

Creating a New Appalachian (Queer-Affirming) Christian Rhetoric Through Storylistening

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Justin Ray Dutton
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As I began to shorten my essay to share with you all, I realized the title I submitted doesn't actually tell you what I'm going to talk about. So here's a new title: Creating a New Appalachian (Queer-Affirming) Christian Rhetoric Through Storylistening. I apologize for not mentioning the Christian-thing in my original title – I promise I'm not trying to be a megachurch getting you in the door with fancy lights and rock bands so that I can take you down the Roman road to salvation.

Instead, I'm making a call for a new, Christian worldview where deep love and acceptance of queer and trans individuals leads the way in Appalachian Christians' words *and* deeds.

As the world stands now, many queer Appalachian people do live full lives in various understandings of the phrase. Yet one major institutional and individual hindrance to this reality finds its source in Appalachian Christianity, both at an individual church level and through the influence the faith tends to exert on wider Appalachian culture.

But before I dissect this further and make my case for a change, I need to name three things.

First, queerphobia is not unique to Appalachia.

Second, since particular forms of Christian rhetoric tend to speak the loudest in this region, many folks, both within and beyond the mountains, have turned this into an assumption about the region and its people. Against this trope, this paper does NOT assume (and is not meant to imply) that Appalachian rhetoric is inherently Christian rhetoric, or vice versa.

Appalachia is not a Christian region any more than the United States is a Christian nation – regardless of what the voices with the most political power continually tell us.

Finally, I need to name that I am talking about something that does not exist. There is no such thing as Appalachian Christianity as a unique, homogenous form of faith. There is no Appalachian Orthodox Church on the corner. And, notably, not all Appalachian Christian individuals and churches are queerphobic.

Nevertheless, I use the naming of Appalachian Christianity. Not because there is anything unique to Christianity in Appalachia. And not because one necessitates the other, as if to be Appalachian is to be Christian or to be either is to be queerphobic. Rather, I name Appalachian Christianity because the loudest voices (read: those with the most political power and control) in this region *and* the loudest voices in this faith are so very often queerphobic. And it is to queerphobic Christians that I am writing. I am writing in hope that they will follow the unconditional love of their savior and expand that love to their queer and trans siblings.

Yet in order to fit this discussion into a fifteen-minute presentation and have a hope of making a change, we have to narrow the infinite potentiality of identities down to three and then venture a few simplistic conclusions. As my title implies, I have chosen to name the identities of Appalachian, queer, and Christian.

Personally, I identify with two of these labels: Appalachian and Queer.

Religiously speaking, I was raised a Christian, a Central Appalachian United Methodist, to be exact. I have a bachelor's degree in Christian Studies from a Southern Baptist Appalachian college and a Master's of Divinity from Wake Forest University – one of only three seminaries in the South that welcomes LGBTQ students, according to The Institute for Welcoming Resources.¹ I have identified as Christian for very little of the past decade of my life, but have remained fascinated with faith. I now know myself as a prophetic agnostic, actively admitting

that I have no definite answers of which I can be certain and challenging others to see the doubt that their certainty often veils.

So this is a snapshot of the reality from which I write. I am a queer, white, Appalachian in touch with and fully affirming of my siblings across the queer and trans spectrums and in touch with and (mostly) grateful for my Christian upbringing. This latter point, however, continues to play an ambivalent role in my life. On the one hand, I see people doing great works of justice, reconciliation, and compassion in Christ's name.² On the other hand, I see people following the same savior doing great mental, physical, and emotional damage to queer individuals. This latter reality must change. Christians have blood on their hands.

In the next few minutes, we will cover three areas. First, I will briefly identify what I mean by Christian queerphobic rhetoric. Then I will make a case that changing contemporary Christian rhetoric, or, dare I say, changing contemporary Christian *theology*, does *not* mean that those embracing the experiences of their peers are turning their backs on God. Finally, I will propose a method through which Appalachian Christians can make this change a reality: storylistening.

Going on the assumption that many gathered here today are far too familiar with queerphobia and its effects, I am not going to share particular experiences of queerphobia. Instead, I will identify Christian queerphobic rhetoric by painting with broader strokes, covering two main areas.

