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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Dutchess Renee Jones entitled "Homosexuality and the Black Church: Perceptions of Church Leaders." I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

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We have read this dissertation
And recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Provost and Dean of
Graduate Studies

Homosexuality and the Black Church: Perceptions of Church Leaders

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dutchess Renee Jones

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother,

Brenda Delores Jones

who has supported me in every academic

endeavor, from learning to write my name,

to completing this degree.

My mom is living proof that

single mothers can raise

exceptional children!

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ABSTRACT

With more gay men and lesbian women seeking to become fully involved in the Christian church community, churches are beginning to grapple with the issue of the role of the homosexual within the church. Many churches, however, appear to try to ignore the issue; or turn to abusive or neglectful behavior toward homosexuals. The black church, in particular, has a reputation for being especially careless when it comes to issues of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. For those reasons, the purpose of this study is to explore the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of pastors and church leaders within black Baptist, Pentecostal, and other churches regarding the issue of homosexuality and how it is addressed within the black church. How this issue has been addressed in the past, and how it can best be addressed in the future are also explored.

Qualitative research methodology is used for the study. In-depth interviews are conducted with participants in order to allow them to fully express their thoughts, and in an effort to present this issue through the eyes of the participants. Participants of the study are six pastors and church leaders of black Baptist, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian churches located in the southern region of the United States.

Four major themes surfaced from the interviews: Gay and Lesbian Behavior, Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality, Treatment of Gay Men and Lesbian Women Within the Black Church Community, and Sex and Sexuality Within the Black Church.

Results from this study suggest that pastors and church leaders are aware of a homosexual presence within their churches and within the black church community in

general, but that they lack the skills necessary to minister effectively to this population. Data also corroborate the notion that homosexuality remains a sensitive, often ignored topic within the black church. Many remarks made by the participants imply that stereotypical perceptions of gay men and lesbian women exist among church leaders.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The United States of America is more diverse today than ever before. There is more ethnic, racial, language, and religious diversity than most people ever imagined there would be. When we as a nation begin to examine cultural differences across various groups, we are challenged to develop ways of making all persons feel valid and respected.

One of the reasons that issues of religious diversity must be addressed is because religion is deeply ingrained in the history of this country. Individuals in search of religious freedom in fact founded this country. The First Amendment of the Constitution guarantees this freedom (O'Neill, 1949).

As this nation has grown older, her relationship with the institution of religion has seemingly grown distant. Even into the 1960s, religious overtones could be seen in everything from department store advertisements to insurance company slogans. Many of the country's most elite colleges and universities were founded upon strong religious principles. Students attending these schools were required to study the Bible and attend weekly worship services. These requirements often applied to faculty and staff as well. In addition, ministers were often elected as presidents and trustees of these institutions (Kramnick & Moore, 1996).

Today we find that this nation as a whole, and churches in particular, have changed tremendously over the last forty years. It could be argued that religion, in many respects, is no longer considered a sacred institution. There is now more tolerance in general, of practices and behaviors that were once considered improper. Sexual

behaviors are no exception. The tendency to alter moral boundaries related to sexuality is not a new one.

> For the generation that lived through the Great Depression into the aftermath of the Second World War, the great sexual issue was marriage and divorce. For the generation that experienced the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and liberation of women in the 1970s, the issues were the nature of human sexuality and abortion. For the generation that has witnessed the decline of the mainstream churches in both numbers and influence from the late 1970s into the 1990s, the issue has been and continues to be homosexuality (Rogers, 1999, p. 223).

Today we find that churches address the issue of homosexuality in a variety of ways. However, there are four primary positions regarding the debate over homosexuality and its place within Christianity. The first of these is the exclusivist position. Exclusivists believe that the Bible clearly states that a homosexual lifestyle is in direct opposition to God's intention for intimate human relationships. They adhere to this belief and leave no room for compromise or negotiation. Organizations holding this point of view include the Greek Orthodox Church, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, National Association of Evangelicals, Southern Baptist Convention, and Roman Catholic Church. Another religious group holding this point of view is Orthodox Judaism (Wellman, 1999).

Next there is the semi-exclusivist position. Here we find churches and individuals who contend that homosexual desires in and of themselves are not sinful, but acting upon those desires is sinful and unacceptable. Some of the organizations that fall under this category are the United Methodist Church, American Baptist Churches in the U. S. A.,

Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America, Disciples of Christ, Conservative Judaism, and the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.) (Wellman, 1999).

The semi-inclusivist position consists mainly of organizations falling under Reform Judaism and the Episcopal Church. This position postulates the idea that heterosexual relationships are the "ideal," yet they provide "unofficial acceptance" of men and women who are actively involved in same-sex sexual relationships (Wellman, 1999).

Lastly, the inclusivist position is perhaps best described as the exact opposite of the exclusivist position. Inclusivists believe that the Bible *does not* clearly speak out against homosexuality. It is also their belief that many scriptural texts have been taken out of context and twisted by those who have traditionally interpreted them. Inclusivists believe that God fully accepts gay men and lesbians and loves them just as they are. Churches who support this position (to one degree or another) include Unitarian Universalist Association, Reconstructionist Judaism, numerous regional meetings of the Religious Society of Friends, United Church of Canada, United Church of Christ, Metropolitan Community Church, and the Moravian Churches (Wellman, 1999).

There are certainly numerous churches that fall someplace between two or more of these positions. In reality, each individual church is bound to address this issue based upon their regional location, community politics, church leadership, and the makeup of their particular congregations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of pastors and church leaders within black Baptist, Pentecostal, and other churches

regarding the issue of homosexuality and how it is addressed within the black church. How this issue has been addressed in the past, and how it can best be addressed in the future are also explored.

Definition of Terms

In this section I have provided definitions for various terms that will be used in this study. The definitions are provided to be used within the context of this study, and may be defined differently in other contexts.

Baptist – a Christian denomination that was originally distinguished because of its practice of baptizing believers by immersion; is usually Calvinistic in doctrine.

Church – a body or group of Christian believers who have united and formed a congregation; the whole body of Christian believers.

Evangelicalism – the preaching or promulgation of the Christian gospel.

Exegesis – critical explanation or interpretation, especially of Scripture.

Feminize – to make feminine(having qualities or characteristics traditionally ascribed to women, such as sensitivity, delicacy, or prettiness) in character, quality, or appearance.

Gay – indicating or pertaining to homosexual issues; often used as a synonym for homosexual; a male homosexual.

Hermeneutics – the art or science of interpretation, especially of the Scriptures; the branch of theology that deals with the principles of Biblical exegesis.

Homophobia – irrational fear of or antipathy toward homosexuals and homosexuality.

Homosexuality – sexual attraction toward members of one's own sex; sexual activity with another person of the same sex.

Lesbian – a female homosexual.

Masculinize – to make masculine (having qualities or characteristics traditionally ascribed to men, such as strength and boldness) in character, quality, or appearance.

Pastor – the senior minister who is in charge of the church.

Church Leader – a preacher/minister who serves as an associate to the pastor of a church.

Pentecostal – noting or pertaining to any of various Christian groups, usually fundamentalist, that emphasize the activity of the Holy Spirit, stress holiness of living, and express their religious feelings uninhibitedly, as by speaking in tongues.

Religion – a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code for the conduct of human affairs.

Subcultural Identity Theory – a theory that supports the idea that groups need outside groups in order to formulate and strengthen their own identity. The outside group is viewed as an enemy of sorts, which helps to build loyalty within the dominant group (Wellman, 1999).

The Bible – the collection of sacred writings of the Christian religion, comprising the Old and New Testaments. The King James Version will be used for this study.

The Black Church – an institution consisting of churches where the leadership and membership is predominately black; churches whose origins date back to the era of slavery.

Theoretical Basis for the Study

This study will be based, theoretically, on subcultural identity theory. In the section below, an overview of the theory is provided.

Subcultural Identity Theory

Subcultural identity theory is a theory that is derived from the disciplines of social psychology and group theory. Wellman (1999) writes,

> This theory takes seriously the symbolic and ideological formations of individuals and groups as they seek to mobilize movements, resources and membership. The theory proposes that groups need outgroups to establish their cultural and religious identity . . . Therefore, subcultural identity theory predicts that for groups to thrive in a pluralist and open religious market they need be in tension with, though not separate from, the common cultural milieu. Moreover, there is need to create outgroups against which group and religious identity is further solidified. This construction of enemies, imaginary or real, as Coser has shown, is integral to group solidarity (p. 187).

Group identity is an important part of personal identity development. We come to understand who we are as individuals by associating with other individuals in group settings. Families, athletic teams, schools, and churches are examples of places where our interactions with others help us see ourselves as we are, or as we would like to be. In order for group identity/collective identity to occur, there must be some basis upon which people are counted as being inside or outside of the group. A person is either a member of the family, or not; they are on the team, or not. The boundaries that keep these groups separate help to create an "us-them" mentality (Smith, 1998).

An interesting aspect of group identity development relates to the criteria groups often use to differentiate themselves. Smith (1998) states,

> The bases of these kinds of identity distinctions are rarely, if ever, essentialist, immutable differences between groups. Rather, identity distinctions are always created through the use of socially constructed symbolic markers that establish group boundaries. It is through languages, rituals, artifacts, creeds, practices, narratives – in short, the stuff of human cultural production – that social groups construct their sense of self and difference from others (p. 92).

A subcultural identity theory of religion is derived from the belief that evangelicalism continues to flourish in America because it is diabolically opposed to the secular forces of the world. Smith (1998) argues that evangelicalism "*thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat" (p. 89). He goes on to say, "The evangelical movement's vitality is not a product of its protected isolation from, but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic modernity" (p. 89).

The ability of churches to identify groups of "others," according to this theory, is an important part of survival. The creation of outgroups give the "ingroup" a vivid representation of what they are not and what they want never to become. Smith (1998) remarks,

> [P]eople also construct for themselves 'negative reference groups': categories of people who are unlike them, who actively serve in their minds as models for what they do *not* believe, what they do *not* want to become, and how they do *not* want to act. Having to interact with others who are dissimilar to oneself, perhaps even antagonistic to one's own religious views, does not necessarily need to disconfirm

one's own commitments, practices, and identity. Indeed, they can serve as ongoing reminders of one's desire to be quite different from them (p. 105).

Essentially, Smith is arguing that conflict with outside groups builds solidarity within the ingroup. I have witnessed this over and over again, particularly with children. When I was child, it didn't matter how much my little sister and I had been getting on each other's nerves the entire day, or how many arguments we had had, if one of the neighborhood kids had made a negative statement about our mother, we would have joined together to defend our family name by any means necessary. The same thing happens with other groups as well. The "us-them" paradigm often brings the ingroup closer together than they would have been without it.

Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock (1996) have identified four key components for what they call subcultural identity work – defining, coding, affirming, and policing. *Defining* basically involves the creation of the identity. *Coding* involves setting the criteria for membership within the group. Certain rules (either spoken or unspoken) may be a part of these criteria. These codes signify who is and who is not a part of the group. *Affirming* occurs when group members are given the opportunity to stake their claim as members of the group, and where other group members are able to affirm each other's membership. *Policing* consists of protecting the boundaries that separate members from nonmembers.

To illustrate the process involved in subcultural identity work, let us look at a subgroup of (primarily African American) female vocalists known as *divas*. The official definition of *diva* is a goddess or a prima donna, which is a first or principal female singer of an opera company. However, over time, the term has come to represent a subset of African American singers. In order for this group to proceed through the

definition phase of subcultural group work, someone had to attach the term diva to various individual vocalists. Coding occurred when certain rules or guidelines were established for recognizing divas. As Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock (1996) assert, "A group must devise and transmit a set of understandings about the meaning of certain words, dialects, acts, pieces of clothing, hair styles, facial expressions, and anything else that can be 'wielded' by an individual who wants to claim membership in the group" (p. 125). The way that a diva walks and talks, the way that she carries herself, her clothes, her jewelry – and of course, her voice, all of these things serve as markers for this elite group. Affirming involves the accolades and confirmations that divas receive from fans as well as their colleagues within the music industry that they are indeed a part of this group that is set apart from the rest. Affirming may occur at award shows or in magazine articles. But it is certain that a diva is not a diva until she is recognized as such by individuals who have the authority to make such a claim and have it mean something. There are thousands of women who can sing and dress as well or better than Whitney Houston and Patty LaBelle put together, but if "no one" knows them, if they don't have a recording contract, if they haven't won a single Grammy Award, if no one raves about them, it doesn't matter how much they fit the profile, they fail to qualify for membership. Policing makes sure that only those worthy of inclusion are allowed to claim membership in the group.

An important component of subcultural identity work deals with oppressive identity work. Oppressive identity work addresses the way that dominant groups impose subcultural identities onto groups that are in one way or another fundamentally different from themselves. In essence, it involves the process of "othering" whereby "a

characterization of others as lacking some quality or qualities possessed by the original identity claimant [is made]" (Schwalbe &Mason-Schrock, 1996, p. 139). The insinuation in "othering" is that the "other" is somehow inferior to the dominant group. One of the most debilitating aspects of "othering" is that it robs groups of people of the right to define themselves. As a result, many members of dominated groups engage in oppositional identity work. This involves "destigmatizing" those characteristics of its group members that the dominant group has labeled as inferior or undesirable. "Through oppositional identity work, subordinated groups not only resist their devaluing at the hands of the dominant group, they create themselves as people, individually and collectively" (Schwalbe &Mason-Schrock, 1996, p. 141).

> To summarize, the subcultural identity theory of religion contends that, [R]eligious groups that are more capable of constructing distinct identity boundaries vis-à-vis outgroups will produce more satisfying morally orienting collective identities and will, as a consequence, grow in size and strength. By contrast, religious groups that have difficulty constructing identity distinction in a pluralistic environment will grow relatively weaker (Smith, 1998, p. 97).

As Wellman (1999) has stated, subcultural identity theory offers a rational explanation for why many religious groups use homosexuals as their primary outgroup. Doing so often helps them to create a sense of internal identity, and in some cases even helps them rally their resources. Boston (1999) cites examples where religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Martin Mawyer have used homosexuals as an outside reference group in order to gather together their constituents and encourage them to make financial contributions. In one of his newsletters, Mawyer is quoted as saying,

"You know it [homosexuality] is not normal . . .it is dirty and dangerous . . .it is even criminal in a number of states . . .and it is coming after you and your family! If we allow the tidal wave of gay and lesbian smut to continue to pour into our homes, it will utterly consume us in no time at all" (Boston, 1999, p. 10). This remark was made in reference to the ABC situation comedy "Ellen," which featured an openly lesbian lead character.

The issues addressed in subcultural identity theory go hand in hand with issues of power and ideology (Schwalbe &Mason-Schrock, 1996). Ideology, which is a central component of critical theory, can be defined as "the distortions of reality whose purpose is to camouflage and legitimate unequal power relations" (Childers & Hentzi, 1995, p. 60).

Kincheloe & McLaren (2000) assert that, "A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system" (p. 281). These aspects of critical theory bring with them the criticisms that all forms of protest against the status quo attract, which make it noteworthy when addressing a topic as controversial and argument inducing as homosexuality and the black church.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are that the data may not be generalizable to other church leaders or churches, and that the study is limited to a finite number of individuals who live in a particular region of the country.

Significance of the Study

In October of 1998, *Charisma* magazine published an article entitled: *Homosexuality and the Black Church: Let's Stop Hiding From the Pain*. In this article, the various ways that churches address the topic of homosexuality were discussed. The article's title suggests black churches can be a painful place for gay men and lesbians. This study is significant because it brings attention to an issue that is often "swept under the carpet" and forces it out into the open, so that it can be discussed and that the potential for change can be facilitated. This will, hopefully, enable black churches to become more inviting, and help equip them to effectively minister to the gay community.

Sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, can be a sensitive topic to address in a church setting. Through in-depth, face-to-face interviews, I was able to discuss this topic with church leaders in a less threatening environment. This enabled interviewees to share their thoughts on this issue in ways that they might not share in a sermon or in a more formal setting. It also enabled them to express themselves as individuals rather than as part of a larger body with which they may or may not agree. Much of the literature that does exist tends to categorize black churches and their leaders. This research allowed church leaders to express their personal views without being confined to one category or another.

Very little research has been conducted on the topic of homosexuality and the black church. This study will help fill a void in the literature, and will, I hope, inspire other researchers to take up this topic and to expand upon this research. The study is also significant in that I hope to use the data collected from the participants to begin creating a

grounded theory related to the way that issues of gender and sexuality are conceptualized within the black church.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is somewhat like a discipline, but not quite. Some define cultural studies as multi-disciplinary, while others go one step further, calling it anti-disciplinary. In reality, cultural studies utilizes information from a number of fields, depending on the particular project that is being undertaken. One particularly popular "definition" follows:

> [C]ultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture . . . It is typically interpretive and evaluative in its methodologies, but unlike traditional humanism it rejects the exclusive equation of culture with high culture (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992, p. 4).

Gender issues, racial issues, and issues related to sexual orientation are easily taken up in cultural studies. This is due, in part, to the trend within cultural studies to take up issues that have been neglected in more traditional forms of scholarship.

