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Unveiling Secrets: A Multidiscipline Academic Examination of Bishop Eddie Lee Long's Sermon "Back To The Future"

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UNVEILING SECRETS:
A MULTIDISCIPLINE ACADEMIC EXAMINATION
OF
BISHOP EDDIE LEE LONG’S SERMON “BACK TO THE FUTURE”

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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(Order No.1)
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Master of Sacred Theology Boston University School of Theology, 2012
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ABSTRACT

Throughout his ministry, particularly as the Senior Pastor of the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, Bishop Eddie Lee Long has been known to "frequently denounce homosexual behavior”¹ and to “administer ‘homosexual cure’ programs to recruit gays and lesbians for what he called ‘sexual reorientation’ conferences.”² Under his leadership, New Birth started a ministry called “Out of the Wilderness Ministry” designed to help convert homosexuals into heterosexuals.³ According to the Southern Poverty Law Center's Magazine, Bishop Long is "one of the most virulently homophobic black leaders in the religiously-based, anti-gay movement."⁴ Bishop Long’s concepts of Biblical literalism and sexuality sets him apart as one of the more popular adversaries of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) rights for


³ Ibid.

gay Christians who seek inclusion into the mainstream church. Within this thesis I will attempt to examine and critique the philosophy, culture, logic, and hetero-normative/homophobic rhetoric that Bishop Long used and continues to use in order to justify the excommunication of LGBT persons from the “will of God”. I will argue that Bishop Long’s homophobic sermons and actions are nothing more than the manifestation of the social components of white American and Eurocentric notions of hetero-normativity.
PREFACE

As a young African American seminarian with extremely liberal views of the Bible and life in general, I can attest to the fact that one of the most difficult things to do is to preach against biblical literalism to a southern black Baptist congregation. Baptists are known for being biblical literalists. For example, they do not allow women to preach they interpret 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 to mean that it is disgraceful for a woman to speak out in church, and that if she has any questions, she should wait till she gets home and ask her husband. More importantly, and in regard to this thesis, Baptist churches e.g. The National Baptist Convention of USA Inc., The National Baptist Convention of America, and the Full Gospel Missionary Baptist Church, of which New Birth was apart, largely reject homosexuals and their civil rights to be viewed as equals in church participation and society at large because the Bible calls homosexuality an abomination and the sign of a reprobate mind. In the words of my former pastor from rural Georgia, “if the Word says it, I believe it”. This deceptively pithy statement illustrates the mindset of many African American Baptist ministers, which has complicated implications. They read the Bible as if it is exclusively inerrant, without considering the social processes which have shaped, produced and reified the religious text.

I find myself constantly wrestling with my life, which is admittedly situated in a multidimensional realm of consciousness. However, sociologist C. Wright Mills asserts in The Sociological Imagination that, “by addressing ourselves to issues and to troubles, and formulating them as problems of social science, we stand the best chance … to make reason democratically relevant to human affairs in a free society.”⁵ Thus, it is through connecting the religious and the social life in a global context that I hope to discover more of myself. For this

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reason, I have decided to tackle the issue of homophobia in the Black Church that largely reject homosexuals and their civil right to be viewed as equals because passages in Leviticus states that homosexuality is an abomination and Romans argues that same sex affections are the sign of a reprobate mind.

As a young Baptist minister, I write this work as a piece of my life’s work which seeks to contribute a new perspective to current scholarship in order to eradicate the spiritual ignorance of an age that perpetuates racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia as well as all the “isms” and phobias that promote hatred, violence, poverty, religious fanaticism, and ignorance cloaked in religious dogma.
CHAPTER ONE

THE INTRODUCTION

An Introduction to Bishop Long’s March against Gay Rights which Sparked My Interest in Writing about His Ministry

On December 11, 2004, an estimated 25,000 people participated in a march called “Reigniting the Legacy,” a public demonstration convened to support a recent constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. This procession drew considerable attention, extending from Atlanta’s Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violent Social Change to the city’s Turner Field. The protest was initiated and lead by Bishop Eddie Lee Long, the senior pastor of the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, one of the largest mega-churches in Atlanta, Georgia.

According to Bernice King, the youngest daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Long’s executive pastor and the co-leader of the march, the march was not intended to protest against LGBT people. In an interview with the Associated Press, Reverend Bernice King stated that the march was simply “a call for God’s People to stop being silent and about God’s business of speaking up for the Kingdom of God.” However, prior to this march, both King and Long had been publically vocal about their belief that same-sex relations were damaging to the black family and matters of spirituality. Thus, they initiated a march to reignite their vision of what they considered the true legacy of Christian family values.

According to Reverend Bernice King and Bishop Long, the first objective of the demonstration was to support the constitutional amendment to protect marriage and define it as

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7 Ibid.
between one man and one woman. The march purported to “reignite” Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy of the civil rights movement; however, it also subtly attempted to crystallize rigid categories of sexual and gender identity while buttressing conservative family values in the name of historical ‘legacy’ and civil rights. Some journalists have pointed out the mobilization of ecclesiastical rhetoric to support conservative political positions. Erica Edwards, a writer for *The New Black Magazine*, has particularly noted that the march “illustrated how the charismatic political aesthetic of the church is put to use to police African-American sexuality, to align black religious groups with the “family” or “moral values” agenda of the right, and to keep ideas of manhood tied to, or tangled up with, a model of religious and political leadership that relies on unyielding categories of sexuality and gender.”

Not surprisingly, this attitude noted by journalists also parallels the theology of Bishop Long, which is particularly apparent in his Sunday morning sermonic reflections. According to Jonathan Walton, a scholar whose critiques of Long I will explore later in this paper, Bishop Long’s “sermons and teachings emphasize a ‘chain of command’ between certain superiors and subordinates characterized by ‘respect, submission and obedience.’” Thus, Long understands the first link in this chain to be “a man who chooses to be respectful, submissive and obedient to God and then “a woman who chooses to be respectful, submissive and obedient to her father or

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husband.” Any other role outside of this prescribed system is to be “outside the divinely established order” and will result in “the loss of spiritual and natural benefits.” However, I believe it is necessary to analyze the rationale behind Long’s theology before criticizing the potentially damaging and alienating precepts behind the march.

