this country. I honestly think it's the biggest threat even, that our nation has, even more so than terrorism or Islam, which I think is a big threat, okay. Because what's happening now, they're going after, in schools, two year olds.<sup>15</sup>

I was invited onto a local television political talk show to debate Rep. Kern face to face. I must say that it was one of the more unpleasant things I've ever done. The debate was recorded on Good Friday, so it helped to put me in a morose mood that prepared me for that evening's service. Sometimes what we are called upon to do as ministers who witness to the reign of God is to publically confront someone like Rep. Kern. I hope that when you are ministering in local communities that you will become engaged in the issues of those communities and speak passionately as a witness for God in the public sector. There is no excuse for a minister of God's word to sit silently by.

Rep. Kern has refused to apologize. She has defended herself by saying that she was not attacking gay people but was talking about the gay political agenda. I pressed her on this point and said that that explanation actually makes her statements more outrageous. She, as an elected public official, is saying that when gay people engage in the democratic political process that they are worse than terrorists. Notice the coded and charged language which means gay activists are worthy of worse treatment than terrorists – I guess torture, death, or other forms of shock and awe.

Why would someone view the engagement in the democratic political process by a group of people as a bigger threat to America than people who hijack planes and fly them into skyscrapers or blow up federal buildings with fertilizer bombs? Using a Foucaultian analysis, we know that what a society tries to exclude tells us more about the society doing the excluding than it tells us about the thing being excluded.

The LGBT community is not a threat to America if you believe that the American ideal is a pluralistic society that works to build community among various nationalities, religions, races, and genders. I happen to believe that that is the American ideal that motivated our founders and has been working itself out through centuries of religious

---

<sup>14</sup> Sally Kern, ([www.equalrightsproject.com](http://www.equalrightsproject.com), accessed 14 April 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. See also "I'm listening" ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), posted 7 March 2008).



awakenings, wars, and social movements. Essential to this understanding of a pluralistic America is the value of freedom.

Clearly, though, Rep. Kern and her compatriots hold a different view of the American ideal. She seems to think that the American ideal is the preferential treatment of a specific type of fundamentalist, evangelical Christianity which would deny equality and freedom to those who were different or believed differently.

As such, I would actually agree with Rep. Kern. The LGBT community is a greater threat to that interpretation of the American ideal and Christianity than would be the sharia law of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Why? Because not only does the queer community represent the inclusion of diversity, it represents a radical ethic of freedom that *is* a challenge to traditional social categories and norms. Essential to this ethic of freedom is the power to make choices about our own bodies. We should be free to make choices about how we find sexual pleasure with our bodies. We should be free to make choices about how we express our gender. We should be able to make our own reproductive choices.

I recommend Michael Bronski's 1998 book *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*. In it Bronski argues that the culture wars are the argument over who is an American and who is not. It is a power struggle. "It is about the power of the majority to set and maintain a political and cultural agenda and to create and regulate codes of personal, social, and sexual behavior that conform to the majority's standards."<sup>16</sup>

Bronski writes,

Homosexuality strikes at the heart of the organization of Western culture and societies. Because homosexuality, by its nature, is nonreproductive, it posits a sexuality that is justified by pleasure alone. . . . The real issue is not that heterosexuals will be tempted to engage in homosexual *sexual* activity but that they will be drawn to [the] more flexible norms that gay people . . . have created for their own lives.<sup>17</sup>

For Bronski the fundamental problem that traditional society has with homosexuality is its radical notion of freedom – that within reasonable limits such as bringing harm upon someone else, a person should be free to live her life as she chooses. Bronski goes on,

This vision of personal liberation forms the basis of a far broader social vision of human liberation. This vision is profoundly centered on the idea of community and an almost utopian desire to remake the world in a way that would prioritize freedom over repression, and to understand that pleasure and sexuality are vital tools in creating a society and culture that is humane, celebratory, and life-sustaining.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

This analysis suggests that those with bias against LGBT people are either insecure about their own identity and transfer that insecurity into prejudice or they are attempting to protect their own privilege – their own right to live their lives as they choose.

Personal pleasure has long been the privileged right of rich, white, heterosexual, men. This culture has a long history of denying and suppressing the pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, of women. Black men have been viewed as a sexual threat which must be kept away from white women with a lynching every now and then to assure the maintenance of those boundaries. There are a plethora of feminist, postcolonial, race critical, and queer theorists who have written on these subjects.