This study can be linked to cultural studies in a couple of ways. The theoretical framework for the study is a subcultural identity theory. One component of this theory is that it admonishes its adherents to examine and challenge the status quo.

The study is also related to cultural studies in that it addresses a seldom discussed topic in an environment where a group of individuals, in this case gay men and lesbian women, have found themselves marginalized. In addition, issues of concern for the gay and lesbian community have long been an integral part of the work that takes place in

cultural studies. This makes homosexuality and the black church an appropriate topic to be examined in the context of a cultural studies environment.

This dissertation consists of five chapters. In the first chapter, the *introduction*, I discuss the purpose of the study and the theoretical framework upon which the study is based. I also provide definitions for various terms that will be used in the study, and discuss the limitations and significance of the study. In the second chapter, the *review of literature*, I deal with four specific categories: the black church during four historical eras, sexual identity within the African American community, homosexuality within the black church, and biblical references to homosexuality. In the third chapter, *methodology*, I discuss qualitative research methodology, present a statement of bias, talk about the importance of establishing trustworthiness, and outline the research methods that were used.

In the fourth chapter, the *presentation and discussion of data*, I present profiles of the participants, and the various themes that were unearthed from the interviews. I also discuss the data from the study and how they relate (or do not relate) to the literature. In the final chapter, *conclusions recommendations*, I talk about the significance of the study and offer recommendations for how the topic can be addressed in future research studies.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of pastors and church leaders within black Baptist, Pentecostal, and other churches regarding the issue of homosexuality and how it is addressed within the black church. How this issue has been addressed in the past, and how it can best be addressed in the future are also explored.

The four categories of this literature review speak directly to the purpose of the study. An overview of the black church is provided because of the importance of being able to place the black church in a historical perspective. Sexual identity within the African American community is discussed because there are some significant differences between the way that blacks and whites view themselves (and each other) as sexual beings. These differences are relevant factors in any discussion regarding homosexuality and the black community. The section on homosexuality and the black church is provided because the topic being explored is directly related to the way that homosexuality has been addressed in black churches. Finally, Biblical references to homosexuality are presented because of the importance of such reference in discussions of homosexuality and Christianity.

An Overview of the Black Church During Four Historical Eras

Introduction

W. E. B. DuBois, as cited in Fordham, asserts that the black church as an institution is so important, that it is much like a political organization. According to

DuBois, the church functions as not only a spiritual resource, but also an educational resource, a social resource, an economic resource, and a source of recreation (Fordham, 1975).

Historically, the black church has gone back and forth between conservatism and radicalism. Even with its inconsistencies, it is certain that the black community has fared better with the black church than it ever could have without it (Wilmore, 1998).

In 1930 Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson began an in-depth study of the "Negro" church. Included in this study were data collected for over fourteen months, from 609 urban churches and 185 rural churches. Several themes regarding the unique nature of the black church were discovered. One of those themes dealt with the origin of the black church. It was its origin, according to the authors, that sets it apart from the religious organizations of other ethnic and racial groups. They identified five factors that contributed to the origin of the black church which were: "growing racial consciousness, individual initiative, splits and withdrawals, migration, and missions of other churches" (Mays & Nicholson, 1999, p. 423). In an effort to unearth the "genius or soul" of the black church, the authors identified "the pride of ownership, democratic fellowship, and the spirit of freedom that blacks could enjoy within them" (Mays & Nicholson, 1999, p. 423) as the factors that make the black church *the black church* (Mays & Nicholson, 1999).

The black church provides an environment where ordinary people have the opportunity to be recognized as important individuals. It is in the black church that a maid can receive recognition because she is the choir director, and a manual laborer can receive respect because he is a member of the deacon board. The black church often

gives people a chance to exhibit their gifts and talents when other institutions do not (Mays & Nicholson, 1999).

It would be naïve, however, to assert that such opportunities to serve in leadership positions are distributed equally among church members. Most black churches are patriarchal in nature. This means that women are relegated to certain roles, which I will discuss later in the paper.

Another role that black churches play is that of a community center. Information of importance to community members is often disseminated through the church. In fact, leaders of the Montgomery Bus Boycott relied heavily upon pastors to relay vital information about the boycott to its members on Sunday mornings. They realized that if they could get the information to the pastors, that they in turn could and would get it to the people. In addition, the church has also helped to meet the recreational needs of the black community. Whereas whites might attend recitals, plays, and other such events in other community based facilities, blacks often attended these events at the churches (Mays & Nicholson, 1999). This was due, in part, to the role that legal segregation played in the lives of African Americans. Segregation limited the social opportunities for blacks outside the African American community. For that reason, black churches were called upon to help meet needs outside the spiritual realm.

These are merely a few of the roles that the black church plays within the black community. For the remainder of this section of the literature review I will address the various assignments the black church has sought to complete during four specific eras in our nation's history. I will specifically attempt to address how the black church's

conservative side has challenged its activist side, and how this contention has affected the community as a whole.

The first half of the Nineteenth Century before the Civil War

In 1619 twenty Africans were sold as indentured servants in Jamestown (C. Cone, 1975). This was (as best we know) the beginning of a horrific ordeal for black people in this country. It is important to note that as horrible as the system of slavery was, it was often justified through references to biblical texts related to slavery. In hindsight, it is easy to look back and see the flaws in that line of logic. Those who were enslaved saw the flaws at that time. But, there was not always agreement on how the problem of slavery should be addressed. According to James Cone, "A large majority of black slaves refused to believe that God was irrelevant, but, as they looked at this life, he appeared not to care. Therefore, in order to cling to hope, the average black slave had to look forward to another reality beyond time and space" (Cone, 1969, p. 93).

This was one of those areas where the black church found itself split. On the one hand, there were those who taught and believed that the Christian way to deal with slavery was to accept that suffering is a part of this life, and to look forward to a better life someday in heaven. This view was in direct conflict with the more activist sector of the church, that believed that they deserved a better life here on earth, and that the Christian thing to do was to fight for that life, and thus fight for their freedom.

Part of the dilemma over slavery dealt with patience. There were some blacks and whites that believed that a gradual emancipation would be best. It was their opinion that to free slaves all of a sudden, charging them with sole responsibility for their own lives, would be a mistake. It was their view that emancipation should take place in stages

– so that slaves could get used to the idea of being free, and so that appropriate sources of aid could be established. The opposing faction, however, believed that full emancipation should be granted immediately.

African American slaves likened themselves to the Israelites of the Bible who were slaves in Egypt. Like the children of Israel, many black slaves saw themselves as God's chosen people who were being treated unjustly here on earth. And like the Israelites, many of them dreamed of the day that they would reach the promised land where there would be no more crying, no more beatings; in short, no more slavery. While they waited, slaves were able to take white Christianity and make it their own. As Wilmore (1998) so eloquently put it, "From the beginning the religion of the descendants of the Africans who were brought to the Western world as slaves has been something less and something more than what is generally regarded as Christianity" (p. 22).

There has long been a debate about whether or not aspects of the various African cultures continued to be a part of the lives of slaves in America. There are those who would argue that the way the system of slavery was organized prevented slaves from preserving their former cultures. However, most historians agree that if one takes a close look at some of the religious practices of those slaves, it becomes obvious that there is a direct connection between their behaviors here, and the behaviors of their contemporaries in Africa.

One example is that there were certain ways in which individuals used herbs and charms to affect themselves and others in their communities. One might employ such a tactic in order to prevent a beating from the master or in an effort to win the affection of a love interest. In addition, there were often instances of energetic hollering and dancing

that were incorporated into the worship services of slaves that were perhaps characteristic of African customs.

W. E. B. DuBois supported the idea that remnants of African culture were indeed present within the black community and the black church. E. Franklin Frazier, on the other hand, believed that the nature of slavery prevented the survival of such culture (C. Cone, 1975). More recent work has addressed this question as well.

There are many other scholars who believe that slaves were stripped of their African heritage because their families were often split up, because they were often made to live and work with slaves who did not speak their native languages, and because slaves were very mobile, often being sold from one owner to another. All these factors, they believe, contributed to the destruction of the African culture in America (Cone, 1969).

According to Montgomery (1993), the idea that slaves abandoned their native beliefs in exchange for the beliefs of their white masters is difficult to prove because they had no motive for doing so. He also states that recent scholarship on the topic has supported this theory.

There were certain aspects of Christianity that made it an adaptable religion for slaves. The following quote illustrates this point:

> Beyond its intrinsic appeal, evangelical Christianity was malleable, and slaves modified it to accommodate their traditional West African beliefs and practices. The resulting religious forms were superficially Protestant Christian but substantively African in many aspects. For instance, the Protestant concept of spiritual conversion or 'rebirth in Christ,' the symbolic use of water in baptism, and the emphasis on experiential rather than intellectual routes to salvation were

> features of European-American evangelical religion through which slaves maintained related African traditions such as initiation rites, water ceremonies, and spirit possession (Montgomery, 1993, p. 22).

He went on to say, "African-American Christian worship was more notable for its dancing, singing, and hand-clapping, all of which were elements in West African religion and were easily fitted into the pattern of Protestant evangelical worship, which was itself often noisy, spontaneous, and exuberant (Montgomery, 1993, p. 22).

Another aspect of slave religion that distinguished it from white religion was the significance of slave spirituals. Spirituals such as "Steal Away," "Tell Old Pharaoh to Let My People Go," "Go Down Moses Into Egypt Land," and "My Lord Delivered Daniel" demonstrate the deliverance theme that ran through most spirituals. This theme related to both earthly and heavenly deliverance. Though some black churches may have taken a conservative stance on the issue of slavery, most of them were liberal in their acceptance of the incorporation of African customs into Christianity. This was probably empowering for the slaves themselves. In a world where they had very few choices regarding anything of importance to them, they were at least able to define their God and how they would worship Him. As Cecil Cone put it, "Thus the slave transformed Christianity and reinterpreted the Scriptures in the light of the black religious experience" (C. Cone, 1975, p. 35).

It is no secret that many whites tried to use Christianity as a tool for controlling their slaves. Many of them justified the institution of slavery by stating that it was a compassionate way of bringing Christianity to a group of savages who would likely receive it no other way. Their argument was that slavery was actually helping the slave

become a better person. It was also seen as a way of introducing slaves to Christianity. It goes without saying that there were numerous slaves who did not buy this theology. Many slaves resented having to attend church with their masters. They tired of the exhortations to obey. For that reason, many would meet together for their own services, either with or without their master's permission. When permission was not granted, they would sneak off into the woods or into an old cabin. There they would often listen to the slave preacher, a man of considerable influence among slaves (Montgomery, 1993).

According to Wilmore, "Even those slaves who accepted white preaching and made a public profession of faith exasperated their mentors by the way they apparently drifted in and out of the state of grace, clinging to dreams, visions, belief in ghosts, good-luck charms, and the efficacy of the hoodoo man or root doctor" (Wilmore, 1998, p. 257). Though many southern historians have attempted to paint the picture of the black slave as a passive, easygoing individual, this was not always the case. Many slaves became very skilled at playing this role in the presence of whites, but there were numerous slaves who not only hated slavery, but also hated their masters. This is evidenced by the occurrence of mini-revolts where barns and houses were burned to the ground, and masters were poisoned or sometimes beaten to death by their own slaves. There were also larger scale revolts such as the one planned and executed by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, which will be discussed later in this section (Robertson, 1971).

Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker are but a few of the members of the black community who felt that Christianity justified an open rebellion against slavery. In fact, many black preachers were leaders in slave resistance movements. Nat Turner, who led one of America's most well known slave revolts, was a man of deep religious

conviction. He was even a Baptist preacher. He said he believed that God had ordained him for some special purpose. Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, and other leaders of revolts also had strong religious backgrounds (C. Cone, 1975).

The Nat Turner Revolt got off to a bloody start. He and his compatriots went first to the house of his master where they killed seven people. In just a couple of days the number of victims rose to fifty-seven. Approximately two months later, after dodging his would be captors, Turner was finally apprehended (Wilmore, 1998).

Nat Turner's revolt made whites much more apprehensive about the connection between religion and uprising among the slaves. Many failed insurrections were the result of information from another slave who had been promised his or her freedom in exchange for the information (Wilmore, 1998).

Gabriel Prosser was a devout student of the Bible, and was a man of deep religious conviction. He felt that he was being led by God to lead a slave revolt. He likened himself to the Biblical character Samson, and believed that he had been set aside by God to deliver his people. The year was 1800, and though his plans were well organized, they failed. Two slaves revealed the plot to their master, leading to Gabriel's capture and death (Wilmore, 1998).

Denmark Vessey was a former slave who purchased his freedom in 1800. He was a very learned man who had traveled extensively with his former master. He was also a religious man who constantly studied the scriptures. Vessey apparently found inspiration in the story of the Battle of Jericho. He used it to encourage his followers of their assured victory at he hands of the Lord. In addition, the black Methodist church is said to have been involved in his plan. The plan, however, was foiled by a slave who informed his

master of Vessey's intentions. Ultimately Vessey, along with several others, was executed (Wilmore, 1988).

Henry Highland Garnet, a Presbyterian minister from New York, urged slaves to rebel in a slightly different way. He reminded them that their numbers reached approximately four million, and that they should confront their masters directly. During the 1843 National Negro Convention he urged,

> Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery and of a future judgment, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire is FREEDOM, and that nothing else will suffice. Do this, and forever after cease to toil for the heartless tyrants, who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse. If they then commence work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences (Wilmore, 1998, p. 120).

There were some independent black churches in the south prior to the Civil War. Many of them were formed with the blessings of white congregations. In fact, white congregations often contributed financially to the establishment of such institutions. Many of these churches dealt with issues similar to those being dealt with by slave churches or by slaves who attended white churches. Many of the preachers within these churches were white. Those blacks, that served as preachers within independent southern black churches during this time period, were closely watched by the white community. They were expected to preach in a way that was similar, if not identical, to the way that non-independent and white church leaders preached to blacks (Wilmore, 1998).

One of the ways that northern black churches attacked the institution of slavery was by branding it a sin, and thus un-Christian. They felt that if they could convince southern whites of this fact, that they would denounce slavery. This same argument was used to help boost the self-concepts of northern blacks. All of this led to a belief that God was *for* those who were enslaved and discriminated against, and that He would eventually punish the others (Fordham, 1975).

When discussing the lives of free men and women of color in the North, it is important to recognize that they still experienced racism. They faced discrimination when it came to the vote; they were also discriminated against when it came to issues of education and public accommodation of many types. Blacks were also discriminated against in the job market. There were certain occupations that were simply out of the question. When the large numbers of European immigrants began to come to this country during the mid-1800's, job competition, and thus job discrimination, increased noticeably (Fordham, 1975). In short, northern blacks were not granted full citizenship rights.

In the North, Freedmen/women were dealing with other issues as well. For one, those who were Christians were forced to decide whether they would remain a part of white congregations, suffering racist treatment, or organize their own churches. In addition, many freedmen and women in the North were abolitionists who fought for the freedom of all African Americans.

The move to establish separate black churches in the North began in the late eighteenth century. Before that time, the few blacks who participated in public worship in the North did so in white churches. The push for separate churches was fueled

primarily by a resentment on the part of blacks of the way they were treated within the integrated churches. They were most often delegated to the "Negro pews," and were restricted from full participation in the religious process, including positions of leadership within the churches. In 1794 a former slave by the name of Richard Allen founded the Bethel Church of Philadelphia. That same year his friend, Absalom Jones founded Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. Afterwards, black churches began to show up in virtually every black community in the North. There were over 300 such churches by 1840 (Fordham, 1975).

That northern blacks began to establish their own congregations was encouraging to the community as a whole. Even though these individuals were free, there were really no organizations that they could call their own. The courageous step toward independent places of worship opened the doors for the black community to be able to meet some of its own needs.

An important function of black churches in the North during this era was to help individuals free themselves from what were viewed as the demoralizing effects of slavery, and to help them become morally upright citizens. This included strong pronouncements against drinking, dancing, and various other "wicked endeavors." Though this quest for morality was firmly supported by the Bible, there were other reasons that these churches urged the pursuit of moral improvement so fervently. One of those reasons was because they felt that by becoming morally superior individuals, they could demonstrate that they were not the degenerate beings that many whites believed they were. They also hoped that such a demonstration of morality would help to abolish slavery, because they realized that slavery was justified, in part, by the insistence that

African Americans were incapable of civilized behavior outside the system of slavery. For this reason, many northern blacks felt it was their duty to lead exemplary lives, for the sake of those still in bondage (Fordham, 1975).

Most free blacks in the North continued to struggle economically during this time period. Though they were legally free, many had not been outside the system of slavery long enough to accumulate the skills needed to obtain economic security. Furthermore, regardless of their skills, racism circumscribed their opportunities. For that reason, the church was often called upon to help provide for those who were not able to completely provide for themselves. Granted, there were some individual blacks that were able to accumulate wealth, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Therefore, charity and benevolence were an important part of the duty of the black church in the North during this time. Though the roles of women were traditionally restricted, even in black churches, this was an area where women were allowed to exercise their various gifts and talents. Ladies auxiliaries were common in northern black churches, and an important part of what they contributed related to their ability to raise funds to help the needy. Organizations such as the Colored Female Education Society, an auxiliary of the African Presbyterian Church of New York, helped to supply funds to those in need. In fact, nearly every northern black church during the antebellum period had some sort of benevolence ministry whereby they provided help to those in need (Fordham, 1975).