The “Reigniting the Legacy” impacted me as a young college student, attempting to expand, strengthen, and construct my own worldview. When Bishop Long held his march in downtown Atlanta, I was a newly admitted freshman at Morehouse College. Prior to the march, my professors had introduced me to the writings of ethicists, sociologists, and theologians like Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, Peter Berger, Michel Foucault, Walter Rauschenbusch, Bishop John Shelby Spong, and Horace Griffin. While watching the procession from my window, I could not help but notice a juxtaposition of images. Walter Rauschenbusch writes in his *Christianity and the Social Crisis* that, “whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men, to that extent denies the faith of the Master.” On the one hand, I was watching a group of religious people, Bishop Long and his followers, march to uncouple the social life of LGBT persons within the religious sphere, while on the other hand being taught by my professors that such an uncoupling antagonistic to the ideology of Jesus Christ.

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12 Ibid.

Subsequently, I found myself wrestling with how my scholarship connected with my church’s oppression of LGBT persons. However, after this life-altering event, I decided that exploring the interaction of the religious and the social was the only way to create a cerebral space that would empower, confront, and evaluate the Christian church that I had grown to love. As a young male who identifies with African-American, LGBT, and Christian communities inclusively, I knew my academic journey would not be easy. I began my coursework by embracing practical genres of theology that would generate critical thinking skills by questioning “truths,” challenging social constructs, and rejecting religious superiority while nurturing a new understanding of the all-inclusive message of Christianity. However, I quickly discovered that in order to challenge social constructs and reject religious superiority, I would have to dedicate a significant amount of time to understanding the ethos of African American religious culture and how it has transformed over time. It was only after I invested time and study to this objective that I felt comfortable attempting to understand the current attitude of homophobia in African American religious communities. It is for this reason that I chose to dissect the homophobic sermons and theology of Bishop Long, since it was his march that caused me to question the foundational underpinnings of my faith.

**Thesis Statement**

In this thesis, I will examine and critique the hetero-normative rhetoric in Bishop Eddie Lee Long’s sermons. My examination will include an in-depth study of his patterns of scriptural interpretation and the cultural norms upon which his sermonic claims are based. I will use the research of sociologist of religion Dawne Moon and theologian Horace Griffin to argue that
Bishop Long’s homophobic rhetoric is nothing more than a manifestation of the social components of white American notions of hetero-normativity.

**The Intention of this Work**

The intention of this work, which is the beginning of a much larger project, is to challenge the theological basis for the homophobia that exists in the African American community and its religious institutions. One might question the reasoning behind using the Black Church as the initial catalyst for starting such a radical conversation about the inclusion of LGBT persons into the larger context of black life. However, the Black Church is one of the key components for understanding the ethos of Black America. In their book, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya argue, “The black church in the USA is widely recognized as the central, oldest, and most influential institution in the black community.” Thus, there are two reasons why the Black Church provides an ideal arena to study the impact of homophobia and sexual inequality for LGBT persons in the black community. First, the black church has an undeniable influence on African American culture and society, particularly in the United States. Secondly, LGBT Christians have numerous experiences with rejection—experiences that date back to the early 1900’s--already documented in film and written forms.

One might also question why I would use New Birth Missionary Baptist Church as a catalyst for understanding or even beginning the conversation on homosexuality and the Black Church. One could argue that New Birth is not a proper representation of the mainstream black denominations whose parameters were established in Lincoln and Mamiya’s *The Black Church*

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in the African-American Experience. However, I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting in my use of New Birth that it is the paradigmatic institution for black religious life; I am certainly not declaring through my analysis that the ideology of New Birth is representative of the ethos of a monolithic “Black Church.” I am simply using New Birth Missionary Baptist Church because it drew significant media attention due to the demonstrative march through Atlanta at the behest of its senior pastor. For this reason, I am asserting that New Birth Could at least be considered as a microcosm for understanding issues of homophobia in the African-American community at large. Using this framework for analysis establishes a vantage point for understanding cultural currents in the larger African American religious community.

However, in an effort to avoid overgeneralizations, some may question what evidence, if any, can link discrimination and the abhorrence of homosexuality within all Black churches and the African American community at large. I will briefly attempt to address this concern within this explanation of this projects intent so that my further reflections on Bishop Long are not seen as an overgeneralization that would detract from the potency of my main argument.

Recent research has argued that African-Americans overwhelmingly consider homosexual relationships as improper and immoral. In his book, Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line, Michael Eric Dyson said, “Both directly and indirectly, black churches have been identified as fostering homophobia—a fear or contempt for homosexuals and behavior based upon such feelings—playing an important role in its genesis, legitimation and weekly reinforcement in

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black communities.” Although this may seem like a tenuous connection on the surface, the impact of religious ideology on African American communities is palpable. For example, Elijah G. Ward, director of the Institute for Health Research and Policy, School of Public Health, University of Illinois at Chicago, notes that, “Black churches in the USA constitute a significant source of the homophobia that pervades black communities. This theologically-driven homophobia is reinforced by the anti-homosexual rhetoric.” In other words, it is the dehumanization and rejection of homosexuals in the church that has contributed to, at least in part, the rejection and denial of homosexuals as a vital component of African-American culture at large. I will take up this issue later in my examination of the dehumanization of homosexuals in Bishop Long’s sermons, which is particularly informed by the work of Horace Griffin.

**The Framework of My Research**

I intend to argue my thesis within the frameworks of Horace Griffin’s critique of the Black Church’s traditional patterns of scriptural interpretation and how they ostracize LGBTQ persons. I will survey Bishop Long’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) theologies, particularly focusing on his derogatory sermonic reflections about LGBTQ persons. The theological topics that I will cover will include sources like queer theologian Horace Griffin, feminist theologian Sandra Schneider, media scholar Jonathan Walton, and sociologist of religion Dwane Mood. The majority of my argumentation will be rooted in a deep suspicion of

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Bishop Long’s culturally-fixed gender identities, contemporary cultural and political assumptions about sexuality, and the intersections of scriptural interpretation and culture.
CHAPTER TWO

EDDIE LEE LONG AND THE NEW BIRTH MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

Who is Eddie Lee Long?