First, regarding the use of the term "queerphobic rhetoric." I opt for this phrase instead of simply homophobia or even queerphobia in order to note that homophobia, or, more broadly, queerphobia is more than explicit words or acts that express varying levels of hate toward queer folks. In my imaginings, queerphobic rhetoric expands what one might immediately associate

with queerphobia to involve all of the interpersonal, cultural, religious, social, and other implications that come from specific beliefs that equate queerness with a sinful choice and/or state of being.

Second, I name a key factor that contributes to the continuation of Appalachian Christianity's generally queerphobic understandings: Not personally knowing an out queer person. This is not meant to be an excuse. It is not meant to place the 'burden of proof,' so to speak, on queer people to come out or else their loved ones will remain queerphobic. But. In my experience, it is certainly a factor.

Not personally knowing an out queer person (a reality faced even by queer individuals, perhaps especially in rural areas³) is becoming an ever-more-difficult feat. But while it remains a reality, it remains easy for queerphobia to reign unchallenged. Personally knowing an out queer person, on the other hand, combats queerphobia because it is much easier to fear and hate an abstract and unidentified other than it is to hold and express those same feelings toward an actual person, particularly a person one knows well.

We'll explore this more in the third section, but now I will provide evidence that changing Christian theology does *not* mean being of the world instead of being of the Lord. This second section will also be divided into two parts.

First, and ironically, given the assumptions under which we live, the current queerphobic rhetoric embraced and furthered by Christians is of the *world*. Queer-affirming rhetoric, however, is of the Lord. Many forms of Christian religion certainly have taken up the cause and perpetuated queerphobic rhetoric. Many people **rightly** blame Christianity for the queerphobia that plagues society. Yet, at the foundation, queerphobia is a secular invention. In truth, the queerphobia encountered in contemporary churches and beyond results more from nineteenth-

century science than Christian faith. Queerphobia actually has nothing to do with the Gospel of Christ.

To use language as an example, the words used over the past two hundred years to describe queer persons (sodomite, invert, homosexual, etc.) originated with political and clinical – not faithful – considerations. These considerations did indeed use Biblical language and allusions⁴ and thus seem to be Christian-based. But this queerphobic rhetoric does not arise from serious theological, ecclesial, and Biblical reflection. Rather, it represents a bastardization of the Christian God's word. Thus, the current queerphobic rhetoric, not the proposed queer acceptance, is against the central tenets of the Christian faith.

Second, a brief case study on updating theology. The first records of adapting theology to lived experience can be found in the Bible. Actually, they are the Bible. In the years immediately following Jesus' execution, his followers, notably Paul, expected him to come back in their lifetime. When these same followers began to die of old age, individuals and communities began to record stories of Jesus' life. The four Gospels that give accounts of Jesus were written approximately a century after his death as a result of new lived experiences. If his apostles were going to die before he returned, then the stories needed to be written down – something that was not necessary when his return was considered imminent.

In the fourth century, St. Augustine wrote that the bishops and church councils of his time had the authority to contest the conclusions reached by bishops and councils of earlier times, I quote, “if as a result of practical experience something that was closed is opened, something that was hidden becomes known,”⁵ end quote. Although Protestant churches do not directly draw their faith from the tradition of the early church Fathers such as Augustine, these

men directly influenced the Christian institution that Protestants inherited and themselves *reformed*.

In the previous century, evangelical Christians themselves updated their theology to reflect their contemporary experiences. Here, I am talking about divorce.

Divorce has almost universally been condemned throughout much of church history. But it became a theologically acceptable method of moving out of unhealthy and unhelpful relations at the same time as more and more individuals discovered and tapped into the courage to leave life-denying marriages. Today, church officials and structures that continue to decry divorce are often preaching “to an audience that is no longer listening,” because the individuals who make up the congregation know and love at least one divorced person.⁶

In retrospect, many Christians have decided that the Bible’s teachings on divorce are not as unequivocally negative as Christian tradition had made them out to be. All of this has the effect of many churches now consenting to a reality they had unambiguously denounced for hundreds of years.⁷ And despite the supposed threat divorce posed to all families as well as the church,⁸ Christians and their institutions, including marriage, have survived.