Another issue of importance to northern black churches during this era was education. Many black pastors and other religious leaders stressed the importance of strengthening one's intellect. One of the most notable proponents of educational pursuit

was the Reverend Daniel A. Payne of the A. M. E. Church. In fact, it was his belief that morality and education went hand in hand (Fordham, 1975).

The last quarter of the Nineteenth Century after the end of Reconstruction

The term Jim Crow refers to a set of laws that segregated whites and blacks in society. It also refers to the basic disfranchisement of blacks based on a belief that they are inferior to whites; and also based on the need of whites to remain in charge. This disfranchisement included the construction of laws that relegated blacks to the role of second-class citizen, which was evidenced by legal segregation (Scruggs, 1971).

After the end of Reconstruction, African Americans came face to face with Jim Crow. The black church, which was controlled and attended by blacks, was often a place of solace where individuals who shared a common sorrow could come together for encouragement and fellowship. As lynching increased in the South, black men found that the church was a place where they could go and be affirmed as men.

Part of the new problems that African Americans faced after slavery was due to their new status as free individuals, and the way this new found freedom affected their value. As slaves, black people had a certain amount of value to whites because they were seen as property. Once they became free, however, these same individuals were of virtually no value. It was therefore not problematic, in the eyes of many whites, for an African American's life to be taken for no reason. Blacks could be killed for any reason, or no reason at all, and very few white people were sincerely concerned (C. Cone, 1975).

Southern whites used the last twenty-five years of the Nineteenth Century to undo everything that had been accomplished by southern blacks during Reconstruction. As a result, many blacks began to doubt that there was any chance for them to have a just

existence in America. It was at this time that ideas of emigrating to Africa began to look more and more appealing (Montgomery, 1993).

In the eyes of numerous blacks, this was one way of dealing with what looked like a hopeless situation. There were some churches that supported the idea of African Americans moving to Africa. Others were very much against it. In the end some people did move to Africa. But many more remained in the United States, some because they lacked the finances for the trip.

To many, the post-Civil War black church appeared to have lost its fervor. Preachers traded their sermons on freedom for messages that focused on such topics as drinking and dancing. They began to adopt an attitude that suffering in this life was a prerequisite for rewards in the next life. The preaching of such ideals was also supported by white churches and white businessmen. As long as preachers were teaching their congregations that they should be honest and obedient, and as long as they were telling them that things would get better "after while," these churches and businessmen were obliged to give them loans to help build new churches, because they saw their efforts as a good investment. They, with the help to the leaders of the black churches, were helping to keep all blacks in their place (Cone, 1969).

According to E. Franklin Frazier, the post-Civil War black church was not protest minded. Frazier believed the function of the church, in general, was to help blacks deal with their present condition rather than trying to change that position. In fact, he viewed the black church as a tool of social control in the black community. On the other hand, Frazier recognized the other roles filled by the church such as that of an educational institution, a place where individuals could become involved in politics, a source of

economic opportunities, and as a place of solace in a world that favored whites (Fordham, 1975).

In what was generally a hostile world for blacks, the church was seen as perhaps the only place where blacks could consider themselves "safe" (Cone, 1969). This was important, especially during this time when groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) were using violence and threats in an effort to keep blacks in their place. Sometimes the black church was the only place where blacks could gather together and feel safe, because of the sheer number of individuals gathered together, if nothing else. The church was a place of solace.

Another post-Reconstruction concern for black churches was whether or not they should break ties with the northern white churches that had "befriended" them during the Civil War. Though such churches had been helpful in many ways, their help was often disseminated in a paternalistic fashion. In the Methodist denomination there was constant strife between the African Methodists and the Methodist Episcopal Church. Both groups competed with each other for black members, and the Methodist Episcopal Church was bent on keeping African Methodists out of political matters. Some black Baptists, on the other hand, insisted on controlling their own churches in virtually every way, yet they continued to receive financial aid from white controlled groups such as the American Baptist Publication Society and the National Baptist Convention's Foreign Mission Board. Other black Baptists, however, struggled with this issue. They also struggled with whether or not white Baptists should continue to run schools that were established to meet the educational needs of blacks, or whether the control of such schools should be given to black churches (Montgomery, 1993).

Another area of interest involving higher education dealt with the content of the curriculum that would be offered. On one side were Booker T. Washington and others like him who favored industrial training for blacks. His objective was to help students develop character while also helping them to become skillful and competent individuals. One problem, however, was that many of the trades he was teaching were already outdated. On the other side of the debate, were individuals like W. E. B. DuBois who believed that the African American community needed intellectual leaders and that higher education should help to meet their needs and cultivate their talents. As with many other issues of importance, churches lined-up on both sides of this debate. During the 1880's, training schools such as those proposed by Washington, were an important part of many church educational programs. However, many other churches embraced DuBois' ideals regarding the importance of educating what he referred to as the "talented tenth," a phrase DuBois used to refer to the ten percent of educated, influential African Americans whom he considered most suited for leadership within the black community. In fact, many church leaders believed they were a part of this talented tenth (Montgomery, 1993).

Many denominations were instrumental in the establishment of historically black colleges and universities. For example, the United Church of Christ played a role in the establishment of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and the United Presbyterian Church of North America was instrumental in the establishment of such institutions as Knoxville College in Knoxville, Tennessee (Booker, 1994).

During this same era certain members of the black community attempted to deal with a different set of issues. Members of the "black elite," which was mostly comprised

of mulattoes and men and women of wealth, made attempts to distance themselves from more "common" blacks. In order to do so they formed their own (elite) churches. Many of the members of these elite groups were Congregationalists, Presbyterians, or Protestant Episcopals. There were often very strict codes that members were required to abide by. Individuals who did not qualify for membership, such as those whose skin tone was deemed "too dark," were turned away (Montgomery, 1993).

The members of the more refined urban churches were often critical of the church services of the rural poor. The "undignified" manner in which these blacks conducted themselves in such services was seen by the elite as an embarrassment to the race. Poor blacks, however, often viewed the church services of the black elite as parallel to those of white churches. These issues became problematic when southern blacks began to migrate to the North. Blending individuals who were accustomed to two very different styles of worship was a challenge for many congregations (Montgomery, 1993).

An impressive religious movement during this era was the emergence of Pentecostalism or holiness doctrines. The church meetings of members of Pentecostal denominations more closely resembled those of slaves. There was much dancing and hollering as the Spirit "fell on" various members. One notable contribution of the Pentecostal church was its recognition and promotion of women into roles of leadership that were off limits to women in other denominations.

One of the ways that women of all denominations contributed to their churches and to the black community during this era was, of course, through their fund-raising efforts. Black churches, particularly in the North during the last half of the nineteenth century, did a great deal of fund-raising. In 1896 a group of black women from all over

the country met in Washington, D.C. and founded the National Association of Colored Women. This move helped them to expand their focus from church work to social welfare. As these women's groups continued to grow both inside and outside the church, some men who were against their expanded roles resisted them. Various women leaders such as Mary Cook, Lucy Wilmot Smith, and Virginia Broughton began to stand up and demand that women be treated as equals. They insisted on having their voices heard both inside and outside the church (Montgomery, 1993).

Even during a time when it appeared to some that the black church was lagging behind, it was still able to push itself forward in certain areas. In some churches, the roles occupied by women began to change. The overall role of the church within the black community was expanded. Though there was no real activist contingency, the church did progress. But in a very subtle way, the post-Reconstruction church appeared to support the status quo.

The Era of the Harlem Renaissance (1920's)

It is important to recognize that the 1920's marked the beginning of a new era for America. There were many firsts that took place in the twenties. The automobile made society more mobile than it had ever been before. This caused more and more families to venture out into the urban and suburban parts of America. In addition, the roles of women were beginning to change. Women began to exert their rights, even smoking in public and wearing more revealing clothes. They began to wear makeup that had previously been associated with prostitution, and they began to pursue careers as well. The strength of the economy also sparked a new consumerism. Companies were

producing merchandise in increasing volumes, and Americans were there, waiting to buy it (Klein, 1972).

The entertainment industry began to change also. Movies, theatre, and other forms of entertainment began to produce more illicit productions. The nightclub business began to boom, as did interest in professional sports (Klein, 1972). Klein postulates, "Perhaps most of all, the traditional social arbiters, who had shaped social and moral standard for so long, were losing their hold. The church, the family, the social elite, and the small town ruling class all found their domains of authority fast shrinking" (p. 13).

Along with all of the innovations of the 1920's came a new set of criteria for separating the affluent from the poor. Advertising and salesmanship were of great importance not only to the individuals involved in those professions, but to the national economy as well. As a result, the number of chain stores in America grew astronomically during this time. When people did not have the money to pay right away, they began buying on credit (Klein, 1972).

This was the essence of life in the 1920's, for middle-class whites. For blacks, life was somewhat different. One of the issues of major concern for the African American community during this era was what has been called The Great Migration. During this time, hundreds of blacks left the South and headed north to what they believed was the land of opportunity. With the growing factories and other industries that began during this period, the opportunity to secure a good job was reason enough for many to move north. This migration had a profound effect on the black church as well. Many southern black Christians cautioned their friends and relatives about the alluring nature of the big cities. In some instances this sparked division between northern and

southern congregations. According to Wilmore (1998), "The period of the 'Great Migration,' which includes the years following the war, had a decisive impact upon the churches. It brought them face to face with a larger number of newcomers than they had ever seen before, thereby straining both their capacity to assimilate the southern style of worship and the meager resources available for expanding their ministries" (p. 171).

World War I helped to create an enormous demand for workers, particularly unskilled workers, in northern cities. This need for industrial workers was the driving force behind the migration. (Frazier, 1963).

Though most southern blacks that migrated to the North did so in search of better jobs, obtaining such jobs was not as easy as many imagined it would be. As a result, some of them found themselves involved in illegitimate activities such as illegal business dealings and prostitution. Many churches played a role in helping these migrants find a job. Some churches would obtain job listings from the Urban League or other organizations and make this information available to church members on Sunday mornings. Many pastors viewed their ability to help people get jobs as a tool in recruiting new members. In some cities, large corporations built relationships with churches. In Detroit, for example, the Ford Motor Company established arrangements with certain preachers in which the preachers could virtually assure a certain number of positions to his congregation, thus helping to boost attendance. In addition to helping these newcomers find employment, northern churches also helped them meet their basic needs in times of emergency (Sernett, 1997).

Another issue that remained important during this era was that of Black Nationalism. There were many groups who continued to support the idea of African

Americans moving to Africa. By 1919 there was a new leader for this movement. Jamaican born Marcus Garvey came to the United States in 1916 for a speaking engagement. By 1918 he began publishing the *Negro World.* The following year he claimed to have millions of followers. The Universal Negro Improvement Association, the organization founded by Garvey, which had divisions in the States as well as Jamaica, was the foundation of his service to blacks. Many poor blacks were tired of being rejected by middle-class blacks, and they were also losing interest in traditional Christianity. They found that Garvey's organization was a refreshing way to meet their political, religious, social, recreational, cultural, and economic needs. Garvey was critical of America and doubted that blacks would ever achieve equality here. Though many black preachers were distressed by Garvey's religious beliefs, still others supported him. One of his beliefs was that "Negroes" from all over the world should come together and create their own country. He believed that his movement was beneficial to whites in America because it provided a way for blacks to leave the country in a peaceful way. He was quite critical of the United States and its treatment of blacks. He was also critical of black preachers, stating that they urged their members to forgo current blessings in hope of a better life in heaven. He often engaged in shocking behavior, such as soliciting the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) for support of his "Back to Africa" initiative. In addition to his political pursuits, Garvey also sought to meet the spiritual needs of African Americans by holding Sunday morning "church" services and other such events (Wilmore, 1998).

The African Orthodox Church (AOC) grew out of Garvey's movement. Some of the clergy who were supporters of Garvey, and who were involved in his movement, wanted to establish a relationship with the Orthodox Church as a black affiliate. Though

they accepted people of all races, their ultimate goal was the formation of a single black church (Hayes, 1997).

Certain segments of the African American community were again becoming tired of the status quo. Many of them saw the black church as helping to maintain the status quo. Rather than sit by passively, many were taking action. Some began to reconsider emigration, as mentioned previously. Others simply rejected the church altogether.

The term "New Negro" was used to describe individuals who were cultured, proud of their racial background, political, and willing to engage in interracial interaction. This term, coined by Alain Locke, helped describe those individuals who were involved in the New Negro Movement, which later became known as the Harlem Renaissance (Stewart, 1996).

Of the many artists who contributed to this movement, James Baldwin's contributions are noteworthy. Baldwin was known for pushing the envelope. His writing exposed a gritty, sometimes vulgar reality that was uncomfortable for many Americans to embrace. According to Ross (1999),

> Baldwin's alleged excesses (overly poetic images, gutter language, too much sex) are mere covers for this deeper issue of exhibitionism or promiscuity, racial and sexual . . . The moment Baldwin begins to expose/explode the vagaries and slippages of desire, he seems to be writing a titillating project that places sexual revelations, confessions even, at the heart of cultural identity (p. 36).

Perhaps it was his desire to resist categorization that freed him to write about aspects of society that were either ignored or considered improper. In *Here Be Dragons* Baldwin concludes,

> For what this really means is that all of the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life. Not without anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of the label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself (Baldwin, 1985, p. 681).

Referring to the controversial content within many Baldwin novels, Ross (1999) asserts, "[B]aldwin wants to explode those categories, offering not a protest but rather a critique that disables the categories from retaining their oppressive power" (p. 36). Several of his later novels are centered on homosexual relationships. Baldwin's own homosexuality perhaps made his approach to this topic all the more revealing.

Some of the members of this next generation of middle-class blacks began questioning, and ultimately rejecting, the traditional doctrines of the black church. Individuals such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen, "the New Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance," were among those who felt more comfortable in secular environments such as nightclubs, than in churches. This newfound opposition was new to black church leaders, and they were never truly able to deal with it. These individuals were interested in types of social contact (interracial social contact) that were in some ways viewed as "off limits" by the black church. Many of them embraced Marxist ideals, which further isolated them from the traditional black church (Wilmore, 1998).

To the members of this elite group, the church had become passé. In their opinion, the traditional black church did not understand the social times in which it existed. They found the requirement that they accept Jesus and thus reject the world as

simply too much to ask. Many of them viewed black preachers as hypocrites who partied with them on Saturday night and then preached salvation on Sunday morning (Wilmore, 1998).

By the 1920s, many blacks had grown tired of living in a society where it was obvious that they would never be treated with dignity and respect. They were tired of suffering. And if they were not suffering so much personally, they were tired of hearing of the suffering of less fortunate blacks. The coldness of the ghetto and the escape provided by drugs and alcohol and partying all helped to create one of the first generations of blacks who rejected the message of Christianity and of the black church whole-heartedly and openly. They found solace in the nightclubs and in the company of friends rather than in the church (Wilmore, 1998).

> It became faddish for whites to travel uptown to patronize black cabarets, drink bootleg liquor, and listen to the great jazz bands. Primitivism and the exotic-erotic image that whites expected were provided; some nightclubs in Harlem, while featuring black musicians and singers, were open to whites only. Inevitably, while enjoying the surface gaiety, white patrons missed the tragic underside of Harlem – the starvation, frustration, and anger which erupted in the race riot of 1935 (Davis & Peplow, 1975, p. 142).

The animosity expressed by these "New Negroes" toward the black church, though perhaps not widespread, is still worthy of notation. What they were saying, in essence, was that "business as usual" was not good enough anymore. The feelings of these artists toward the black church are evident in the literature of the time. Some of

them curse the preacher, some of them curse the church, and some of them curse God (Wilmore, 1998).

The Civil Rights Era (1960s)

The Nineteen-Sixties were unlike any decade before or since. A large part of the distinctiveness of the era is derived directly from the Civil Rights Movement, which consumed it.

During the 1950s and 1960s black religion experienced a revival of sorts. Due largely to the way that Martin Luther King, Jr. and others were able to combine modern ideas of justice with traditional ways of worship, people began to see the church as a place of hope once again. In addition, protest movements initiated by college students and seminarians began to take shape. Some of the leaders of the student movement, such as John Lewis, Prathia Hall, Charles Sherrod, Leontine Kelly, Maulana Karenga, and Joseph C. Jones, Jr., had grown up "in the church" as children of pastors and other church leaders (Wilmore, 1998). The movement itself was riddled with religious overtones, from the way messages were delivered, to the symbols, songs, and other paraphernalia used to inspire the people.

However, many of the "hard-core" members of organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did not trust Dr. King and other preachers. They felt that the church, in general, did not appreciate where they were coming from. Even Dr. King realized that he could not depend upon the majority of black churches to support him or the movement enthusiastically or consistently. Certainly there were many churches that provided meeting facilities, helped with "freedom schools," and provided other support to the movement. In fact, many *individual* churches strongly supported the

movement. Without their strong support the movement likely would not have survived (Wilmore, 1998).