Bishop Eddie Lee Long is the senior pastor of the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church of Lithonia, Georgia. New Birth, a twenty-five thousand member megachurch, is an African-American Baptist church that connects itself to the “bapticostal movement” because embraces Pentecostal beliefs and worship rituals. Before his career as a pastor, Bishop Long received a Bachelor’s of Business Administration degree from the North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina in 1977. After earning a degree from NCCU, Eddie Lee Long worked “as a factory sales representative for the Ford Motor Corporation, but was fired after he submitted expense reports that included personal telephone calls.” After this experience, Long moved to Atlanta to study theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center where he earned a Master of Divinity degree. He also holds a doctorate in pastoral ministry from International College of Excellence, an unaccredited school founded by Robert "Robb" D. Thompson, the founder and senior pastor of a megachurch in Tinley Park, Illinois. After obtaining his education, Long began expanding his ministry, including outreach programs. The New Birth website describes his ministry as including, “the building of a hospital, a radio station

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20 Steve (Klingaman. September 28, 2010). "Eddie L. Long: David or Goliath?". *rootspeak.org*.

and a school in Kenya. His ministry also expands to New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Honduras and other nations across the globe.”

Bishop Long “administered ‘homosexual cure’ programs to recruit gays and lesbians for what he called ‘sexual reorientation’ conferences” Under his leadership, New Birth started a ministry to help convert homosexuals into heterosexuals called the "Out of the Wilderness Ministry.” According to the Southern Poverty Law Center's magazine, Bishop Long is "one of the most virulently homophobic black leaders in the religiously based anti-gay movement.” Bishop Long’s concepts of Biblical literalism and sexuality sets him apart as one of the more popular adversaries of LGBT rights for gay Christians who seek inclusion into the mainstream church.

The History of New Birth and its Economic and Geographical Demographics

Before Bishop Long assumed the pastorate of New Birth in 1987, the church only had three hundred members. After being called to New Birth, Long “became a fixture in black Atlanta society, sitting on numerous boards of directors and being honored by organizations

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24 Ibid.

including Big Brothers Big Sisters, Omega Psi Phi fraternity and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”

Over the years, Bishop Long expanded the influence of New Birth through televised broadcasts of church services on a local television network. By utilizing innovative strategies through technology, Long “built a humble suburban Atlanta congregation into a giant TV ministry on the strength of his charisma and his interpretation of the Gospels, including the magnetic idea that the faithful will be rewarded with wealth.” With more than 25,000 members, New Birth built the New Birth Cathedral in the spring of 2001. The fifty million dollar complex that contains a sanctuary with a 10,000 person capacity, administrative offices, a library, a 1,700 square foot bookstore, computer lab, kitchen, audio and video studios, nurseries and more was declared by Long to be a “spiritual corporation.” Sponsoring various programs and events that minister to people locally, nationally, and internationally, New Birth also started a new school called the Faith Academy and built for the school a 30,000-seat stadium. Through the expansion of his church through massive infrastructure and construction projects, Long “built a fiercely loyal and insular community inspired by his message of prosperity and his personal

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27 Ibid.


29 Ibid.
journey from a modest background as a preacher's son into an influential leader of a multimillion-dollar ministry.”

**An Overview of Bishop Long’s Theology as Articulated in the Creeds and Doctrines of the Church**

Bishop Long, and subsequently the congregation of New Birth, advocates the precept that “the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God and is inerrant in the original writings. The Bible being the revealed Word of God is the ground and foundation from which all claims of truth shall be substantiated. The Word of God is alive and quick! Through God’s sovereign hand, the Scriptures have been preserved and are the supreme and final authority.” Bishop Long’s method of literal Biblical interpretation is not a rare phenomenon within religious spheres. According to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, conservative Christian scholarship affirms the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal or normal sense. Bishop Long’s belief that the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God and is inerrant in the original writings is associated with the fundamentalist and evangelical hermeneutical approach to scripture and is used almost exclusively by conservative Christians. Furthermore, conservative Christians, like Bishop Long, also deny the legitimacy of any other approach to scripture that

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30 Errin Haines. **BRAND BUILT BY EDDIE LONG FOSTERS FIERCE LOYALTY.** The South Florida Times: Miami, Broward, Palm Beach, Breaking News

31 New Birth. **New Birth MIssionary Baptist Church.** 2010. 6 April 2011 <http://www.newbirth.org/about/what_we_believe>.


attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support.\textsuperscript{34} For Bishop Long, the literal sense of scripture is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning that its writer allegedly expressed. It is clear when listening and reading the manuscripts of Bishop Long’s sermons that he does not question, as other religious leaders and scholars do, if parables, metaphors and allegories exist in the Bible; he relies on textual infallibility and the interpretations based on the author's intention.\textsuperscript{35} Instead, Bishop Long, according to the research of Bock and Buist, sees the Bible (as an infallible and literal text to which human law and culture are subjected) in direct contrast to the hermeneutical evaluation of scripture, where the exegetical challenges lie in interpreting biblical text from different perspectives.\textsuperscript{36}


CHAPTER THREE

AN ANALYTICAL EXAMINATION OF BISHOP LONG’S SERMON: BACK TO THE FUTURE

Analyzing an excerpt of one of Bishop Long’s sermons illustrates his literal reading of scripture in the grammatical-historical sense (e.g., the meaning that the writer expressed). The sentences below are passages from Bishop Long’s sermon entitled: “Back to the Future”:

Woman is the soul of man. She is his flesh consciousness. In essence, God made Eve to help Adam replenish the earth. Woman has the canal…everything else is an exit. God had to separate Adam and Eve where they connected so he could tell them to reconnect in [a] covenant to duplicate Him. Man is made in the image of God. And God is a straight man because as his bride In Christ, God puts his seed in us. Any other way is a spiritual abortion. Cloning, Homosexuality and Lesbianism are spiritual abortions. If we are in the image of God and God is our man, then God is heterosexual and we should be like wise anything else is spiritual abomination. Homosexuality is a manifestation of the fallen man. As men we must be like God and be men. In a society, where little boys are exposed to grubby, cursing, dirty, cigarette-smoking road construction worker women, is it any wonder they stop chasing women and start chasing men? “You see [t]he word of God is potent. The word of God is His sperm. God is a real man and [t]he job of the preacher is to bring fresh sperm and when he speaks it, the womb — the church — is to take it in and say, ‘Sho’ you’re right.”