The “traditional” views of male and female were that a male is superior in intellect, physical strength, political and economic power, and is to be the penetrator in sex and the female is the opposite of each of these. Over the last two centuries, those categories have been assaulted on a number of fronts. But the LGBT community is perceived to be the extreme transgressor. Gay men are evidence that “maleness” is much broader than the traditional view. Lesbians are evidence that “femaleness” is much broader than the traditional view. And transgender people are evidence that the gender binary and all its cultural baggage is itself a myth.

One contribution of a queer understanding is that all people should have the freedom to find bodily pleasure how they choose. This notion of freedom is an assault on Rep. Kern’s view of America and of Christianity, which would control pleasure in a way that privileges some people’s bodies over others. But is this notion of freedom *really* an assault on Christianity? Can Christian theology accommodate this ethic of bodily freedom?

Sallie McFague focuses on bodies in her book *The Body of God*. She writes,

Christianity is *par excellence* the religion of the incarnation and, in one sense, is about nothing but embodiment, as is evident in its major doctrines. In another sense, Christianity has denied, subjugated, and at times despised the body.<sup>19</sup>

Key Christian doctrines, including creation, incarnation, resurrection, and communion, deal directly with bodies.

For McFague, it is not enough, to see the incarnation as a one time event of God entering the world. Instead, she sees the life of Christ as the paradigm by which we understand how God is always present in the world. What she considers to be the significant factor in the life of Christ is that Jesus was inclusive. McFague writes, “The story of Jesus suggests that [God’s incarnation in the world] includes all, especially the needy and outcast. . . . The distinctive characteristic of Christian embodiment is its focus on oppressed, vulnerable, suffering *bodies*, those who are in pain due to the indifference or greed of the more powerful.”<sup>i</sup>

McFague argues that the central motif of the Gospels is that Jesus cared for those bodies that were broken and hurt. Three central aspects of Christ’s ministry illustrate this. These aspects are his parables, the healing stories, and the eating stories.

---

<sup>19</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 163.

The parables focus on oppression that people feel due to their concrete, cultural setting, as servants rather than masters, poor rather than rich, Gentile rather than Jew; the healing stories are concerned with the bodily pain that some endure; the eating stories have to do with physical hunger and the humiliation of exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

In the stories he told, the people he healed, and those with whom he ate, Jesus modeled outreach to broken and marginalized bodies. He reached out to the poor, to lepers, to prostitutes, to women, to the mentally ill, to the disabled, to those who were the objects of others' scorn; even, according to the Gospel of Matthew, healing the same-sex lover of the Roman Centurion.

From Exodus to eschatology, the scriptural narrative includes stories of bodily liberation. Maybe no more powerful teaching on bodies exists than the doctrine of the resurrection which signifies a new physical creation occurring in human history. Repeatedly the New Testament insists that the resurrection is in the body, that our actual physical existence will be transformed. Robert Goss, in his commentary on the Gospel of John in *The Queer Bible Commentary* writes that the "resurrection is a continuation of creation" that "ends the entombment of bodies."<sup>21</sup> This is a powerful message for those of us whose bodies are oppressed, including women, laborers, the disabled, gays and lesbians, and transgender and intersex people. God has promised us that in the new creation signified by the Risen One, our bodies are liberated and transformed by God's own glory!

Does this emphasis on bodies in Christian doctrine include sexed bodies?

Whenever I've preached or taught on sex, I've found that people are hungry for positive Christian messages. Very few ministers are brave enough to tackle these issues. More of you need to preach sermons from the Song of Songs!

When he wrote his three volume systematic theology, James McClendon, my favourite baptist theologian, bucked centuries of tradition and wrote the first volume on ethics. The book deals with community, forgiveness, politics, and being the church in the world. Yet it begins with discussions of the body, sex, and erotic love. Why? Because McClendon realized that these are of supreme importance to our human life.

The erotic body is our ultimate mode of experiencing love, relationship, and community. McClendon writes,

Love is a gift. . . . It is God's gift, the gift that is ever present, breaking down our so carefully enacted barriers of race and class and caste, melting our resistance to the ongoing of the generations, overcoming our destructive and self-destructive urges, welding us together in a unity that (if God's love be true) death itself cannot destroy. As a gift it returns to the giver; God *is* love, and to the extent that we love (who would narrow the sense of the term here?), to that extent we abide in God, and he in us.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>21</sup> Robert E. Goss, "John," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 563-4.