Part of the reason for this lack of consistent support on the part of the black church may have been because many pastors felt that the movement was too radical. According to Wilmore, "The fact remains that King was considered too radical by black as well as white clergymen, and many churches carried on business as usual, Sunday after Sunday, while SCLC and SNCC workers suffered for lack of bail money and program funds, and were harassed, beaten, and jailed throughout the South" (Wilmore, 1998, p. 209, 210).

It is worth noting, again, that many of the civil rights activists were young adults and teenagers. Though most adults supported them in their efforts, many did not. In fact, there were some who felt that they were troublemakers who were making an already tough existence for blacks even tougher. Some of their opposition came from high places.

Due to the conservative political and social views of Joseph H. Jackson and many of the supporters of the National Baptist Convention, in 1961 Martin Luther King, Jr., along with over 500,000 other members, left the Convention and formed the Progressive National Baptist Convention. In essence, Jackson and the National Baptist Convention, though appreciative of the efforts by student protesters to pursue equality for all blacks, saw their behavior as an act of rebellion against their elders. Though protest was seen as an important step toward civil rights for black people, it was not enough. Jackson placed more emphasis on becoming producers and business owners. (Jackson, 1999).

According to Dr. Joseph H. Jackson and other supporters of the National Baptist Convention and its theology, the role of the black preacher was not that of an activist. His role was simply to preach the gospel of Jesus, and to help members become morally upright Christians (Lincoln, 1974).

The Nation of Islam was quite critical of the black church during the 1960s. They saw black preachers as the number one hindrance to the progress of black people. In their view, black preachers taught their followers to remain subservient to whites, and to look forward to a better life in heaven while enduring "hell on earth." To them, whites were devils, and blacks were God's chosen people (Wilmore, 1998).

According to Wilmore, "In a genial, almost humorous vein, Malcolm stripped black churches of the last shred of dignity by pointing out, as Garvey had done before him, their responsibility for 'the Negro's deplorable economic condition,' and how preachers conspired with white power structures to keep the people impoverished" (Wilmore, 1998, p. 215).

During the mid-1960s a Harlem street gang calling themselves the "Five Percenters" demanded that preachers pay them 5 percent of their salaries because they believed that black preachers were draining the black community of its financial resources but were not doing anything to help those same communities build up those resources. In other black communities black churches were vandalized. It has been argued that the Black Manifesto, which was released in 1969, also played a role in escalating the negative feelings of a growing number of people regarding the black church. Though the white church was the primary target, some argue that the black

church was a target as well. In addition, groups such as the Black Panthers ridiculed black preachers, calling them "Uncle Toms" (Wilmore, 1998).

In 1968, James Forman began to talk to members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers about an upcoming National Black Economic Development Conference. This conference was sponsored by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), whose purpose was to disseminate funds to community groups. Lucius Walker was the IFCO's executive director. Walker, and others such as Mike Hamlin and John Watson, played a role in the carrying out of the Black Manifesto (Forman, 1972).

In reference to the decision to present the Manifesto at the conference Forman (1972) writes,

> We agreed that a conference with the declared purpose of helping black economic development should not take place in a city like Detroit without producing some definite programs beneficial to the black community. And we decided that the only way to make this conference relevant was to take it over completely and then make sure that an organizational framework was created to carry out the programs formulated by the meeting (Forman, 1972, p. 545).

The Black Manifesto basically consisted of a demand that the black community be repaid for the abuses it has suffered at the hands of white society. It was directed toward white churches and clergy, who had been forerunners in the assault against blacks, and who reaped numerous benefits from their support of the institution of slavery and other methods of oppressing blacks. In the Manifesto, which was presented by James Forman at the 1969 Black Economic and Development Conference, $500,000,000 was

requested on behalf of all blacks in America. This was seen as an alternative to the ways that the government and other organizations had proposed to meet the financial needs of the disenfranchised members of the black community (Wilmore, 1998). In addition to its financial demands, the Manifesto addressed other issues of importance such as a denouncement of capitalism and a plan to establish a socialist society within America that would be run by blacks (Lincoln, 1974).

Though many people, black and white, were upset over the Manifesto, many more became outraged by what occurred just a few days later. On May 4, 1969, James Forman interrupted a Sunday morning service at Riverside Church in New York. Many called his behavior sacrilegious and withdrew any support they had been contributing to The National Committee of Black Churchmen (Wilmore, 1998).

According to Lincoln (1974), Forman actually read the Black Manifesto from the pulpit of the Riverside Church that morning. It is reported that many members of the church, including the pastor (Dr. Ernest Campbell), left the church during Forman's "presentation."

In June of 1966 Stokely Carmichael of SNCC coined the now famous slogan of "Black Power" (Wilmore, 1998). A few years later James Cone penned these words:

> If the black church organizations want to remain faithful to the New Testament gospel and to the great tradition of the pre-Civil War black church, they must relinquish their stake in the status quo and the values in white society by identifying exclusively with Black Power. Black Power is the only hope of the black church in America (Cone, 1969, pp. 108, 109).

In his book *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone was able to do what no theologian had done before – he was able to present the basic tenets of Christianity in a way that accommodated the needs of African Americans to embrace a religion that recognized their uniqueness and that did not detract from their experiences in a racist world. His book was published during the height of the debate over the Black Manifesto, and was praised by many who supported the Manifesto (Wilmore, 1998).

The overall role of the black church in the civil rights movement is difficult to discern. In some instances the church was available and helpful in bringing about constructive changes within society on behalf of all black Americans. On the other hand, the church appeared afraid to take that final step of full-fledged activism. There were, however, many local pastors and churches that did take a stand, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers.

During each of the four eras discussed in this paper, it was obvious that the black church was (and is) a multifarious institution. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It does become problematic, however, when various segments of the church are hindering the progress of other segments of the church. This happened in one way or another during each of these eras.

Sexual Identity Within the African American Community

Sexual identity within the African American community is a complex matter. Part of its complexity is derived from the manner in which blacks were viewed and treated by whites beginning during slavery. Dyson (1996) remarks,

> Whites viewed black bodies as ugly, disgusting, and bestial, and blacks were made aware of this. Black bodies were spoken of in the same breath as, say,

> horses and cows . . . Black sexuality sat at the heart of such judgments. If black bodies were demeaned, black sexuality was demonized. Unless, of course, it was linked to breeding black babies for slavery, or, in the case of black women, satisfying the lust of white men. Thus, a central paradox of black sexuality began (p. 84).

It was important for whites to dehumanize blacks in order to make the horror of slavery more "acceptable" in their own eyes. One of the ways they accomplished this was by creating myths regarding black sexuality. As stated in the above quote and elsewhere in this paper, these behaviors had a devastating affect on the psyche of African Americans.

In reference to the way that many members of the African American community deal with issues of sex and sexuality, Harper (1993) stated, "Indeed, some middle-class blacks have colluded in this defusing of black sexuality, attempting to explode whites' stereotypes of blacks as oversexualized by stifling discussion of black sexuality generally" (p. 246). Douglas (1999) explains, "Because White culture racialized sex and 'sexualized' race by equating blackness with sexual deviance, the Black community has been diligent in its efforts to sever the link between such deviance and blackness" (p. 97). This has been difficult, in part, because segments of the white community have continued to try to prove their case.

According to Hart (1998), documents such as the "Moynihan Report" have created an image of the black community as matriarchal in nature, serving to feminize the entire race. Hart explains, "There is a devious and deviant inversion of masculine and feminine identity in a group otherwise gendered female" (p. 206). All of these efforts to

define black sexuality and black families as abnormal have, perhaps, contributed to homophobia within the black community.

Providing insight into the problem of homophobia within the African American community, Douglas (1999) writes,

> Indeed, some Black people's desire to maintain a degree of privilege in a White patriarchal society makes homophobia even more formidable in the Black community. In a society where privilege is accorded on the basis of race (namely, whiteness), gender (maleness), and sexual preference (heterosexuality), heterosexual privilege is virtually the only privilege that Black people – especially Black women – can claim in order to move to the center (p. 104).

Feminization

Historically the black female has been stereotyped as an aggressive, matriarchal, castrating individual. Cole (1978) explains that in order to get the maximum amount of labor out of slaves, black women were stripped of their femininity so that they could more "justifiably" be worked like animals. The white culture taught her that she was not a true woman. It can be argued that the church, adhering to the morally conservative position of the black middle class, sought to reverse this mindset by requiring that women behave in a passive, "lady-like" manner.

Black women were systematically stripped of their dignity through the constant sexual exploitation they suffered at the hands of whites. One example of such exploitation is the life of Sarah Bartmann. In what must have resembled a circus sideshow, Sarah (also known as the "Hottentot Venus") toured Europe during the early 1800's so that her naked body might be gawked at as a form of entertainment. After her

death, she was the subject of many "scientific" studies. Physiologically, she was compared to an orangutan, and after an autopsy her sexual parts were removed and placed on display in the Musee de l'Homme in Paris (Douglas, 1999). As Collins (1991) argues, "Efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression" (p. 77). The degrading treatment of black women by white men took on numerous forms. Though the delivery was sometimes different, the results were always the same – a distorted, unrealistic, humiliating portrait of black women as sexual beings.

Stereotypes such as the "jezebel" have helped create an image of black women as being sexually loose. Other images such as the loyal, asexual "mammy," or the tragic, displaced "mulatta" have helped create an inaccurate representation of black women that the black community continues to fight against. During the late 1800's and early 1900's, many middle-class black women fought fiercely against these stereotypes and attempted to present themselves as sexually moral and chaste people (Anderson, 1997). Many did so by ascribing to the tenets of the "cult of true womanhood." These tenets include the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Collins, 1991). Their efforts were aided by the emergence of the Black Women's Club Movement. Members of these various clubs, who were mostly middle-class, subscribed to the tenets listed above, and sought to live them out in their lives and encourage other (sometimes less fortunate) women to do so as well. Though their efforts to achieve "true womanhood" were perhaps commendable, the average black woman, for whom it was difficult to achieve the tenets of the cult, was left asking the famous question posed by Sojourner Truth many years ago – in spite of the life that I live, ain't I a woman too? (Giddings, 1984).

Since the mid-1960s, the female head of household has been problemitized and racialized. Black "matriarchs" are portrayed as unable to supervise properly their children due to long hours worked outside the home. They are said to be aggressive and unfeminine - qualities that serve to strip black men of their masculinity. Their inability to succeed is based on their so-called failure to model what is deemed appropriate female behavior (Collins, 1991). Each of these portrayals, no matter how erroneous, leave black women searching for a sense of what exactly it means to be a black woman in America.

According to Collins (1991), "These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (p. 68). Therefore, it is important to realize the stereotypes used against black women are designed to keep them in a perpetual state of oppression. In an effort to combat the distress caused by the bombardment of inaccurate and insensitive portrayals of what it means to be a black women, many black women have created an alter ego of sorts – the "superstrong" black woman.

One of the most basic feminizing characteristics both within the black community and the larger society is the ability to bear children. Some argue that lesbians are viewed as not-feminine because of the perception of them as non-childbearing. This, however, does not take into account those lesbians who do have children (Boykin, 1996).

Masculinization

To say that there are certain gender-coded "norms" that men are expected to adhere to is an understatement. Like the "cult of true womanhood," there are rules that the possessor of "true manhood" is expected to follow. According to White & Cones (1999), traditional ideals of masculinity have both positive and negative aspects. The

emphasis on logical thinking, organizational skills, and planning ahead are to be admired. However, as the authors note, "Excessive emphasis on power, dominance, competitiveness, and individualism, and control has resulted in the oppression of ethnic minorities and in sexism . . . Little or no value is placed on empathy, nurturance, compassion, harmonious relationships, and being in touch with one's feelings" (p. 115).

Regarding the masculinization of black men is the issue of boys being raised by single-mothers. As was argued in the infamous "Moynihan Report," black men who do not have a father-figure present in their homes grow up not knowing how to be "true men" because no one has modeled this for them. They are therefore placed at a disadvantage because they are unable to take advantage of "rights" as men in a male dominant world. Some argue that gang violence and prison terms are the results of absent fathers in black families. Gangs have been known to recruit children from fatherless families, and many black prisoners report growing up in families without fathers (White & Cones, 1999).

As Calvin C. Hernton has noted, black men have always had to deal with the stereotype of them as sexually brutish and insatiable – the result of which is the perception of them as a constant threat to the sanctity of white womanhood (Harper, 1993). This perception has caused many within the black community to avoid discussing those aspects of black male sexuality that stray from what might be considered appropriate sexual behavior within that community. In addition, many black males have embraced the stereotypes regarding their sexual nature, making the acceptance of a homosexual nature (which is viewed by some as more passive) more difficult to accept. As Anderson (1998) writes, "Given the ways that the virtues of black masculinity have

informed black moral consciousness, the very idea that black homosexuals can and ought to love and fulfill their desires for same-sex intimacy and unions constitutes a moral emasculation of themselves in the black community" (p. 189).

There are many myths and stereotypes related to the way male sexuality and masculinity are conceptualized within the black community. For example, many men within the African American community have expressed their disapproval of homosexuality based on their belief that gay men are essentially weak, whereas black men are supposed to be strong. Some African Americans argue that the lack of male dominated households within the black community causes some black men to behave effeminately which (they conclude) leads to homosexuality. The assumption is that the development of masculinity in these men is stunted in some way. This assumption is carried one step further by African Americans who assert that black male masculinity is threatened by the existence of black lesbians. It is argued that lesbians, because they are capable of existing virtually independent of black men, detract from these men's ability to demonstrate their masculinity by dominating these women in a patriarchal fashion (Douglas, 1999).

During the Civil Rights Era many black men vocalized their desire to assert their masculinity within the African American community and within society in general. Within the movement there existed a sexist attitude that either delegated women to staying at home, or serving within the Movement as secretaries, desk workers, or the like. Though women such as Ruby Doris Smith, Diane Nash, and Donna Richards Moses were afforded a certain degree of respect within organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), most women were not. Ruby Doris Smith's 1966

election as Executive Secretary of SNCC was the exception, not the rule. The general consensus in such organizations seemed to be that women were needed primarily to inspire their men, and raise their children (Giddings, 1984).

Other "Black Power" proponents of the era shared similar opinions regarding the role or black women in the Movement and in the community. Imamu Amiri Baraka expressed the opinion that women were, by nature, submissive, and that their submission to men was required for there to be order in the world. His wife, Amina, echoed his sentiments stating that femininity is what makes women appealing, and that this femininity cannot be obtained without first submitting to the authority of men (Giddings, 1984).

The various myths regarding black men and their sexuality were created to dehumanize and degrade them. By creating an image of black men as sexual beasts with abnormally large sexual organs, white men hoped to create justifiable reason for the brutality they suffered at the hands of whites. Collins (1991) explains,

> Depicting African-American men as sexually charged beasts who desired white women created the myth of the Black rapist. Lynching emerged as the specific form of sexual violence visited on Black men, with the myth of the Black rapist as its ideological justification (p. 177).

Though lynching and similar manifestations of racism have declined, black men continue to suffer from prejudicial and racist mistreatment. By the mid-1990's homicide had become the leading cause of death of young black men. The unemployment rate of black males was more than twice that of their white counterparts. In addition, black men on average made $8,000 less per year than white men. The number of black men in

prison continued to escalate, leaving the black community with a sizable void that needed to be addressed. On October 16, 1995, a large sector of the African American male population took a decided step toward asserting themselves as men, and reclaiming their roles as leaders within the African American community. The Million Man March took place in the hopes that it would be an exciting first step toward this reclamation (Nelson, 1998).

> The Million Man March was, in part, Black America's response to these developments. Black men descended on Washington determined to bring the spiral of social and economic erosion in the Black community to a halt. Expressing extreme concern for increasing racism in America and the deterioration of the social cultural and moral fabric of the Black community, Black men came to Washington, in the words of the March's Mission Statement, 'Committed to the ongoing struggle for a free and empowered community, a just society and a better world' (Nelson, 1998, pp. 244-245).

In all of their effort to assert their masculinity and empower the African American community, many African American women were offended by the request that they not attend the march. Black women were asked to participate in a "Day of Absence," which was to include not going to work or school, and not patronizing various business and entertainment venues. However many black women, such as Angela Davis, Jewel Jackson McCabe and Michele Wallace, openly criticized the march on the grounds that it was sexist and divisive. Nevertheless, the March provided black men with a platform for asserting their masculinity while addressing many of the social ills that plague the African American community (Nelson, 1998).

Homosexuality

Homophobia within the black community is a complex issue. Though there are numerous reasons why homophobia exists among African Americans, Douglas (1999) contends,

> Homophobia does not reflect merely a close-minded sexual bigotry by Black men and women. This is a phobia and prejudice nurtured in large part by a history of White sexual exploitation. The case supporting homophobia in the Black community reveals homophobia almost as a misguided strategy for protecting Black lives and the integrity of Black sexuality, as a necessary position to safeguard Black life and freedom. Homosexuality is seen as threatening Black well-being. The passion that often surrounds homophobic attitudes is perhaps best understood in light of Black people's mistaken efforts to protect 'authentic blackness' rather than as a sign of a community more intensely homophobic than other communities (p. 105).

As in other communities, black lesbians are seldom heard from or discussed. Gordon (1998) contends, "The lesbian has been, for the most part, a hidden point of African American gay iconography" (p. 173).