This sermon was preached during a Sunday morning service at the New Birth Baptist Church when they were worshiping in their Snapfinger location. This sermon preached in 1997 was an advertisement to get parishioners to purchase his new book, I Don’t Want Delilah, I Need You!

There are several exegetical problems with Bishop Long’s statements quoted above. The ancient texts of Genesis, in which Jewish, Islamic and Christian concepts of creationism are rooted, are not historical accounts and as such, their meaning is firmly based on case-by-case


interpretation.\textsuperscript{39} According to the \textit{New Oxford Annotated Bible}, it states, “because of the mythic and legendary character of much material in Genesis, it is less often used now than it was in the past as a reliable source of historical information.”\textsuperscript{40} I would like to contend that the sexual orientation of the first couple should not be the focus of the story. The fact that God created them and gave them to each other to express love is the relational point of the story, not their sexual preference. This hermeneutical approach is more inclusive and alternate readings can and are valorized. However, Bishop Long’s argument includes the belief that as human beings, we should see ourselves as being made in the image of God. However, Long’s point here is spurious at best, since God is not tangible and is not human at all. Long believed God to be heterosexual because according to the pronouns used by the Bible and Church culture, God is a man and the Church is His bride. Thus, if God is heterosexual and we are made in His image, then we are also obligated to be heterosexual. The initial problem with this claim is that it introduces sexuality into the Divine and makes the assumption that God is male. In some opinions, this initial mistake discredits the entire claim. Bishop Long’s claim begins by filtering God through cultural nuances, patriarchal traditions, and cultural egotism. God is neither male nor female. God has no body thus God has no sex. There are two ways that one could argue against Long’s claim. First, both God and Gender are socially constructed concepts whereby people attribute different ideologies to them based on their need for a deity that reflects their cultural norms. Or, one could


simply say that God’s true identity lies outside of the realms of human knowledge, and thereby, the human attributes of heterosexuality.

In John 4:24, God’s attributes are clearly identified as a spirit and not in comparison with human figures. Likewise, it can be argued that God is not heterosexual because God is not subject to the gender norms of human culture.

Furthermore, if God is a man and we are all made in His image, then everyone on earth should be male. Sandra M. Schneider’s book, *Women and the Word*, explains that the he/him and masculine metaphors for God were images used by the biblical writers because the patriarchal readers of that time would have completely voided out the notion of a God that rejected their cultural norms. Schneider argues that the maleness of God has traditionally been used against women and the poor and other oppressed minorities that should have protection from the Church. Thus, God was personified as male to meet the preconceived notions of ancient Israel because they could only see God through their closed-mindedness and anthropomorphic idiosyncrasies. She goes on to say that God chose Jesus because during biblical times only a man could have subverted the cultural definition of masculinity to liberate women from the oppression of their femininity. As Schneider points out, in the twenty-first century where a plurality of views on Christianity exists, a different ethos prevails where women are respected as equals and are no longer subject to male superiority. One can draw from the resources that feminist theology has offered that God is not subject to patriarchy. In addition, Jesus’ maleness

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.
was God’s way of suppressing patriarchy, not supporting it. Thus, God is neither male nor heterosexual.

Bishop Long’s patterns of scriptural interpretation concerning sexually exclusive ideologies and doctrines should be read against the works of a well-known queer theologian, Horace Griffin. Griffin’s experience as a former Black Church preacher ostracized from his church based on his sexual orientation, seems almost the opposite of Long’s popularity. Citing biblical literalism as the LGBT community’s biggest challenge in his book, *Their Own Received Them Not*, Griffen notes that this ethos evolved from their understanding of the Bible’s stance on the subject of homosexuality. Without a doubt, Biblical literalism is the driving force behind Bishop Long’s fundamentalist views. It is his stance on what he believes the Bible says that enables him to condemn same-gender-loving individuals to a burning hell and deem their love to be a sort of “spiritual abortion.” Although in the book of Leviticus, it says: “‘Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable’ and “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads” (18:22; 20:13; NIV), Long’s interpretation clearly exaggerates the status of homosexuality in today’s culture by associating it with another act conservative Christians find taboo (abortion). Bishop Long’s interpretations and modern, literal use of these scriptures is an example how:

Religion, especially African-American Judeo-Christian religion, is still being used to persecute and oppress people who are in-the-life. It forces people to remain closeted. Perhaps one of the worst things about it is that it is used to destroy peoples self-esteem and to augment their self-hatred. Religiously-inspired homophobia and biphobia are actually killing people. It is one of the main reasons that the United States is not more aggressive in dealing with AIDS; it serves as an inspiration for violent crimes against lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender people, in much the same way that inflammatory anti-Jewish preaching often leads to
pogroms. The white religious right is trying to co-opt the Black Church into supporting its homophobia/biphobia. Some of us need to articulate theologies for the Black Church that teach that we are inclusive, not exclusive; that we are about life and not about death. Pastors like Bishop Long use select scriptures like these to hate the otherness of homosexuals, alienating and marginalizing them from their religious communities, simply because they believe “the Bible told them so,” despite other all-inclusive language present elsewhere in the text. Because of this self-selecting religious literalism, “The vast majority of regular churchgoers who hear about homosexuality in church say the message is a negative rather than a neutral or positive one and nearly three-quarters of black Protestants (74%) see homosexual conduct as sinful.” Thus, it is clear to see that biblical literalism has had a long lasting negative effect on the attitudes of Black Protestants towards homosexuality. However, Long seems to exhibit this behavior par excellence, we must realize that this ethos did not originate with him. In general, Protestants (including the Black Protestant Church), have considered homosexuality as sinful due to their reliance on the literal interpretation of the Bible. Furthermore, for the majority of black Christians, the Bible serves as the archetypical source of ethical and moral instruction. Furthermore, Horace Griffin notes that,