While naming the risk of over-identifying two very different situations, it does seem that today’s ‘closeted’ *queer* family members bear a striking resemblance to yesterday’s ‘closeted’ *married* family members; the married family members who withstood matrimonial hurt and even, at times, various manifestations of domestic violence in order to not violate Christian teachings against divorce.⁹

Since its origins, Christianity has continually reviewed its theology and reformed its practices so as to live the way of Jesus rather than the way of the world. It is once again time to

bring the faith up-to-date, this time regarding the experiences of queer persons. In order to make that a reality, however, we must first imagine what it might look like.

Which brings us to the third section of this work: a proposal of just one way Appalachian Christians can move from secularly-influenced queerphobic rhetoric and into Jesus-influenced deep love and acceptance for all. This proposal focuses on stories, but, to repeat that which I named above, that does *not* mean that overcoming and replacing Appalachian Christianity's queerphobic rhetoric is the responsibility of queer individuals – not even queer Appalachian Christians! While self-education through respectful and deep listening to and personal interaction with queer individuals is incredibly helpful, in this information age of the internet, it is not the only way to learn the realities of queer and trans lives. Indeed, the further one extends their reach, the better the education. Moving beyond one's own communities expands the possibility that one will encounter queer individuals with a variety of intersecting identities such as queer Appalachian, queer people of color, queer individuals representing multiple ethnicities, and an infinite number of combinations of any and all manners of self-naming.

So here I am going to formally introduce my new term. Instead of storytelling, I name the step toward shedding queerphobic rhetoric as storylistening. Storylistening is not just sitting in a room and listening to queer individuals share their experiences or read papers about queer identity. Storylistening also includes paying attention to the transmission and interpretation of a variety of personal and social cues and interactions. In short, storylistening is paying attention to the implicit and explicit processes through which humans individually and collectively make their experiences known.

Those of us who know ourselves as queer individuals, particularly queer Appalachians, certainly should have a say in what stories our currently-queerphobic loved ones, friends, and

acquaintances hear. We can define ourselves, claiming a queer *and* Appalachian identity along with all other aspects of our individual selves. Not only does such action make queer coalitions, gatherings, and friendships possible for ourselves, but it also provides all people – particularly cisgender and heterosexual Appalachian Christians, in the context of this project – the opportunity to encounter *out* queer individuals as their full human selves.

But, given the queerphobic climate of our region and nation, it is not always wise or possible for us to fully claim our place. Regardless of our ability or choice to come out and claim our own identities, however, we can also point the way toward our queer siblings who find themselves in more public situations. (Note: I shouldn't have to say it, but this NEVER means outing another person.) We can especially point the way toward queer folks who do not look or act like we do. We can point the way to the stories we find inspiring. We can point the way to the stories to which we ourselves enjoy listening.

As deep storylistening expands, change becomes possible.

This is not to say, however, that individual support alone will bring about long-lasting and meaningful change for the betterment of queer individuals. Institutional discrimination must also end. In the context of this paper, Appalachian churches are the institution. Thankfully, Appalachian Christians are heirs to a two thousand-year history of changing and updating their institution. They are heirs to a tradition based on the life, teachings, execution, and supposed resurrection of a first-century Jewish man who radically challenged the comfortable religious and political status quos of his time to the point of his capital punishment. Appalachian Christians are people who can join the fight to eradicate queerphobia. But only if they listen.

¹ <https://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/an-lgbtq-group-at-duke-divinity-say-the-school-is-marginalizing-gay-and-trans-students/Content?oid=12102660>.

² "Mission Statement," *Wake Forest University School of Divinity*, accessed January 6, 2018, <http://divinity.wfu.edu/about/mission-and-values/>.

³ Kate Black and Marc A. Rhorer, “Out in the Mountains: Exploring Lesbian and Gay Lives,” in *Out in the South*, ed. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 17.

⁴ Ezekiel 16:49 names inhospitality toward God’s messengers as the reason destroying Sodom. Thus, the term ‘sodomite’ is the result of a limited reading of the Bible that does not take into account intratextual considerations.

⁵ St. Augustine, quoted in Geoffrey Robinson, *2015 Synod, The Crucial Questions: Divorce and Homosexuality*, (Hindmarsh, South Australia: ATF Press, 2015), 64-65.

⁶ Robinson, 68.

⁷ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 100.

⁸ Ibid, 112-113.

⁹ B. Jaye Miller, “From Silence to Suicide: Measuring a Mother’s Loss,” in *Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price*, ed. Warren J. Blumenfeld, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 91; Tickle, 100, emphasis added.