Homosexuality does not appear to exist in West Africa in the same way that it exists in America. This is, perhaps, due in part to the way that Africans generally view marriage, and to the importance they placed on bearing offspring. Within this society, homosexuality is categorized as a sexual offence, along with fornication, rape, and incest (among others) (Mbiti, 1969).

In African cultures, marriage is seen as a responsibility rather than as a choice. Individuals who do not marry are viewed by the community as rebellious and abnormal. Because marriage and procreation go hand-in-hand in African cultures, the ability to produce offspring is another important aspect of the marriage relationship (Mbiti, 1969).

In West African societies, children are an important part of the culture. For this reason, marriage, and the children conceived within marriages, are an important part of the identity of men and women within this society. Mbiti (1969) explains:

> In some African societies, marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth. First pregnancy becomes, therefore, the final seal of marriage, the sign of complete integration of the woman into her husband's family and kinship circle. Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children for, whatever other qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide: she has become the dead end of human life, not only for the genealogical line but also for herself . . The fault may not be her own, but this does not 'excuse' her in the eyes of society . . . She will suffer for this; and it will be an irreparable humiliation for which there is no source of comfort in traditional life (p. 110).

There are some members of the black community who suggest that homosexuality is a part of white culture, and that if black men and women are homosexual, it is only because they have been influenced by whites. These claims, however, ignore strong evidence that homosexuality exists in *some* form in virtually every culture, including African cultures. There is also a contingency within the African American community that argues that homosexuality is a threat to the black family. They argue that gay and

lesbian unions place the community in jeopardy because they do not produce offspring, and that this non-production of offspring places the future of the race at risk for extinction. This argument fails to acknowledge, however, that many gay men and lesbians are in fact raising children (Douglas, 1999).

Another issue that black gays and lesbians must confront is the relationship between their gay identities and their racial identities. Many people identify primarily as African Americans and secondarily as gay or lesbian. For others, the opposite is true. For blacks who choose race as their primary source of self-identification, many do so because they see their sexual object of choice as something they can hide, whereas their race is something that is more easily identifiable by others. Those who chose sexual orientation as their primary source of self-identification often do so because they feel the gay community was more tolerant and because they feel their sexual orientation is a more significant part of their daily lives than is race (Conerly, 1996). Boykin (1996) comments, "For many black homosexuals, being black and gay involves shuttling back and forth between two identities and searching to make peace between them" (p. 92).

Some gay and lesbian members of the black community state that the lack of black gay role models is problematic for them. They report that there is virtually no model for healthy, long term gay and lesbian relationships, and that they are encouraged to keep their sexual identity a secret (Loiacano, 1989).

Homosexuality Within the Black Church

The church is without a doubt one of the most powerful institutions within the African-American community. It is within this community that church and family are interdependent - each helping to strengthen the other (Caldwell, Green & Billingsley,

1992). Since the days of slavery within this nation, African Americans have clung to Christianity and spirituality as sources of strength and hope. The church has had, does have, and will in all likelihood continue to have a tremendous impact upon the social and spiritual climate of the black community.

Over time, the church has become a place of solace for African Americans. It is here that we are able to come together and celebrate our current blessings, while sharing in our hopes for a better future. This sentiment, however, is often stifled for gay men and lesbian women. Instead of a place of solace, for many, the church has become a place of horror. According to Lowe (1998), "Although Christians have been commissioned to preach the good news of God's forgiveness to every person - including gays and lesbians - many African American churches are cold and inattentive toward homosexuals" (p. 84). One of Lowe's interviewees stated, "Growing up in COGIC's [Church of God in Christ's] 'purity classes' - a program that teaches teens about sexual abstinence - [I] was taught with other students that homosexuals go to hell automatically when they die" (Lowe, 1998, p. 84).

Many individuals who deal with same-sex attraction end up leaving the church altogether. Ninety percent of those contacted by Lowe agreed that most Black churches do not possess the knowledge, skills, or compassion necessary to minister effectively to gay men and lesbians. Most stated that outreach ministries to these populations are virtually nonexistent within black churches (Lowe, 1998).

Furthermore, another of Lowe's interviewees stated: "Many pastors and evangelists should repent. Their use of homosexual jokes is disrespectful to the pulpit. All you have to do is say words like 'sissy' or 'faggot' in a black church, and everyone

laughs and claps. No one makes fun of substance abusers by calling them 'junkies' or 'crack heads' or calling an alcoholic a 'lush' or a 'drunk,' because it wounds the congregation" (Lowe, 1998, p. 86).

There are many black congregations that would probably address this issue in a more positive way if they knew where to start. According to Hicks, the time has come for the Black church to stop running from issues involving sex.

> We need to talk about human sexuality in the church. We need to talk about abortion, abstinence, adultery, fornication, masturbation, lesbianism, and homosexuality...quite candidly, the problem that the African American church faces is one of its own creation. The moral preachments of those who stand in black pulpits have already alienated hundreds who are no longer convinced that they can come within the walls of the traditional church for the nurturing they need, the comfort they require, or the grace which God has guaranteed (Hicks, 1994, pp. 93-94).

According to Douglas (1999), the African American community has a reputation for dealing harshly with gay men and lesbian women. She asserts, however, that the allegation that blacks are more homophobic than the general population is not substantiated. She argues that blacks may appear to be more homophobic because of their fear of sexuality in general, stemming from sexual oppression during slavery. During slavery, blacks were stereotyped as insatiable sexual beings. Their sexual habits were compared to those of animals. For these reasons, and several others, many members of the black community developed a sensitivity regarding their sexuality. In

general, they sought to distance themselves from any sexual practice that might be deemed unusual or abnormal.

Contrary to some assertions, the Bible is not always clear on the subject of homosexuality. Many of the biblical verses that are traditionally used to condemn homosexuality have been distorted and misconstrued (Douglas, 1999). Yet, when asked for the basis of their condemnation of homosexuality, many blacks (as well as people of other races) defer to the Bible. Douglas states,

> Whether they are churchgoers or not, Black people often argue that the Bible makes clear that homosexuality is a sin. By invoking biblical authority they place a sacred canopy, a divine sanction, over their views toward gay and lesbian persons. This canopy renders homophobia practically intractable. The Bible becomes, then, a tool for censoring a group of people, in this case, gay men and lesbians (Douglas, 1999, pp. 90).

Douglas (1999) argues that the historical misuse (by slaveholding whites) of the Bible to justify slavery and the oppression of blacks has caused many African Americans to distrust the biblical interpretations of white scholars on the topic of homosexuality. It is her belief that in order for blacks to stop using the Bible to support their homophobic attitudes, it will take black scholars, and other members of the black community presenting different interpretations of the Bible in a way that is believable and acceptable to the black community. She argues that it is important that blacks understand the relationship between the way that whites used the Bible to "terrorize" them, and the way that many of them use the Bible to "terrorize" gay men and lesbian women.

In his book *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*, Keith Boykin recounts a chilling incident that occurred in the life of a man named David. David was attending the funeral of a friend named Vaughn who had died of an AIDS related illness. During the funeral the preacher asked those who wanted to dedicate their lives to Jesus to come to the alter for prayer. When no one responded, this preacher asked the organist to stop playing so that he could speak to the congregation. In his speech he stated, "we all know what Vaughn died of." He stated that Vaughn was on his way to hell, and that others would be on their way there too if they didn't change their ways. This preacher then asked those members of the congregation who were saved to raise their hands. David, having raised his hand, began to experience a verbal attack from the preacher. The preacher stated that he (David) could not be saved because homosexuality is an abomination to God. Several of David's (and Vaughn's) friends walked out of the service as this exchange was going on. He could not believe that this was happening at a church, during a funeral (Boykin, 1999).

HIV/AIDS has become an epidemic within the black community. African American men and women are contracting the disease at an alarming rate.

> A recent study by the National Cancer Institute reported that one in 33 black men ages 27 to 39 may be infected with the AIDS virus. The study calculated that one out of 98 young black women may be infected. The rates for whites are one out of 139 men and one out of 1,667 women. Maureen Downey, in a November 30, 1995, article in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* quoted Dr. Stephen Thomas, director of Emory University's Institute for Minority Health Research, as saying,

'AIDS has escalated into the civil rights battle of the 1990s' (Billingsley, 1999, p. 110).

Numerous churches across the country have joined in the fight against this disease, and it's effect on the black community. Organizations such as The National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS and The Balm in Gilead have been established. Other well known groups such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference have taken steps to help combat the disease as well (Billingsley, 1999).

While some organizations freely serve all persons affected by HIV and AIDS, others experience some difficulty reaching out to certain segments of this population. It has been argued that the conservative moral framework of the black church has made it easy for it to condemn gay men and intravenous drug users. As Cohen (1999) notes, "It seems that only when dealing with the 'innocent victims' of the epidemic are black churches fully prepared to embrace the political struggles of people with AIDS" (p. 283).

Yet, there even appears to be a difference, at times, between the ways these two groups are viewed as it relates to the disease.

> Further, while there is no denying the stigma of drug addiction in black churches, organizers suggest that distinctions between what clergy deem the 'sick' behavior of drug users and the 'sinful' behavior of homosexuals have also influenced and differentiated the response each group receives from the church. Neither behavior or lifestyle is condoned by the church, but drug use is seen as a temporary 'condition' that black clergy can acknowledge, talk about, and most importantly, develop programs for. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is viewed as sinful behavior, not to be acknowledged or accepted (Cohen, 1999, p. 284).

Though some churches and religious groups have chosen to address the HIV/AIDS crisis, many others have not. The reasons for the lack of attention given to this issue are numerous. Some scholars believe that black institutions, such as the black church, shy away from this issue in part because of their own homophobia. Within the United States, black men and women have historically been portrayed as sexual deviants. Such stereotypes have been used as justification for the marginalization of African Americans. As Cohen (1999) explains,

> With such a history of marginalization in mind, we can begin to understand, yet never condone, how homophobia along with other systems of exclusion might be willingly deployed by black elites in an attempt to distance 'the community' from blame and stigma and to retain their hopes of legitimacy and full incorporation (p. 35).

But how does such homophobia play itself out within the black church? In an attempt to explain how and why events such as the previously mentioned funeral scene occur in black churches across the United States, Boykin asserts,

> Despite the widespread awareness of homosexuality in the black church, we still find black ministers, deacons, ushers, choir members, music directors, organists, congregations, and homosexuals themselves participating in an elaborate conspiracy of silence and denial. Several of the black ministers I interviewed – even those with reputations for homophobia – acknowledged the presence of large homosexual contingents in their churches, but this fact has not stopped their homophobic preachings, particularly because the lesbian and gay parishioners accept and even participate in the rhetorical gay bashing (Boykin, 1999, pp. 127).

As an example, Boykin (1999) cited the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Though the church's pastor, Dr. H. Beecher Hicks, is unabashedly homophobic, the church has a rather large gay membership. After interviewing Dr. Hicks, Boykin asked several gay acquaintances why they continued to attend that church despite the homophobic views of its pastor. Their responses were that he did not preach homophobic sermons very often. Boykin reasons that many black homosexuals continue to attend such churches because they have not accepted their homosexuality and feel guilty about it.

From a different point of view, Cheryl Sanders (1998) argues that black churches, in general, are ecclesiastically accepting of homosexuals, though they do not advocate for them. This is evidenced by the widespread participation of homosexuals in various roles within the black church, particularly music ministries. She remarks that black religious scholars tend to categorize homophobia and discrimination against homosexuals as sins along with other forms of oppression, but that they fail to advocate for gay and lesbian rights and neglect to address the theological and ethical dimensions of these forms of oppression with any detail.

In Sanders' opinion, the Bible speaks very clearly against homosexual behavior. She believes, however, that many scholars misuse the Bible in an effort to prove their points regarding this issue. She stated,

> I am neither enlightened nor persuaded by most of the sources I have consulted that purport to offer critical exegesis and modern interpretations of Scripture on this issue. On the contrary, I have been profoundly disappointed to discover the extent to which both liberal and conservative interpreters engage in what I would

> call proof-texting to support their claims on behalf of same-sex conduct. In my opinion, proof-texting always means what others do with the Bible to support views we don't affirm. Among liberals I detect a tendency to negate the relevance of each and every biblical text on the grounds of cultural specificity or other contextual limitations. On the other hand, conservative interpreters sometimes cite Scriptures referring to same-sex practices without fully examining what God requires of Christians today in light of what God required in ancient times (Sanders, 1998, p. 180).

When it comes to sexuality or sexual behavior within the black church, there is sometimes a double-standard as it relates to homosexuality. In many churches where homosexuality is not advocated, homosexuals are singled out as unfit for leadership positions requiring ordination, whereas married heterosexual ministers who might be engaged in adulterous behavior, are deemed acceptable. In actuality, the "don't ask, don't tell" military policy adopted by the Clinton administration regarding homosexuality appears to operate within many black churches as it relates to ordination and related issues. As a pastor, Sanders claims that she does not single out or discriminate against homosexuals, however, all individuals who seek to be recognized as members of her church "in good standing" or who wish to serve in a leadership position are expected to adhere to the church's teachings regarding sexuality and sexual behavior. These teachings include the promotion of heterosexual marriage and the condemnation of homosexual behavior (Sanders, 1998).

According to Anderson (1998), the black church is a key promoter of homophobia within the black community. This homophobia causes black gay men and lesbian women

to remain silent, and helps to justify the violence and disdain they experience. In his view, the black church is not a safe place for many black gay men and lesbian women, and they are wise to "maintain a guarded trust" with regards to them. In reference to the pain many gay men and lesbian women experience within black churches, Anderson stated,

> That many black gays and lesbians are members of church choirs, church musicians, soloists, and ushers, that their gifts are used and exploited by their churches and their communities, ought not to be confused with genuine acceptance and love (Anderson, 1998, p. 194).

A common adage among Christian leaders is that we must hate the sin, but love the sinner. This entails hating homosexual behavior, but loving homosexual persons. Anderson proposes that this is a contradictory request when it comes to homosexual sex. How can you love a person while hating a part of the very essence of that person? A better way to address gay men and lesbian women, according to Anderson, would be to focus on them as human beings – to take steps to help insure that they experience the rights and privileges that should be extended to all human beings, not because God says to love them, and not based on a religious theology or conviction. (Anderson, 1998). Anderson goes on to say, "Rather, the recognition that black gays and lesbians are human beings with rightful claims to the fulfillment of their bodily, mental, and spiritual integrity is a sufficient basis for advocating their protection from bodily harm, threat of life, gay bashing, and sexual harassment" (Anderson, 1998, p. 196).

Though it might appear that the black church is settled in its homophobic beliefs, this is not necessarily the case. According to Hart, "The black church is a profoundly

ambivalent and contradictory site. No site is as important in the production of heterosexist ideology, few as important in their potential store of antiheterosexist resources" (Hart, 1998, p. 206). In other words, the black church possesses within itself the ability to either be a great help or a great hindrance to those who support either of these positions regarding heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Another area in which the contradictory position of many churches regarding homosexuality reveals itself is in the relationship between anti-gay sermons followed by music administered by individuals who are perceived as gay. How ironic is it for a minister to preach that homosexuality is an abomination, and then follow his sermon with a solo sung by a known homosexual? This happens quite often within the black church. In addition, many of the most vocal opponents of homosexuality within the black church are themselves closeted homosexuals. The black church continues to teach that sex should only occur inside a monogamous marriage relationship, yet many (if not most) black parishioners struggle between what their bodies long for and the religious beliefs that they cling to (Dyson, 1996). This results in an atmosphere where actions not only speak louder than words, but also completely contradict those words to a point where hypocrisy is an understatement.

The way that the black church has traditionally dealt with homosexuals is by requiring that they give up being gay or lesbian in order to enjoy full membership within the Christian community. This, argues Dyson, is an unfair request. He argues that the black church should affirm healthy relationships between consenting gay and lesbian adults (Dyson, 1996). Regarding the ability of the black church to help change present conceptions regarding sexuality, Dyson said, "The black church has been at the forefront

of every major social, political, and moral movement in black culture. It remains our most precious institution. It has the opportunity to lead again, by focusing the black erotic body in its loving, liberating lens" (Dyson, 1996, p. 108).

Biblical References to Homosexuality

> Among religious people who wish to take the Bible seriously there is no more vexed topic today than that of homosexuality. The current debates recall the passion with which the topic of slavery was once debated within the context of American Christianity, but since the debate about homosexuality is very much alive and well with no immediate prospect of a moral or social consensus in sight, we have more than a historical or even anecdotal exhibition of the conflicts of values and interpretations . . . We have a contemporary, existential, deeply felt struggle that shows no sign of going away, that grows increasingly less civil, and upon which everyone has an opinion and a text upon which to base it (Gomes, 1996, p. 144).

Whenever discussions and debates break out over Christianity and homosexuality, members of both sides of the argument usually end up at the same place – the Bible. There are several references to same-sex sex within the Bible. There are also passages that seem to suggest that heterosexual marriage and celibacy are the only acceptable sexual options for Christians who choose to adhere to the teachings of the Bible. For each of these passages, there are Christians and scholars (some Christian, some not) who have interpreted the meanings of the same passages in very different ways. In this section I will discuss ten Biblical passages that are commonly referred to in discussions on homosexuality. These passages were selected because they are often cited in literature

on the topic and/or in discussions on the topic. The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible is referred to because it is the version utilized by most black Baptist and Pentecostal churches. I also present scholarly information regarding the interpretation of these passages where it was available. The passages that will be examined are: Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2, Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Deuteronomy 23:17-18, Judges 19, Romans 1:18-32, I Corinthians 6:9-10, and I Timothy 1:9-11.