<sup>22</sup> James William McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 155.

This is just an example; there are many recent theologians who have worked to reclaim the positive message that Christianity can speak celebrating the erotic body.

The lived experiences of the LGBT community and queer theory represent radical notions of freedom, particularly related to issues of body and pleasure. I do think that Christian theology has a place for these notions of freedom.

I find that the theological concept of pizzazz, which incorporates diversity and freedom, connects with both the LGBT experience and with Christian theology.

Now, what about the issue that introduced this examination of diversity and freedom? How can we develop a queer affirming Christian theology and practice that responds to the challenge posed by Mohler?

I actually want to illustrate the path forward by turning to the abortion debate. American political culture for over thirty years has tried to convince us that we cannot value human life and human choice at the same time. But this is a false dilemma. The February 22, 2005 issue of *The Christian Century*, ran the following eye-opening editorial:

Around the globe, the presence or absence of legal restrictions has relatively little to do with whether women decide to have an abortion. The countries with the lowest abortion rates in the world are Belgium and the Netherlands, where abortion is legal and covered by national health insurance. Those countries each year report seven abortions per 1,000 women of child-bearing age. By contrast, in countries such as Peru, Brazil, Chile and Colombia, where abortion is restricted by law, the abortion rate is about 50 per 1,000 women. Those figures are more than twice that of the U. S., where the rate is about 22.

Judging by abortion rates, one would have to conclude that . . . a "culture of life" is actually flourishing more in Western Europe than in Latin America. And there are reasons for this. Belgian and Dutch women are well educated about contraceptives and have access to them, which is not the case with Latin American women. The Belgians and Dutch can also rely on generous government provisions for health care, child care and parental leave, which means raising a child is a more sustainable prospect.

The low abortion rates in Western Europe should prompt Americans to ask how one actually fosters a "culture of life." Couldn't one create a culture in which abortion was a legal option that women rarely felt compelled to choose? Such a culture would feature hearts that welcome children, yes -- but also widespread education about sex and contraception, and practical supports for the welcoming of new life.<sup>23</sup>

This analysis demonstrates that the question is not should we have the freedom to choose or should we protect life. Rather, it is how we create a world where life affirming choices are more easily made.

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Christian Century*, 22 February 2005.

With due diligence, we must work to create a more pluralistic society that respects, welcomes, and affirms diversity and difference and the freedom to live one's life as one chooses, including the pleasures of one's body.

I propose an ethic that values the diversity in creation, both the diversity created by God and the diversity created by the creation. This ethic will teach that we abuse our freedom when we use it to limit that diversity.

This sort of society will confront the prejudices which lead to the extermination of fetuses exhibiting any form of difference. Further, in this society, parents will more easily make life-affirming choices, because if parents know that their child will not face discrimination, then they are less likely to be troubled about bringing that child into the world.

To achieve this pluralistic society will take incredible efforts of education and activism. And I believe that such efforts are urgent. We cannot simply wait and assume that the next generation will solve these issues. It is my experience that human beings require something akin to a conversion experience to break them out of the mode of pathologizing difference and controlling others' freedom. Right now we have people in power who continue to speak and act in ways that create a charged environment of hate. The sort of environment in which members of the Aryan Brotherhood kidnapped and murdered Oklahoma City resident Steven Domer last October 26 simply because he was gay.

The work that I and my congregation and others like it do is vitally important and urgent. School kids are getting bullied and beaten up every day. Thousands of teenagers are committing suicide because of what their churches have taught them. Last year in one Oklahoma City school we had ten LGBT teens homeless because their parents had kicked them out of the house – now that sounds like family values to me. Ten kids in one high school, folks. And people like Steven Domer are still being lynched because of who they are.

Al Mohler imagines a future possibility, but the life and death struggle exists right now. It is imperative that we create a society of diversity and freedom. It is imperative that, like God, we love pizzazz too.

I think that the Christian community should lead this effort. Christianity is culpable for much of the prejudice and violence that currently exists. Yet, Christianity can redeem itself and be the most powerful force for liberation. We possess a theological discourse that already embraces the pizzazz of creation. In other words, the Christian theological discourse is already queer.

<sup>i</sup> Ibid, 164.