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47 Vincent L. Wimbush,”The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an
The black church has historically been and continues to be a wonderful institution of support, nurture, and uplift. Unfortunately, however, black church leaders and congregants have been resistant and even closed in treating gay and heterosexual congregants equally or, in many cases, offering simple compassion to the suffering of gay people. The black heterosexual majority is presently engaged in a biblical indictment that identifies gays as immoral.48

However, Griffin begins by stating that there are only seven passages in the entire bible about homosexuality and that “there is no reference to, or for that matter, condemnation of, two people of the same sex cohabitating in a loving, committed and long-term sexual relationship.”49 As homosexuality pertains to the texts in Leviticus, Griffin argues that most Christians interpret scriptures inconsistently in that Leviticus is only relevant when it addresses homosexuality. Noting that culture denotes the importance of a text, the current anti-homosexual attitudes prevalent in churches preaching biblical literalism are more aware of the texts from Leviticus that address homosexuality rather than other passages that address different transgressions and punishments. For example, those in the Black Church generally do not believe it is sinful to eat shrimp (Lev.11:10) or pork (11:7), or to wear clothes with mixed fabric (19:19) even though the Levitical code forbids these actions along with male homosexual activity.50

The social components that produced Bishop Long’s homophobia.

In her book God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies, Dawne Moon, as a sociologist of religion, explores the different social components of religious beliefs in

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48 Horace Griffin. Their Own Received Them Not. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2006. 2.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
the life of a person searching for the co-existence of theology and a plurality of sexualities.\textsuperscript{51} As a congregational study, this book explores how members of Protestant congregations distinguish between polarities, including good and bad, right and wrong, and righteousness and sinfulness. Moon argues that the problem is larger than interpretation; the historical-critical tools and nuanced exegesis of biblical scholars that validate the inviolable dignity of homosexuals will not single-handedly solve the issue of homophobia in the church.\textsuperscript{52} Scholar Jay Emerson Johnson agrees with this view, saying that these new biblical sociological, ethnographic, and cultural studies may “offer a fresh voice to the conversation, clarifying various aspects of the debate and perhaps expanding the theological and spiritual vision of all the parties involved, but they will certainly not resolve the sexuality debates in our churches or provide adequate explanation of the type requested by the Lambeth Commission.\textsuperscript{53} For this reason, Moon contends that it is the social components of a person’s everyday theology that causes him or her to oppose changing their opinions about homosexuality--even when the change is derived from new interpretations of the Bible.\textsuperscript{54} For this reason, a deprivileging of the religious text will not necessarily minimize prejudiced attitudes toward homosexuals in religious communities. Moon believes that the Bible is not necessarily the only source of religious and cultural attitudes that fuels homophobia. She believes that it is those already-established attitudes and social components of religious beliefs


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{54} Dawne Moon.. \textit{God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies}. By Chicago, 111.: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 56.
that shape biblical interpretation which have traditionally caused people to attack homosexuality.\textsuperscript{55}

According to Moon, the only function of scripture in the lives of a person who is controlled by everyday theologies. She defines everyday theologies as those beliefs that a person has already considered to be "natural" in their socially constructed and ordered world. Like the Jungian understanding of the psyche that was an integration of conscious and unconscious components, the theological framework of many Christians is also an integration of consciously and unconsciously affirmed cultural norms of a socially constructed and ordered world.\textsuperscript{56} Moon also contends that these everyday theologies are driven by a person’s emotions. Moon argues that, “the appeal to feelings and intuition shapes those theologies just as much as and at times more than Scripture.”\textsuperscript{57} Moon describes the usage of scripture as a sort of defense mechanism because, "expressing something in a language of emotion forecloses debate, and therein lies its rhetorical power."\textsuperscript{58} Thus, I would argue that Bishop Long’s homophobic statements are nothing more than a rhetorical appeal to the feelings and emotions of people who are linked to the Black Church, an institution whose culture shapes its constituents’ theologies.


The kind of emotionally-laced homophobic language that Bishop Long uses is a bully tactic that he uses to end the conversation around homosexuality before a real dialogue can even begin. By using an intensely emotional environment that he creates when preaching, the “conflicts over how to interpret Scripture do more than call "biblical authority" into question; they threaten to "denaturalize" the sense people make of the world and their place in it”.\(^{59}\) For instance, in his sermon “Back to the Future,” Bishop Long said the following:

[citing Daniel 11:29] “Abomination means to ‘dis’-create or filth. Which is Anti-Christ. I’m sure the bishop [referring to the Episcopal Bishop] is anointed. But because of his stand, he has borne in an Antichrist doctrine by spirit into the house of God that defiles the temple. All because it takes away the covenant. There’s not a true image of God when he enters the temple. The woman gets perverted to turn towards woman … and everybody knows it’s dangerous to enter an exit!. “I was born that way”--spirits can be inherited or acquired. You can have a strong domineering mama and a weak daddy that creates a spirit in the male child that makes him more effeminate. This is true for homosexuality or any other disorder in our lives.\(^{60}\)

This is a prime example of how Bishop Long used Daniel 11:29 to perpetuate negative perceptions about homosexuality within his own church community. The explanation that “abomination means to ‘dis’-create or filth” causes the “denaturalization” of homosexuality, underscored by the subtle reference to the consecration of Bishop V. Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church. With his statements, Bishop Long began with the assumption that the Episcopal Church was wrong in elevating a homosexual man to a leadership position within the Church, thereby ending the conversation before the congregation could discuss with themselves and others about a logical explanation for having an openly gay bishop.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

Thus, his offensive preaching tactics function as a sort of defense mechanism to keep the minds of his people emotionally brainwashed because he understands that "expressing something in a language of emotion forecloses debate, and therein lies its rhetorical power."\(^{61}\)