Genesis 1:26-28 – The First Account of the Creation of Man and Woman

> **26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. 28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (KJV)**

In this passage the author describes how God went about creating man and woman. He emphasized that man was created in His own image, and that he was created to be dominant over all the other animals. He then states that He created male and female, and commanded them to produce offspring so that the world would be filled with people.

Peter Gomes (1996) argues that to claim that this passage heralds heterosexual relationships as superior to homosexual relationships is erroneous because this passage does not speak to that issue. In fact, the passages do not mention homosexuality. Many scholars contend that because the creation accounts refer only to heterosexual relationships, that this means that these relationships are God's intention for human sexuality (Schmidt, 1996). Others, such as Gomes, maintain that the creation account

found in Genesis was not written as a historical reference for relationships in general, or even sexual relationships in particular. Instead, Gomes argues,

> The creation story is the basis and not the end of human diversity, and thus to regard it as excluding everything it does not mention is to place too great a burden on the text and its writers, and too little responsibility upon the intelligence of the readers, and on the varieties of human experience (p. 150).

In contrast, Schmidt (1996) contends that these Genesis passages present marriage as the norm, and that the remainder of the Bible supports this assumption. He argues, "The point is marriage. When any same-sex act – with angels, with prostitutes, with boys, with mutually-consenting adults – is evaluated in relation to the marital union of male and female, it falls short of the plan of God present from the Creation" (p. 298). Taylor (1995) echoes these claims, and adds that in creating male and female, God created two beings who compliment each other both emotionally and physically.

Genesis 2:7-24 – The Second Account of the Creation of Man and Woman

> **18 And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him . . . 21 And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; 22 And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. 23 And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man. 24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (KJV)**

In this second account of the creation of man and woman, we receive a more detailed history of their creation. God began by forming man from dust. He then breathed into him and he became a living being. God planted a beautiful garden and placed the man in it; it was the man's job to take care of the garden. God decided that it

was not good for the man to be alone, so he caused him to go into a deep sleep. While he was asleep, God took one of his ribs and used that rib to create a woman. It was then said that men are supposed to leave their mothers and fathers and draw closely to their wives, becoming one unit (in a spiritual sense).

Genesis 19 – The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

> **1 And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing them rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground. 2 And he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your ways . . . 4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter: 5 And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them. 6 And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him, 7 And said, I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly. 8 Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof . . . 12 And the [angels] said unto Lot, Hast thou here any besides? Son in law, and thy sons, and thy daughters, and whatsoever thou hast in the city, bring them out of this place. 13 For we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it. (KJV)**

One of the biblical passages most often referred to in reference to homosexuality is the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is recorded in the nineteenth chapter of Genesis. The story begins with a group of men surrounding the house of a man named Lot. On this particular night, there were two angels who were spending the night with Lot and his family. As they were all preparing to retire for the evening, all of the men of the city surrounded the house and shouted at Lot to bring the men (angels) out so that they could "know" them. Lot refused, begging them not to do

such a "wicked thing." He instead offered them his virgin daughters, whom he said they could do with as they pleased.

The men began to attack Lot and to try to break down the door to get in. The angels opened the door, reached out, and pulled Lot inside the house. They then caused all of the men to become blind, so that they could not find the door. The angels then instructed Lot to gather his entire family and flee the city, because they were going to destroy the city because its wickedness had offended God. The angels urged Lot and his family to run as fast as they could, and that they shouldn't look back. God destroyed the cities by raining down fire and brimstone from heaven, destroying all human, animal, and plant life in the surrounding areas. Incidentally, Lot's wife looked back as they were fleeing and was turned into a pillar of salt.

This passage is often cited during discussion on homosexuality and Christianity because of the belief that the cities of Sodom (from which we get the word sodomy) and Gomorrah were destroyed because of the homosexual behavior that took place there in relation to the two visiting angels. However, Gomes (1996) points out that, according to the passage, God had decided to destroy the cities before the angels even arrived. The two angels were sent to warn Lot and his family about the upcoming destruction of the cities, and to give them a chance to escape. Gomes goes on to say that the supreme wickedness for which the cities were destroyed is not stated explicitly anywhere in scripture. It is, therefore, his opinion that to claim that the cities were destroyed because of homosexuality is invalid. In addition, he states that though the attempted homosexual rape of the angels was wrong, that it in no way discredits all homosexual persons or relationships. McIntyre (1997) agrees by stating that "[O]ne cannot generalize from a

condemnation of homosexual gang rape to a condemnation of homosexuality in general" (p. 416). The same, he says, can be argued for the Judges 19 story.

Though Stanton L. Jones (1994) would likely disagree with Gomes and McIntyre on much of their theology, he concurs with them on this point. He takes one step further by saying,

> The critics are right, for instance, in dismissing the view that homosexuality was the most heinous sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ezekiel 16:49-50 says, 'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.' Materialistic upper- and middle-class America may be more like Sodom than the modern gay community and closer to God's harsh judgment (p. 9).

Leviticus 18:22 – Laws of Conduct Concerning Sexual Relationships

> **22 Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination. (KJV)**

God chose to set a certain group of people apart from all other groups of people in order to fulfill his goals for the world. This group of people, also known as the Jews or the Israelites, were commanded to adhere to a strict code of laws, as a reflection of their devotion to God and in accordance with the holy standards of a holy God. The Levitical Laws are an example of God's rules for his people. After having gone through a long list of inappropriate sexual relations including incest, sex during menstruation, and adultery, verse twenty-two states that it is an abomination for a man to "lie with" another man as if he were a woman.

According to Gomes (1996), one of the most important aspects of interpreting the laws of Leviticus is the consideration of context. These laws were given to the children of Israel as they prepared to enter "The Promised Land." Because they were going to be living among strangers, and because, as God's chosen people, God required that they remain pure and not take on the lifestyles of those around them, they were given certain laws to abide by. Gomes contends that these laws were temporary in nature, and are not applicable to modern-day Christians. After citing a list of behaviors that are addressed in the Levitical Laws, Gomes said, "These and many other actions are condemned because they defy purity and weaken the cultural identification of the children of Israel; and so great is the principle of ritual and ethnic purity that to violate it is in most cases to warrant the sentence of death" (p. 154). In reference to such prohibitions as wearing clothes made out of two types of material or inbreeding cattle, Gomes asks the important question of why it is that many Christians cite these passages as proof that homosexuality is wrong while ignoring all the other practices that were condemned in these same passages, yet are no longer considered improper.

Going back to the issue of context, Gomes (1996) refers to three relevant contextual aspects of these passages that should be considered. He describes the Israelites as "frontier" people. Thus, it was important for them to consider issues of *cultural identity*, *protection*, and *procreation*. Homosexual behavior was contradictory to each of these, which is why (in his opinion) it was considered an abomination.

Another contentious issue surrounding the Leviticus passages deals with the categorization of the laws. Behaviors associated with the Gentiles were considered ritually impure (Nelson, 1998). Gomes (1996) agrees that certain behaviors were

considered ritually impure, while others were regarded as intrinsically wrong. But Taylor (1995) takes issue with this claim because homosexual behavior was again taken up in the New Testament, which seemingly shatters the theory that it was not intrinsically wrong.

Again, Gomes (1996) disagrees. Homosexuality, he explains, was not intrinsically wrong.

> [T]he key to this conclusion being the fact that the word *abomination* does not usually describe something intrinsically evil, such as rape or theft, but something that is ritually impure, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation. An abomination is by definition what the Gentiles do, but that in and of itself is not necessarily evil or a violation of the Commandments. Thus homosexuality is an abomination in Leviticus not because it is inherently evil but because the Gentiles do it, and it is therefore ritually impure (p.154).

Stone (1997) takes issue with the ideology behind Gomes' argument by problematizing the use of sexual practices by an outside group as a means of defining what is and is not considered appropriate sexual behavior. He states, "This attempt is an example of a common rhetorical move whereby the 'other' is defined in relation to deviant sexual practice" (p. 36).

In addressing the two passages from Leviticus that mention same-sex sex, McIntyre (1997) explains,

> Israel is a holy people because it keeps itself apart from the gentiles and does not do what the gentiles do. Intercourse during menstruation is unclean because it mixes blood with semen; lying with a man as with a woman is unclean because it

> transgresses gender boundaries; bestiality is unclean because it transgresses species boundaries. To do any of these things would make the land of Israel itself unclean. . . . the penalty of death prescribed here strikes us as wildly disproportionate. It makes sense only when we understand that the death of the offender was necessary to cleanse the land. Again, we can only understand the prohibitions in question by stepping outside our own moral frame of reference (p. 425).

Davies & Rentzel (1993) disagree. They propose that there were three types of laws described in the Old Testament: civil laws, ceremonial laws, and moral laws. Civil laws dealt with the issues of daily life such as testifying in court, borrowing a neighbor's livestock, or paying for property that has been damaged. Ceremonial laws defined behaviors that rendered one unclean for ceremonial purposes, such as touching a dead body or eating unclean food. Both civil and ceremonial laws applied only to the people of Israel. Moral laws are those that are considered timeless and applicable to all people. They are not related to civil or ceremonial activities, and do not render one unclean. This makes offenses such as eating pork and engaging in same-sex sex categorically different, and thus incomparable. In other words, the argument that prohibitions concerning homosexual behavior must be done away with because other proscriptions such as those against eating pork have been dismissed is unreasonable because the two offences fall under different types of laws.

Leviticus 20:13 – Punishments for Various Offenses

> **13 If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them. (KJV)**

In this chapter certain laws were singled out and the specific punishments for those who violated these laws were described. Offering children as sacrifices to or having sex with Molech (an idol), cursing ones mother or father, and having sex with ones mother-in-law or daughter-in-law are all discussed along with their punishments. Then in verse thirteen, it states that if a man "lies" with another man as if he were a woman, that it is an abomination and that they will be put to death – the same as with the other offenses listed above.

Taylor (1995) states that this verse clearly refers to a sexual relationship between two men, rather than one between a man and a boy. The verb *lie* is used which implies consent rather than force. Also, they are both punished.

Deuteronomy 23:17-18 – Those Who Are Unwelcome in the Congregation of God

> **17 There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel. 18 Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow: for even both of these are abomination unto the Lord thy God. (KJV)**

In this passage, several groups of individuals are mentioned who are not permitted to enter into worship services. Men who have been castrated, children born out of wedlock, male citizens of Ammon and Moab, and men who have "spilled their seed" during the night. Verses seventeen and eighteen state that no male or female prostitutes (referred to as whores and sodomites) can enter into worship services. Dog was a Hebrew epithet for a male prostitute or sodomite.

Judges 19- The Reason Behind the War of the Tribe of Benjamin

> **22 Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man**

that came into thine house, that we may know him. 23 And the man, the master of the house, went out unto them, and said unto them, Nay, my brethren, nay, I pray you, do not so wickedly; seeing that this man is come into mine house, do not this folly. 24 Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you; but unto this man do not so vile a thing. 25 But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning; and when the day began to spring, they let her go. (KJV)

There was a man who was traveling with his mistress. During their travels she left him and went to her father's house. The man followed after her, and they both stayed with her father for several days. On the day that they finally left to return home, it was late in the evening. Seeing that darkness was approaching, the man reasoned that they should find a place to spend the night. The man's servant suggested that they stay in the city of the Jebusites, which is where they were at the time. But the man insisted that they press on into the city of Gibeah, which belonged to the Tribe of Benjamin. They waited for one of the men of Gibeah to invite them to lodge with him, as was customary, but none did. Finally, a man who was from Ephraim, but was staying in Gibeah at the time, came along and invited them to stay with him.

Later that evening, after they had eaten dinner and were fellowshipping with each other, the men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that the male guest come out so that they could "know" him. The man of the house stepped outside and asked the men not to "do so wickedly," and offered them his daughter and the man's mistress. The men would not listen, so the man took his mistress and placed her outside before them. According to verse twenty-five, they "knew her" and abused her the entire night. In other words, they raped her. Early the next morning they released her and she made her way

back to the house, where she died on the doorstep. The man came out, placed her on his donkey, and carried her home. He then dismembered her body and distributed it throughout the coasts of Israel, which was the reason for the beginning of the war.

Romans 1:18-32 – Paul Discusses Potential Consequences for Willfully Denying God

> **26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: 27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. (KJV)**

Romans is a letter that Paul wrote to the church in Rome in order to introduce himself to them and to explain some things he thought might benefit them. In verse eighteen Paul began to discuss how angry sin makes God. He went on to say that God has placed his truth in the hearts of all people, and that there is no excuse for not knowing Him. He said that some people reject this knowledge of God that is on the inside of them, and that allows them to do whatever their hearts desire, even though it is not pleasing to Him. He then stated that the result of God allowing them to do whatever they wanted was that they began to do shameful things with each other. He said that they consciously chose to believe lies, and that they worshipped things instead of the God who created the things. This is the reason, Paul says, that God abandoned the people to their "shameful desires." Verse twenty-four states that they "dishonored their own bodies between themselves." The following verses go on to say that women "changed the natural use into that which is against nature," and men "left the natural use of the woman and began to burn with lust" for each other. As a result, God said that they would receive the penalties that they deserved. Because these people refused to acknowledge God, He

allowed them to do things that, according to Paul, should never be done. They began to live depraved lives, regularly committing numerous crimes and sins. He said that they were fully aware of the penalty for their sins, but kept committing them anyway.

Some scholars argue that this passage is not even dealing with homosexuality. Instead, the passage is about the "fallen nature of humankind"(Gomes, 1996; Nelson, 1998). The problem was that the people knew God, but they refused to honor Him. They were ungrateful to Him, and as a result He allowed them to become depraved in every way. One of these ways was participation in sexual activities commonly practiced by pagan nations, such as homosexuality. But, as Gomes points out, it was not the same sex sexual behavior in and of itself that was problematic; the problem lay in the fact that it was being undertaken by heterosexuals, for whom it was not natural, and that it included lustful passions that had gotten out of control. Nelson concurs with this argument. In addition, Gomes argues that the homosexual practices that Paul referred to were not homosexual relationships as we know them, but pederasty and male prostitution.

Stone (1997) agrees that when the Bible seemingly condemns homosexual relationships, that it is not speaking of homosexual relationships as we know them today. Instead, he argues that the Bible is addressing "cultic activity or sacred prostitution" (p. 36), which was a form of religious idolatry.

Schmidt (1996) disagrees, stating that "[T]he references to same-sex relations [are] closely tied to adultery, which is a concern of unchanging moral law, not a mere peculiarity of Jewish purity regulations" (p. 295). He also argues that pederasty and male prostitution were not the only same-sex relationships that Paul had knowledge of. He states that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah only involved adults, none of which were

presented as prostitutes. In addition, he asserts that there were other examples of adult male sexual relationships, such as that of Nero and a man named Poryphorus, about which Paul would have been knowledgeable. According to Jones (1994), there is archaeological evidence that a wide range of homosexual behavior took place during this time, and that those who lived in the ancient world were fully aware of it.

I Corinthians 6:9-10 – A List of People Who Won't Be Allowed Into Heaven

> **9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (KJV)**

First Corinthians is the first of two letters written by Paul to the church in Corinth. The members of this particular church were having a difficult time because of their environment. They were situated in one the most corrupt cities in the area. Paul wrote this letter to address these issues and to answer a lot of the questions the Corinthians had posed about the appropriate lifestyle for a Christian. In verses nine and ten of chapter six, Paul gives a list of people (or types of people) who will not be permitted to enter heaven. Among them are people who engage in heterosexual sex outside of marriage, people who worship idols, "effeminate," "abusers of themselves with mankind," thieves, people who are obsessed with wealth or other material things, excessive drinkers, people who are verbally abusive, and people who extort things from other people.

Gomes (1996) claims that there is no indication in scripture that the people of Corinth were concerned with the topic of homosexuality. Referring to this passage, he also said,

> We must remind ourselves that when Paul speaks of what we call homosexuality, he is speaking again of what can be called the 'Gentile sin,' whose characteristics are those of which we have already spoken: willful, lustful, exploitive, avaricious, self-deceiving, self-absorbed, and thus idolatrous. Of course someone who fits this profile is unfit for the kingdom of heaven (p. 159).

I Timothy 1:9-11 – Those Whom the Law Was Created For

> **9 Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, 10 For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; (KJV)**

The two letters written by Paul, to Timothy, are instructional in nature. Some refer to them as the "Pastoral Epistles" because they discuss appropriate conduct for pastors and other ministers. In the first chapter Paul discusses some doctrinal issues. He warns Timothy against some of the false doctrines that were being taught by people who wanted to be teachers, but didn't understand the purpose behind the laws that they were trying to teach. Paul goes on to say that the purpose of the law is not to confine Christians to a list of do's and don'ts, but to show unbelievers their sins so that they will recognize that they need God. He then provides a list of examples of the types of people for whom the law was created. Among those listed are criminals, people who are disobedient, people who are unlike God and who commit sins, people who are unholy and who speak with profanity, people who murder their parents, people who commit adultery, people who "defile themselves with mankind," kidnappers, liars, people who commit perjury, and any other act that is against sound doctrine.

Gomes (1996) points out that though sodomites are listed here among those for whom the law was created, that Paul does not use the word *sodomite* as a synonym for homosexual. According to Gomes, the word sodomite is used primarily in reference to male prostitutes.

McIntyre (1997) holds that contextually, this passage is addressed to everyone, not just certain individuals. He writes,

> The context is very different; it is not a question here of who will be excluded from the kingdom of God, but of those for whom the law is written. The answer, 'lawbreakers and rebels' encompasses all of us. This list of sins, then, does not separate the sinners from the company of the godly, but characterizes the vices common to us all (p. 417).

Conclusions

As Taylor (1995) asserts, any thorough examination of the position of scripture on homosexual relationships cannot be limited to a discussion of the above passages. This invites proponents of both sides of the debates to engage in what is known as "proof-texting." Instead, the Scripture must be studied in its entirety, from Genesis to Revelation, in order to discern the likely position of the Bible on the topic. In this respect, Taylor believes that the Bible points toward heterosexual marriages as the only appropriate sexual relations between two people, with celibacy as the only alternative.

Gomes (1996), on the other hand, declares that because scripture has so little to say about the topic of homosexuality, that it cannot be used as proof that homosexuality is wrong. He goes on to say,

> The biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous, and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they know of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness, and exploitation (p. 162).

McIntyre (1997) takes this argument one step further. He asserts,

> Biblical texts that seem to have something to do with homosexuality may in fact be referring to a narrower set of practices. We will then want to focus on texts that do not refer to rape, prostitution, or pederasty. Likewise, we will not want to hastily assume that condemnations of sexual intercourse between men applies likewise to sexual intercourse between women. Given these criteria, most of the passages of possible relevance must be discarded (p. 416).

Another point of interest regarding the Bible and homosexuality is that female same-sex sexual behavior is only mentioned one time, in Romans 1:26. This is, perhaps, because male same-sex sexual behavior dealt with the wasting of "seed" which was to be used for procreative purposes. Such wastefulness was considered abhorrent, as is evident in the Genesis 38 account of Onan (Seow, 1996).

In this chapter various categories of literature related to the topic of homosexuality and the black church have been presented. This information was provided in an effort to provide a contextual background for the remainder to the study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of pastors and church leaders within black Baptist, Pentecostal, and other churches regarding the issue of homosexuality and how it is addressed within the black church. How this issue has been addressed in the past, and how it can best be addressed in the future are also explored.

In this section I discuss qualitative research methodology and demonstrate why it is appropriate for this study. I also provide an outline of the methodological steps that were undertaken for this study. These steps were taken after human subjects approval was obtained.

Qualitative Research Methodology

Qualitative research is perhaps most easily described as the opposite of quantitative research. This description, however, is far too simplistic. Denzin & Lincoln (2000) offer a more comprehensive definition:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative

researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3).

One of the primary differences between qualitative and quantitative research is that they are founded upon different research paradigms. Guba and Lincoln (1994) define paradigm as: "The basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (p. 105). Of the four major research paradigms, I find positivism and postpositivism (the paradigms upon which quantitative research is based) to be problematic for a number of reasons. The following quote helps to illustrate why I find these paradigms inappropriate for answering my research questions.

> The received view of science [positivist and postpositivist paradigms] pictures the inquirer as standing behind a one-way mirror, viewing natural phenomena as they happen and recording them objectively. The inquirer (when using proper methodology) does not influence the phenomena or vice versa. But evidence such as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and the Bohr complementary principle have shattered that ideal in the hard sciences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); even greater skepticism must exist for the social sciences. Indeed, the notion that findings are created through the interaction of inquirer and phenomenon (which, in the social sciences, is usually people) is often a more plausible description of the inquiry process than is the notion that findings are discovered through objective observation 'as they *really* are, and as they *really* work' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107).

As it relates to my study, positivism and postpositivism are unsuitable for a number of reasons. First, the requirement that the researcher remain completely objective is not conducive to the type of environment I wish to create with my participants. I believe, as is stated in the above quote, that it is the dialog that occurs between the interviewer and the interviewee that produces the type of insight that I hope to unearth in this study. In addition, given my research question, positivist and postpositivist paradigms will not inform my questions. I am exploring their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes regarding homosexuality and the black church. In order to successfully accomplish this, I believe that I need to allow the participants to discuss their thoughts in their own words.

Secondly, my research objective does not include the discovery of this so-called objective reality. Instead, I have chosen to examine my research questions using the other two major research paradigms - constructivism and critical theory. As a research paradigm, critical theory enables the researcher to address the disenfranchisement experienced by various marginalized groups based on their social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and/or gender backgrounds. Critical theorists seek to enlighten participants regarding the historical misrepresentation of truth perpetrated by the dominant classes. They also seek to serve as advocates for the groups that they work with and to help empower those groups to fight for the rights that they deserve. In this sense, the researcher is viewed as the expert – the beholder of knowledge. It is his or her task to share that knowledge with those who do not yet possess it, so that they too might be able to recognize and combat the hegemonic forces of the dominant class (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The objective of constructivist research is to help the participants and the researcher to re-evaluate their beliefs and to grow as informed human beings. In this sense, the researcher is a co-participant in the research along with the other co-participants. During the course of the research, each party has a right to his or her construction (of knowledge) or opinion, recognizing that those constructions are subject to change if more reasonable constructions are discovered. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), "These constructions are subject to continuous revision, with changes most likely to occur when relatively different constructions are brought into juxtaposition in a dialectical context" (p. 113).

As the building blocks upon which qualitative research rests, constuctivist and critical theory research paradigms offer what I believe is a more realistic and honest approach to research that seeks to understand people and the world in a meaningful way. As Gergen & Gergen (2000) have noted, "The domain of qualitative inquiry offers some of the richest and most rewarding explorations available in contemporary social science" (p. 1025).

Bias Statement

In the introduction to her book entitled *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, Joyce Ladner discusses the relationship between her childhood in rural Mississippi, and the research topic she chose to pursue years later as a graduate student. She stated,

> When I decided to engage in research on what approaching womanhood meant to poor Black girls in the city, I brought with me these attitudes, values, beliefs and in effect, a Black perspective. Because of this cultural sensitivity I had to the life-styles of the over one hundred adolescent, preadolescent and adult females I

'studied,' I had to mediate tensions that existed from day to day between the *reality* and *validity* of their lives and the tendency to view it from the *deviant perspective* in accordance with my academic training (Ladner, 1971, xi-xii).

I can relate to the dilemma in which Ladner found herself. As a Christian, I too have chosen a research topic that is quite familiar to me. Because of the nature of the topic, I have tried hard to neutralize myself. I felt that as a researcher, it was my responsibility to escape the stronghold of my biases, and simply present the stories, as told by my co-participants, with very little personal input. I now realize that this is an impossible task. The truth of the matter is that I too am a participant in this research. Though my role is not the same as the other co-participants, I play a role, nonetheless.

As a Christian, I feel that it is very important for me to be upfront about my potential biases, while recognizing that the thoughts and opinions of individuals who disagree with me are valid, worthwhile, and worthy of being included in my research. The primary goal of my research is to tell accurately the stories of the people that I interview. I believe that I care enough about their stories, regardless of how similar or dissimilar they are to mine, to present them with honesty and integrity. Ultimately, this study is not about proving which side is "right" regarding the issue of homosexuality and the black church – it is about understanding the people behind the opinions. Whenever there is a debate that is as heated as the debate over this topic within the church, there is a tendency to "demonize" those who disagree with "our side." I hope that by presenting data from all sides of the argument, that individuals will begin to see each other as real people with real thoughts and feelings that matter.

Though I made every effort to interpret the data from this study in an unbiased manner, it is important for me to recognize and acknowledge any potential biases that may have interfered with my interpretation. I accomplished this by participating in a bracketing interview (which is discussed in the research methods section). This process yielded five potential biases: my concern that participants might stereotype me as a lesbian because I am pursuing this topic, my view of many church leaders as hypocritical, my personal experiences within Baptist and Pentecostal churches, my personal thoughts and perceptions concerning homosexuality, and my preconceived ideas about how homosexuality should be addressed in the black church.

My purpose in identifying these biases is to be able to acknowledge that they exist, and that in some instances I may have interpreted the data according to one or more of them. As I have previously stated, it was my intention to interpret the data as impartially as possible. However, it is still important that these biases be acknowledged from the outset, so that they can be used as an instrument of accountability for me as the researcher.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Because I have been a part of black churches both as a child and as an adult, I have come into contact with various pastors and ministry leaders over the years. I have also, at times, served in leadership positions that have provided me with some visibility within the area in which I plan to conduct this research. Each of these factors will, I believe, help me to establish trustworthiness with my interviewees.

Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, I believe it was important for the interviewees to feel as though I am a trustworthy individual. Some of the issues that

were discussed in the interviews were issues that the participants had perhaps not discussed previously, certainly not with a complete stranger. Therefore, I interviewed individuals who either knew me personally, or who had been referred to me by someone who knew me and could vouch for my character. I did not want any of my interviewees to feel that they were speaking with a complete stranger during the interviews. Though I recognize that such interviewer/interviewee relationships are appropriate for most research, I felt that given my topic, it would not be a wise approach.

Research Methods

Bracketing

Prior to the collection of any data, I participated in a bracketing interview in an effort to unearth any unknown biases on my part, related to this topic. During this interview I was asked various questions about my expectations regarding the participants and their responses to my questions, and was also asked the questions contained in the Interview Guide (Appendix A). The purpose of the bracketing interview was to help me further explore my own potential biases (some of which are referred to in the bias statement), and to help me further develop my interview strategy. The interview was audio taped and kept on record for the duration of the study.

Pilot Interviews

One pilot interview was conducted prior to the actual interviews that are included in the study. The purpose of the pilot interview was to test the interview questions and interview protocol to assure that they are capable of eliciting data that is congruent with the purpose of the study. The interviewee for the pilot interview was an individual who has served in a leadership position within a black church. This individual provided

consent by signing an informed consent form. I listened to the tape in order to assess the appropriateness of the questions and met with my dissertation advisor to decide what (if anything) needed to be changed or rearranged prior to the actual study. The audiotape of this interview was erased after it was analyzed.

Participant Selection

Participants in this study were six individuals who serve as pastors or hold other leadership offices within predominantly black Pentecostal, Baptist, and other churches within the Southeastern region of the United States. I chose Pentecostal and Baptist leaders as my primary focus because these are the two denominations I am most familiar with and because these two denominations tend to differ, doctrinally, on certain issues regarding scriptural interpretation, such as the appropriate role of women within the church.

As I have noted previously, the sensitive nature of this topic made participant selection more complex than it might be for a different topic. I initially constructed a short list of pastors whom I wanted to invite to participate in the study. I also contacted a professor who gave me a list of pastors to contact regarding participation in the study. I attempted to contact numerous individuals about being interviewed. The six persons that I interviewed were the only ones with whom I was able to make direct contact. I left numerous messages for other pastors and leaders who simply were not able to respond. I did not intend to attempt to gather a randomized sample, nor did I intend to try to generalize my results to other church leaders in the Southeast.

Development of Interview Questions

After reviewing the literature on this topic, and following a close examination of the purpose statement, I designed a list of interview questions (Appendix A). These questions were submitted to my dissertation committee who examined and deemed them appropriate before I proceeded to use them in my interviews.

Interview Strategy

Methodologically, I chose to use in-depth interviews for my study. I believe that interviews allow co-participants to express their thoughts and opinions in their own words, which is important when trying to achieve poly-vocality in a research context. I also believe that well executed interviews create an environment where meaningful dialog and mutual learning can occur. Fontana & Frey (2000) assert, "Increasingly, qualitative researchers are realizing that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results" (p. 646).

I conducted audio taped interviews with each participant. I also conducted a follow-up session with participants. Each participant signed an informed consent form (Appendix B) prior to the start of the interview stating that he or she understood the voluntary nature of the study, was agreeing to participate in the study, and would permit me to audio tape the interview. The first interviews took between a half hour and a little over two hours. These interviews were semi-structured in format. I used an interview guide (Appendix A), but I tried to structure the questions and the atmosphere so that it felt more like a discussion than an interview. The interviews were audio taped and I transcribed them for accuracy. During the follow-up sessions, which took approximately

one hour, participants were given the opportunity to examine the transcript of their first interview and to add or subtract any information to or from that transcript. Interviewees were also given the opportunity to provide additional information on this topic that they may have become aware of between interviews.

Because in-depth interviews require that the researcher serve as an "instrument" for the collection of data, it was important that I consider the significance of my presence during the interviews, and how this may influence the responses of the participants. In an effort to minimize my influence, I tried to ask questions in an unobtrusive, nondirective manner. However, the possibility remains that participants may have framed their responses in a way that reflects my presence, whether the effects of my presence are discernable or not.

Data Analysis

When constructing a qualitative research study, a primary analytical concern surrounds the interesting role of the researcher as a research instrument. Because interviewing, observation, and other forms of qualitative research place the researcher at the center of the research, it is important to recognize the various limitations that this presents, and to make efforts to overcome those limitations. These limitations include the interference of personal biases, the absence of accountability inside the interview setting, and the assumptions interviewees possibly make regarding the researcher based on his or her educational level, race, gender, or any other personal characteristics.

As I have stated before, the interviews were audio taped for accuracy. I personally transcribed each of the interview tapes. I used the transcripts to unearth themes within and across interviews. I did this by reading and rereading the transcripts

over and over again looking to consistency within and across transcripts, and looking for themes that emerged from the transcripts. I used open coding to achieve this. According to Strauss & Corbin (1990), "Coding represents the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways" (p. 57). Open coding involves "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (p. 61).

Though I initially examined the data myself, I also met with a group of qualitative researchers to examine the transcripts and discuss the appropriateness of the themes. Each of these researchers read the actual transcripts and offered feedback regarding suggested themes. They each signed a pledge of confidentiality (Appendix C). Once the data were analyzed and coded, they were presented categorically in the results section of the dissertation.

Ethical Considerations

Privacy was a major concern for me as it relates to this study. I have been in rooms and offices where the walls were so thin that I felt as if I were in one big open space. For that reason, I tried to make sure that I conducted the interviews in environments where privacy could be maintained, such as a pastor's office. When I thought of the various places I have conducted interviews for other studies I have been involved in, I realized that some of those settings would not be appropriate for this research given the nature of the topic. I felt that my participants needed to know that they could speak freely without worrying that their privacy was being compromised.

Privacy and confidentiality go hand in hand. Confidentiality deals with keeping the information provided by participants private. It means that information regarding who is interviewed and what is said during those interviews is kept between the

interviewee and the researcher. It means that documents such as informed consent forms or demographic questionnaires are kept in a locked cabinet where access is limited to those individuals who have signed a pledge of confidentiality. I made every effort to adhere to the strictest of standards regarding the confidentiality of the information provided by participants in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

The purpose of this study is to explore the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of pastors and church leaders of black Baptist, Pentecostal, and other churches regarding the issue of homosexuality and how it is addressed within the black church. How this issue has been addressed in the past, and how it can best be addressed in the future are also explored.

The following section contains profiles of each of the six participants. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' real names. Brief descriptions of participants are provided in the profiles in order to afford a better understanding of who the participants are and how they are similar and dissimilar to each other. Participants provided the information in the profiles during the course of the interviews. The profiles are intentionally concise in an effort to refrain from presenting information that might compromise the confidentiality of the participants. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews are also presented in this section. They are accompanied by a discussion based on the literature, that helps to place participant responses in a proper perspective.

Participant Profiles

James

James is a Baptist pastor in his early fifties. He has been preaching since the late sixties and has been pastoring at his present location for more than ten years. He was born and lived most of his life in a large metropolitan city in the northeastern United States. He grew up in a very religious household. His father was a pastor and also

worked for the city where they lived. His mother was a domestic. His siblings include three brothers and one sister. One of his older brothers, who died several years ago, was an evangelist. Both his father and his brother had an impact on his ministry. He is married and has children and grandchildren.

James holds several degrees including a Doctor of Ministry Degree from a reputable seminary. He is the author of a book and has worked with some of the most renowned preachers in America. He is a pastor who believes in meeting the social and spiritual needs of his congregation and the community at large.

James observed incidences of cross-dressing (men dressing in women's clothing) at an early age, because some of his neighbors participated in cross-dressing activities. As an adult he has had friends who are homosexual, including a very close friend who died of AIDS related complications. Though there are many aspects of homosexuality that he confesses he does not understand, James is quick to point out that he does not feel he has the right to judge homosexuals based on their lifestyles.

Nathan

Nathan is a Baptist pastor in his late forties. He was born and raised in the southeastern United States. His mother and father divorced during his childhood, and his mother later remarried. He is the oldest of seven children. He is now married and has children.