Bishop Long’s speech against homosexuality, not only alienates LGBT communities due to its blatant virulent speech, but also subtly minimizes the experiences of men and women in general. Bishop Long’s statements also affect the emotions and feelings of black men in his congregation who have same-sex attractions but are in hiding and seeking deliverance because of the black church’s overall disdain towards homosexuals. This leads to unnecessary confusion and shame, due to natural feelings portrayed as “unnatural” or “sinful.” Similarly, this rhetoric portrays a skewed version of what masculinity is, particularly as assigned to the leadership role of “pastor” and exemplified by Bishop Long. Reverend Timonthy McDonald considers the possibility that “the reason that most black pastors contribute to homophobia is because “of their own sexuality. That’s at least part of it. It’s fear of what they don’t know and don’t understand...whether it’s lifestyle or sexual preference or faith commitment.”\(^{62}\) Thus, Bishop Long may also be responding, in some way, to his own feelings and emotions around his sexuality. In other words, Bishop Long may be using his pulpit to prove his hyper-masculinity and to validate his own sexual identity.


Since we understand that the mainstream Black Church takes positions against gay rights,\(^63\) it forces one to ask what already established attitudes and social components of religious beliefs of Bishop Long’s life have contributed to his homophobic rhetoric. Because Moon depicts “everyday” as how frequently “these congregations draw from a wide range of sources encountered in everyday life to articulate their theological position in the process of naturalizing their beliefs, shoring them up against the possibility of their being ‘merely’ culturally contingent,”\(^64\) it requires one to surmise what experiences Bishop Long may have encountered in his everyday life that lead to his homophobic behavior. This leads the reader into the next section on that Bishop Long’s homophobic behavior in the black church as nothing more than the manifestation of the social components of white American and Eurocentric cultures of hetero-normativity.

**White American and Eurocentric Cultures of Hetero-normativity.**

In the case of the African-American Church at large, the liberation of homosexuals is not a part of the strong social justice stance of the Black Church, and the question remains as to why. A recent article on why the Black Church rejects homosexuality explains:

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\(^63\) Four of seven black Protestant denominations take positions against legalizing same sex marriage, and two favor anti-discrimination legislation, or do not support amending the constitution to prohibit same sex marriage. For almost all black Protestant denominations though, political activity on the subject of homosexuality seems to be a relatively low priority compared to efforts on their typical concerns like poverty and racism and as compared to other denominations. In fact, the leadership of three black Protestant churches (National Baptist Convention—USA, African Methodist Episcopal Church, National Baptist Convention of America) have explicitly stated that it is a low priority (e.g., Bannerjee 2005:23). Van Geest, Fred. "Christian Denominational And Special Interest Political Action On Public Policy Issues Related To Sexual Orientation." Sociology Of Religion 69.3 (2008): 335-354. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 May 2012.

It's no secret that a large majority of African-American Christians are theologically conservative. The Pew Research Center's national study of American religion lists African-Americans among the most religiously committed American ethnic groups. They are more likely than the general population to interpret the Bible literally and believe in God with absolute certainty. Considering the theologically conservative disposition of black churches at large, it makes sense that many black Christians take the Apostle Paul at his word when Paul portrays homosexuality as an act of depravity and perversion in his letter to the Romans [1:26-32].

Horace Griffin argues that one of the Black Church’s reasons for condemning homosexuals is rooted in its continuous fight for societal acceptance. This would explain Bishop Long’s statement that, “we have enough problems in our black community without adding more.” Just as black men, who endured oppression during slavery and racism, oppressed women to mimic the patriarchal cultures of white America, the Black church, which was once oppressed by white Christians, now oppresses what it sees as its own subordinate, homosexuals, in order to mimic the socially acceptable standards of its homophobic society. He says:

“As black pastors continue to condemn gays to hell, many gay black Christians feel that heterosexual black Christians should learn from the racist moral failings of white ministers like Jerry Falwell, who in his early ministry used God and the Bible to oppose integration. …Understanding this history is important as we consider whether similar Christian opposition to the moral legitimacy and civil rights of lesbian and gay citizens can be justified. Like ghost of the past, Falwell, Pat Robertson and other contemporary church leaders haunt lesbian and gay people through negative stereotyping and dishonest claims that were used not so long ago against all African-Americans.”

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67 Horace Griffin. *Their Own Received Them Not*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2006. 3.
For Griffin, this type of oppression created by the oppressed is often fulfilling an unconscious need of the oppressed to imitate the act of oppression. Because of this chain of command, anyone who is identified as “other” in the African-American community, either female or gay, is often denied inalienable rights, the respect of personhood, equality and the experience of comfort in their otherness for the sake of Euro-American conformity. According to Dr. Teresa Fry Brown, professor of Homiletics and director of Black Church Studies at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia:

Prior to integration, during, say, the Harlem Renaissance, a person’s sexual identity was not an issue. That was what you did and who you were, but the more we identified with other cultures, the more we would step on one another. We became so mind-alteringly obsessed with others’ sexuality. It made us turn on one another. At one time, the black church was the home of unity, love, and acceptance. It was the black church that served as the home of the civil rights movement. It was the black church that helped strengthen the black community. But then the obsession with sexuality made its way into the church — thanks to the influence of some conservative capital. Who a person slept with and how they lived became a cause of critique — that is, except when it came to the choir director or minister of music, in many cases.68

This need for social acceptance created major problems in the black church. Like the rhetoric of Bishop Long (examined in chapter three), many black pastors use their pulpits to dehumanize a person’s sexual identity. Thus, according to both Brown, Griffin, and Moon’s perspectives, Bishop Long’s homophobic behavior rhetoric and behavior is nothing more than the manifestation of the social components of white American and Eurocentric notions of cultural hetero-normativity. in an interview about assimilative strategies James Cone elaborated on marginalization in the black community, a critique which could also be applied Bishop Long’s homophobic rhetoric:

Some Black people, because they’ve been shut out of white religion, sort of rush over to the side of white conservatives, because their language is so familiar. The assimilative strategy that requires bonding over experiences was used in the public treatment of the African American communities, then women and now to the public treatment of homosexuals. Blacks don’t regularly engage in sophisticated theological discourse, which advises that everything that looks like truth is not necessarily the truth. When Blacks join the community of white conservatives, the only thing they watch out for is racism. You don’t have to tell them about that. Blacks can discern and are suspicious of racism, but not homophobia. We lack a tradition of critical theological inquiry exemplified by exegesis and hermeneutical readings of the scriptures and, as a result, don’t know what questions to ask. White Christianity alienated African Americans from their own black experience, and thus they are easily swayed to become virulently anti-gay.69

Thus, it is safe to assert that for many individuals, like Bishop Long, the objectification of homosexuality could be a direct reflection of his unconscious desire to assimilate with White heteronormativity, which is still the dominant culture in America. For example, in order to demonstrate the strength of their familial structures, some African-American men attempted to mimic the patriarchal cultures of white America and oppressed their own ethnic brothers and sisters. Often, this type of oppression created by the oppressed was a way in which black men could affirm their own manhood. Because of this chain of command, anyone who was “other” or non-male in the African American community was denied inalienable rights, the respect of their personhood, equality and the experience of comfort in their otherness. Thus, the black man became guilty of dehumanizing those that they considered to be their subordinates the same way that white men dehumanized them. According to Griffin,

In an effort to receive acceptance from a homophobic society, blacks strongly condemn and deny homosexuality within black communities and churches. While black church leaders and congregants tolerate a gay presence in choirs,

congregations, and even the pulpit as long as gays cooperate and stay “in their closeted place,” gays quickly experience the limits of this tolerance if they request the same recognition as their heterosexual counterparts.  

The consequences of this oppressive behavior have greatly affected the theologies of black men, like Bishop Long, who often engage in offensive behavior, dehumanizing and ostracizing the LGBT community. In a National Public Radio interview with Michel Martin, Michael Eric Dyson made the following statement regarding this matter of biblical literalism:

And I think we must embrace all of those differences and be careful about applying a biblical stricture against homosexuality when the same biblical stricture was applied to black people by white supremacists who sought to use the Bible as a cajole to beat black people over the head and keep them enslaved and to keep women subordinate to men.  

Thus, Bishop Long’s objectification of homosexuals can be interpreted as a reflection of the cultural ignorance of blacks seeking to assimilate into white culture. Thus, it can be argued that Bishop Long’s homophobia is the direct result of the indoctrination of the Eurocentric notion of elitism and superiority. According to Farajaje-Jones, “homophobia as it is the product of a European worldview that stigmatizes sex in general and homosexuality in particular.” Sadly this white cultural attack on black sexuality that has been patronized by homophobic black preachers has negatively affected all black people, especially black gays and lesbians.  

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70 Horace Griffin. *Their Own Received Them Not*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2006. 20.


For instance, Bishop Long was a prominent supporter of President George W. Bush and he received large sums of money from Bush’s faith-based initiative, including a million dollars from the United States Administration of Children and Families. The connection between conservative political views and anti-homosexual rhetoric espoused behind the pulpit is not coincidental. Timothy McDonald notes, "If you look at the black pastors who have come out with the faith-based money, they're the same ones who have come out with campaigns on the gay marriage issue." This link between Long's homophobic preaching, anti-gay protesting, and his income from Bush’s faith-based initiative might reveal a more subversive anti-gay agenda which complicates analysis. More than adhering only to biblical literalism, his objectification of homosexuality connects politics and religion, both working together to actively create a culture that marginalizes the LGBT community for profit.

Bishop Long’s culturally fixed and stable gender-sex identities and cultural assumptions about sexuality can be further seen by highlighting two quotes from his sermon entitled “Back to the Future”:

It is the most unattractive thing I have ever seen, when I see women wearing uniforms that men would wear, and women fighting to get in the military!

In a society, where little boys are exposed to grubby, cursing, dirty, cigarette-smoking road construction worker women, is it any wonder they stop chasing women and start chasing men?

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75 Scott Billingsley. *It's a new day: race and gender in the modern charismatic movement* Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, c2008.140.


In Long’s previously quoted statements there seems to be a lot of desire and even the expectation for a male to dominate a female. Within these statements, there appears to be an intensified desire for male domination that requires female objectification. From a critical standpoint, according to Professor Patricia Collins:

> Domination always involves the objectification of the dominated; all forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed”. Individual subjectivity is another concern for marginalized groups. Differences can be used as a weapon of self-devaluation by internalizing stereotypical societal views, thus leading to a form of psychological oppression.  

Thus, Long seems to be creating assimilative strategies, that parallel white heteronormativity requiring female objectification.

Bishop Long could also be accused of using the same oppressive tactics against LGBT persons that white preachers used to oppress enslaved Africans and freed slaves. For instance, white preachers used biblical literalism to teach blacks that blackness was a curse and slavery was biblically justifiable. This parallels how Biblical literalism is now used to oppress LGBT persons in African American communities.

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CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

I want to make it very clear that I am not suggesting that Bishop Long has done nothing to liberate people all over the world. For thousands of people, the atmosphere that Bishop Long has created at New Birth has served to alleviate suffering and encourage spirituality. His sermons, though containing prejudiced rhetoric, also contain some positive messages that affirm other spiritual truths. He often challenges people to act with God in order to create a temporary liberation from their suffering. In theological terms, Bishop Long’s sermons often construct theodicies. Bishop Long’s theodicy is often the only the medium through which his members deal with their oppression on a regular basis. However, because of his literal and incorrect reading of scripture, he has chosen to oppose the liberation of LGBTQ persons. This greatly troubles me because in a different reading of the same Bible, readers can see a God who, in the words of James Cone, is present with sufferers, including the LGBTQ community. God’s nature is that of a liberator and for this reason when Christians act on the behalf of God to liberate homosexuals, the realities of freedom, justice and community will be manifested and LGBT persons will also be liberated from suffering. When Dr. Cone was asked the question of why he did not address gay issues in his early writings and what his stance was, he replied:

I recognized the issues before I could do something with them in my work, because doing so required more than what I knew in my personal life. I had yet to read about the issues and acquire the language for scholarly discussion…I feel it’s my responsibility to speak. Therefore, when the Black and gay people of color caucus held a meeting about the Black Church and homosexuality, I felt I should speak not only because they asked me, but also to identify and let people know where I stand. I think on all issues dealing with human life and suffering, we are obligated to take a stand. But you know fighting for justice anywhere always empowers a struggle for justice everywhere.79

To this premise, Emily Townes, a feminist theologian, posits that “liberation from suffering, evil and oppression was thus perceived to represent only the beginning of a journey wherein one acts with God to exemplify the realities of freedom and justice and community formation within the sociopolitical and religious institutions of a society.”80 When probed further about the gay rights movement Townes said the following:

So, when looking at issues of sexuality and sexual orientation and those of us who live them out every day—because everybody’s got a sexuality of some sort—it becomes much more crucial for me to ask, “How do I start to really take hold of the culture we’ve created and been handed and start to reshape it? Can gays and lesbians do that? It is possible. We’ve had social movements before that have reshaped that landscape of the U.S. Will it happen?81

Since my critique of Long has been unabashedly critical, the question should be asked, in light of our previous discussions, how has Bishop Long addressed the topic of sexuality? My first response is that Bishop Long should not be selective regarding what persons he choses to preach liberation to. Instead, he could choose to model his rhetoric according to John 3:16, loving and liberating all of humanity. Bishop Long could be more consistent in his speaking out against the injustices of our nation and include within his stance the rights and liberation of the LGBT community. Most importantly, I would admonish Bishop Long to be extremely reflexive and careful about his methods of biblical interpretation. As it pertains to the Bible, it could be respected as the inspired word of God, but it should not be read literally due to its fallibility. Each person that walks into the church should feel respected as a unique and valuable member of the family of God, regardless of their differences. According to the great commission of Jesus in

81 Ibid.
Luke 4, as a preacher, Bishop Long has been called to be a prophetic voice speaking truth to power, liberating the oppressed, caring for the poor and comforting the afflicted.

In a sermon preached at the Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association, Martin Luther King revealed the aspects of the Christian minister’s connection to social justice mission, referencing Luke 4. According to King, clergy everywhere should be on the true mission of the Church. He said:

Quite often we say that the church has no place in politics, forgetting the words of the Lord, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath {anointed} me to preach the Gospel to the poor…God hasten the time when every minister will become a registered voter and a part of every movement for the betterment of our people.”

It is obvious in this quote that King did not limit his prophecy to the civil rights movement, but he opened it up to all movements that promote the advancement of people. King saw the civil rights movement as more than just a reaction to racism. It was an enlarging of “the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness. In measuring the full implications if the civil rights revolution, the greatest contribution may be in the area of world peace”.

Thus, I would contend that if Bishop Long admires King as much as he proclaimed during the anti-gay march on December 11, 2004, then he would see the gay rights movement as not equal to the civil rights movement but rather a continuation of it, or, in the words of King, an implication of it. Bishop Long should strive to manifest a love, peace and God consciousness transcending the obstructions of discrimination and religious fundamentalism in order to cultivate a worldview in

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which all persons are valued. Thus, he could be on the front line promoting the power of peace and supporting the efforts of every oppressed community.

However, one cannot expect Bishop Long to change his views until a wider conversation begins in the African American community at large. Addressing this idea of mobilizing a larger community, Kelly Brown Douglas says,

> The Black community needs this discourse to help it to understand the role of Black sexuality in maintaining the White hegemonic, racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist structures. A sexual discourse of resistance is needed also to help Black men and women recognize how the White cultural exploitation of Black sexuality has corrupted Black people is concepts of themselves, one another, and their God.\(^{84}\)

However, the question that remains is who will start the conversation? As a student-scholar, I believe that the conversation must find its start in the hearts of the mainline preachers whose pulpits have control of the popular platforms. Furthermore, in light of the recent lawsuits against Bishop Long which allege that Long lured four men into sexual relationships when they were teenage members of the church\(^ {85}\), Bishop Long is at a perfect juncture in his life to use his

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controversy as a platform upon which deconstruct his previous homophobic views and to promote sexual equality and gender impartiality.

The final question becomes, why should he? Why should Bishop Long promote sexual equality and gender impartiality? On December 11, 2004, at the end of the “Reigniting the Legacy” where an estimated 25,000 people participated in a march against gay marriage. Reverend Bernice King, the youngest daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Long’s executive pastor and the co-leader of the march, declared that the march was suppose to “reignite” Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy of the civil rights movement. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, made the following statement in response to the 2004 anti-gay “Reigniting the Legacy” march hosted by her daughter and Bishop Eddie Lee Long. She said:

For too long, our nation has tolerated the insidious form of discrimination against this group of Americans, who have worked as hard as any other group, paid their taxes like everyone else, and yet have been denied equal protection under the law. I believe that freedom and justice cannot be parcelled out in pieces to suit political convenience. My husband, Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." On another occasion he said, "I have worked too long and hard against segregated public accommodations to end up segregating my moral concern. Justice is indivisible." Like Martin, I don’t believe you can stand for freedom for one group of people and deny it to others.86

Furthermore, According to Julian Bond, the co-founder of the Southern Leadership Conference and the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1998 – 2010, “gay rights are civil rights”87. Thus, if Bishop Long was seeking to truly reignite the King legacy of civil rights, there is no way that he could do so without supporting promote LGBT equality and gender impartiality. If he wishes to carry the King legacy of civil rights,

87 Ibid.
should risk his life’s work, as did King, by challenging all forms of oppression, which includes oppressed members of the LGBT community. Such would show his sincerity, compassion, and true allegiance to the continuation of the civil rights movement. Furthermore, King often preached that liberation was the central theme throughout the pages of the Bible and if Long misses that in his teaching, then he is missing the crux of what it means to be a Christian.  

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