Nathan has a Bachelor of Arts Degree from a historically black college in the South. He has also taken masters level courses. He was originally enrolled in another historically black college, but dropped out to work in the Civil Rights Movement. Nathan stated that from a very young age, those around him, including family members

and members of his community, knew that he would some day be a preacher. His initial goal was to become a lawyer. He has served ministerially under a number of well-known pastors, including Drs. Martin L. King Jr. and Sr., and Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks. Nathan has also been awarded an honorary doctorate.

Nathan has been pastoring for many years, and has been pastor at his current location for more than twenty years. His church is involved in local politics, and he strives to help his congregation become active in the uplifting of the African American community.

Nathan has had quite a bit of exposure to homosexual persons and issues concerning them. He, like James, states he does not believe he has the right to judge others based on their sexual orientation.

Toni

Toni is a Pentecostal minister in her early thirties. She grew up in the southeast and still resides in the city where she was born. She is a divorced mother of two who has been preaching since the mid-nineties. Her parents divorced while she was young, and she later became aware that her father was gay.

Toni has a bachelor's degree from a school of theology in the South. She also plans to pursue a master's degree, and possibly a doctorate, in theology and Bible research.

Much of Toni's teaching and preaching center around spiritual and emotional healing. She was the only participant in this study who has addressed the issue of homosexuality in depth within the context of the black church. She is a self-defined renegade who is not afraid to, as a minister and spiritual leader, bring sensitive issues to

the forefront. Despite her knowledge of her father's homosexuality, Toni states that she has a problem with the gay lifestyle in general.

Wil

Wil is a Pentecostal pastor in his early thirties. He was born in the Southeast and currently lives in the same city where he grew up. He has been preaching since the late nineties and has been pastoring for less than a year. His current pastoral position is his first.

Wil grew up in a single parent household and was the youngest child in his family. He is married and has two children. Family relationships are important to Wil, and he makes sure that he spends ample quality time with his wife and kids.

Though he has no formal academic training beyond high school, Wil is a learned man. He confesses that he gathers most of his spiritual information from the Bible itself, which he believes is his most important resource as a preacher.

Wil had very little interaction with homosexuals during his formative years. He has had more contact as an adult, but is quick reveal that he has some problems with the homosexual lifestyle.

Mitchell

Mitchell is a Presbyterian pastor in his late twenties. He has lived his entire life in the southern city where he was born. His parents were divorced during the early years of his life. He has two sisters. Mitchell is single, and has never been married.

Though Mitchell grew up in a very religious household, he did not consider going into ministry until the middle of his college career. He graduated from a historically black college with a bachelor's degree and completed a Master of Divinity

degree from a well-known theological seminary. He plans to begin pursuing a doctorate in the near future.

Mitchell has been preaching since the early Nineties, but has been pastor of his current congregation for only a few months. This is his first pastoral assignment. His training, as well as his prior membership and ministerial service, have been based in the Baptist church.

Mitchell has had some exposure to homosexuals and homosexual issues. During the times that he has discussed homosexuality within the church context, he has experienced some of his members openly disagreeing with his opinions. He is, nevertheless, determined to hold to his convictions regarding this topic, including his belief that homosexuality is a sin.

Isaiah

Isaiah is a Baptist pastor in his mid-forties. He was raised in the South and still resides in that region. His father was a minister and an educator. His mother was also an educator. He grew up in a household with sisters, but no brothers. He is married and has children and grandchildren.

Isaiah has a doctorate in the field of ministry, and has taught at the university level in that area. He has been pastoring for several years, and has been at his present location for approximately ten years.

Isaiah is a proponent of African American Theology, which used to be referred to as Black Theology. Many of his sermons deal with healing and wholeness. He also discusses issues of social and political significance.

Isaiah has had some exposure to homosexual issues. He has engaged in dialog with members of the gay and lesbian community, but admits that he is unclear about many of the issues related to homosexuality.

Themes

After the interviews for this study were completed, the transcriptions were read and re-read in an effort to unearth themes and sub-themes present both within and across interviews. Four major themes emerged: Gay and Lesbian Behavior, Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality, Treatment of Gay Men and Lesbian Women Within the Black Church Community, and Sex and Sexuality Within the Black Church. Each theme, along with corresponding sub-themes, is presented below. Quotations from the participants are used to illustrate and substantiate the themes and sub-themes offered.

Theme 1: Gay and Lesbian Behavior

Participants talked at length about what they perceive to be "typical" gay and lesbian behavior. Many of the descriptions offered by participants centered on the stereotypical ideas of gay men as effeminate and lesbian women as masculine. Less consideration was given to the thought of gay men or lesbian women who do not fit such stereotypes, though some participants did admit that it is sometimes difficult to tell if a person is gay or lesbian based on his or her behavior or appearance.

The Gay and Lesbian Behavior theme includes five sub-themes. They are: Gender Roles, Public Display of (Perceived) Homosexual Behavior, Gay Men, Lesbian Women, and Gay Leadership Within the Church. The Gender Roles sub-theme addresses the relationship between what may be considered to be traditional gender roles, and how participants perceive gay and lesbian behavior in light of those roles. The Public Display

of (Perceived) Homosexual Behavior sub-theme deals with participants' thoughts and feelings regarding gay men and lesbian women who, in one way or another, make their homosexuality a public matter. The Gay Men sub-theme specifically addresses participant comments on gay male behavior, while the Lesbian Women sub-theme does the same for lesbians. The Gay Leadership Within the Church sub-theme looks at what the participants had to say about the appropriateness of gay men and lesbian women serving as leaders within the black church in general, and their own churches in particular.

Gender Roles. When discussing their thoughts and opinions regarding homosexuality, each of the participants in this study talked about what he or she considered to be the typical behavior of gay men and lesbian women. Though many of them acknowledged that this behavior alone is not an absolute confirmation of one's sexuality, they in essence concurred that there are certain behaviors that are indicative of a homosexual lifestyle, or at least a propensity toward non-traditional gender behavior.

James spoke at length about traditional gender roles and how they have changed over time. He expressed an appreciation for the ways that many men and women have begun to break the rules regarding gender roles and stated that these changes force persons to reconsider the categories they have customarily placed others in based solely on their gender. When asked about gender roles he responded,

> [I] think female and male roles are constantly - what defines femaleness and maleness is not what it used to be. You know, it's not. I've noticed that now, I'm looking at a lot of pictures, and I notice on the magazines that women are sitting like this (sits with legs spread apart). And at one time women would (crosses legs), you know – but I've noticed a lot of women, you know, sit like this (legs apart) now, and, it's like a man's position. And I guess that's changed. And the way even, what we used to call effeminate behavior by men, not that they were

> necessarily gay, but they would act what we would call effeminate. I guess, you know, all those are just terms and labels we put on people. So, it's difficult to say, well, this is what men look like and this is what a woman looks like when the roles have changed.

He also used female athletes as an example of women whose behavior transcends traditional definitions of femininity.

> [T]he things that women – I look at the women weight lifters and stuff and, I say I would never be able to lift that much weight in my lifetime, you know. And the lady basketball players. But yet, some of them are real rough on the court but then they come across as being very woman-like and very sensitive. And most of them are very nice looking. But, other than that, you know, so, how we categorize people is changing, and I don't think we can say – that's what a woman should be and that's what a man should be, other than the physical characteristic. I think those are things that people have to accept in themselves and we have to be willing to accept people's behaviors based on who they are as each individual rather than grouping people.

When I asked him whether or not he saw this new fluidity of gender roles as a good thing, he replied,

> I think to some degree it is good. I think it's good that men are able to cry, to express how they really feel, and stop trying to be John Wayne, and be tough all the time – and saying, 'I cry. I hurt.' Rather than attribute that to women, being emotional. Men are emotional too; we just don't want to admit it. We hide it, suppress it, we deny it, we repress it. Instead of saying, yeah, I hurt. You know, women always complain about men, what happens, how they feel – well, men hurt too. When a woman leaves a man he's hurting. He's just not gonna tell you I'm hurting. He's gonna – he might go out and do something stupid, but he's hurting. And, you know, men are lonely and, just like – in other words, men have feelings. But we don't – so, I think it's okay to be sensitive and to show your sensitivity. Break down and cry, it's alright. It doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you. It just means you're willing to accept your feelings. I'm an ENFP [refers to Myers-Briggs Type Indicator], so I – I'm a feelings person. So it doesn't – for me, it's a good thing. It's a good thing that women are able to say, 'Yeah, I can handle this. I can do this.' You know, 'I don't need a man to take care of me. I just need a man to be with me.' Supporting and caring, you know. Sisters take care of themselves. I was talking to a brother, he said – 'You know what, sisters really don't need us.' So, I mean, that's true. I see sisters driving around in Lexus and Mercedes and doing very well.

As Wil discussed his discomfort with gay men, he touched on some issues that are directly related to gender roles and masculinity. He stated that he is more comfortable dealing with lesbian women than with gay men. Here, he explains why.

> I can't see myself, you know, laying up in a bed with another man. I just can't. You know what I'm saying? I – that's just me. I'm so, I don't know if you, I mean – as far as women are concerned, you know, I can deal with it better with a woman than I can with a man. Because, I mean, I have this thing in the back of my mind, okay, you know, if you touch me a certain way, I mean, you know what I'm saying? I'm trying to figure out, well, what's up with that. You know. Then, I don't know, for me, I just – I don't know. It's hard for me to deal with it in the aspect of coming from a man's point of view.

When I asked if he thought this was a masculinity issue, he replied,

> Most definitely. Most definitely. Yes Ma'am, most definitely it is. It's a masculinity thing. But then, it's a thing that self-consciously I have rooted probably in my mind. I had a friend that, you know – and I'm a person that, I'm a very emotional person. I don't, I mean, I don't have too much pride that if God is dealing with me in a certain way or whatever, and I – I'm not scared to cry in front of nobody. I'm not scared to tell you how I feel. If I'm hurt, I will share with you. That's one of the things that I'm glad – my mother raised me, and yes, it's not wrong for a man to tell how he feels or it's not wrong for a man to cry. We do ourselves grave injustices when we tell people – don't cry, you're a man, this and that. No, you're hurting him. Because he's shutting all this up, and it's just building up. And one day he's gonna explode. But, to a certain extent, if I'm hugging you and your hand moves to a certain area that it shouldn't be in, you know what I'm saying. Uh, no. My, my – if I'm comforting you, and you're another male, you know – and I had this to happen one time. I'm comforting a brother and he's, going through and, you know, his hands kind of drifted down the back a little bit and I don't know if he did it consciously or subconsciously, but my mind clicked from, you know, trying to comfort you to - now what's gong on? So, you know – yeah, it's a masculinity thing.

Toni, while growing up in a household with a father who hid his own homosexuality, recalled the behavior of some of her father's friends that signaled to her that "something wasn't right."

> I was – to me it was a man talking like a woman. You know "hey girl" – you know. Flipping their wrist. Or, I would see them periodically have on makeup. To me that was strange behavior, you know. Or, rubbing on my dad. You just –

> to me that just wasn't normal as a child. And so that, I, something ain't right . . . My dad didn't act like that, but I knew there were some feminine characteristics he had – like he was real clean. He loved to cook. He was more of a domestic type, and my mother was like the working type. Well, he worked too, but he cooked, they cooked together. But he did more cooking than she did. So it was, I had a very strange childhood.

Nathan also discussed gender roles when sharing his thoughts on woman preachers. His perception is that many female preachers adopt "masculine" characteristics in order to compete with male preachers. He cited the clothes they wear and even the way they wear their hair as evidence of their rejection of their own femininity. Regarding female preachers he said, "[I]mmediately after they get the call, or at least when they start pastoring, they've got to get their hair cut into a boyish cut, they've got to start wearing pant suits all the time, and they've got to start acting like they are competing with men."

Issues of femininity and masculinity are closely related to gay and lesbian issues because of the stereotypes that gay men are feminine and lesbian women are masculine. Women have traditionally been expected to subscribe to submissiveness and domesticity, whereas men have been expected to demonstrate dominance and power (Collins, 1991; White & Cones, 1999). In an effort to dismiss stereotypes such as the "jezebel," the "asexual mammy," and the "tragic mulatta," many black women, during the early twentieth century, began to adhere to the tenets of the "cult of true womanhood." These tenets include the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Such character traits helped form the definition of black femininity (Collins, 1991).

Strong sentiments regarding femininity and masculinity re-emerged during the Civil Rights Movement, when women were once again asked to behave in a passive,

submissive manner, while allowing black men to express their masculinity and dominance. Activists such as Imamu Amari Baraka, and his wife Amina, stated that women were naturally submissive, and that their submission to men is a necessary part of an orderly world (Giddings, 1984).

Nathan's comments regarding female preachers speaks to this ideal of black femininity. He expressed discomfort with women who refused to adhere to the tenets described above. The "absence of submission" in these women who, as pastors, chose to enter a profession that has historically been reserved for men was also a potential barrier to their being seen as feminine. In addition, they dressed and carried themselves in a way that he considered to be unfeminine. Likewise, James' complaints about women sitting in what he described as "a man's position" points to the notion that the expectation that women adhere to the traditional roles ascribed to them still exist.

Conversely, White & Cones (1999) assert that black men are expected to demonstrate power, dominance, competitiveness, individualism, and control, while neglecting empathy, nurturance, compassion, harmonious relationships, and connectedness with one's feelings. Sexual stereotypes portray black men as brutish and insatiable. Many black men have embraced these stereotypes, which makes acceptance of homosexuality, which many view as a passive form of sexuality, more difficult (Harper, 1993).

Toni's description of her gay father's friends indicates that in her view, they exhibited what she described as feminine characteristics. In describing her father as "more of a domestic type," she again revealed her connection between feminine behavior and male homosexuality.

When men and women step outside of these prescribed roles, they are often suspected of having a homosexual inclination. Many of the participants of this study described those who exhibit such behavior as "flaming" or "flagrant." The degree to which one shows signs of this "extreme" behavior appeared to affect whether or not such persons were accepted into the black church community, and the level of participation in the life of the church in which they were permitted to take part.

Another issue that relates to gender roles is that of the female head of household. Collins (1991) reports that this issue has been problemitized and racialized within the black community. Single mothers are described as aggressive and unfeminine. Research, such as the "Moynihan Report," suggests that they are incapable of teaching their sons what it means to be "real men." Douglas (1999) states that some African Americans believe that the lack of male-headed households causes some black men to behave effeminately, which they reason leads to homosexuality. They also argue that lesbians strip men of their masculinity because they are capable of living independent of them. Though Wil, Nathan, and Mitchell reported being raised by single mothers for at least a portion of their childhoods, they did not express any sentiments that would corroborate what is said in the "Moynihan Report" or other such documents.

Female heads of household are also said to strip black men of their masculinity (Collins, 1999). These assertions are taken further with respect to lesbian women who, in addition to being aggressive, are said to be even more unfeminine than heterosexual heads of household, because of their supposed inability to reproduce. This argument ignores that many lesbian women do have children (Boykin, 1996).

Public Display of (Perceived) Homosexual Behavior. Akin to the comments made by participants regarding male and female gender roles were their discussions concerning what they perceived to be the public display of ones homosexual inclination. The consensus seemed to be that as long as an individual kept his or her homosexuality private, that they would be accepted, or at least tolerated.

When the focus of our interview turned to gay men and lesbian women in particular, James began to include the concept of the "flaming" gay into the conversation. He was, however, aware that not all gay men and lesbian women fit into this category. He stated,

> [I] used to wonder why people who were gay, homosexuals, why they would have to make it a public thing, you know. Whatever you did behind closed doors, why couldn't you just – then you have the flaming gays. But then you had ones who were very quiet. You would not know that they were gay. When I went to seminary I was really exposed to it there, believe it or not.

He went on to say,

> There obviously are, like when they were boycotting, when they wanted to fire all the people who worked at Cracker Barrel who were gay, they said we're here, there, and everywhere. And it's true. Gay people are – and you'd be surprised who's gay. And who's not. Yeah, you'd be surprised. You look at people and say, she's gay, he's gay? Hm. I didn't know. But, you know. I think it's a willingness to be more loving. To be more loving and more gentle and stop trying to play this hard thing, this rugged individual, John Wayne thing.

Nathan's references to "flaming gays" stemmed from personal experiences during his childhood and early adult years. Regarding a teenager in the neighborhood where he grew up he explained, "The other Claude who was around the corner was what the youngsters called 'flaming.' I mean, everybody knew – everybody knew it. I mean, there was no question about it." He went on to say that this particular individual was very effeminate. Another incident he described involved two lesbian women.

> I never shall forget that before I started preaching, I was in college, and we went to this club, had no business there because we were not old enough to buy liquor. But we went to this club, and I saw this sharp young lady sitting at the bar – oh, I mean she was sharp. Ooh. Ooh. And I eased up and ran my best line, and I didn't get anywhere. And I'm like frustrated, what, what? And then all of a sudden, this lesbian comes out who is openly, I mean, you know, you know. Eases up to her, puts her arm around her and said 'let's go baby.' And she eased off the barstool. Well I felt about big enough to – you know, 'cause I've lost out to a lesbian.

In each of the above quotes, Nathan suggests that in some cases (i.e., when a person is "flaming") one can tell that an individual is gay or lesbian by observing his or her behavior. He went on to share that two ladies in his church are lesbians, and that "everybody knows it."

When it comes to homosexual behavior James, like many of the other participants in this study, was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of an individual freely expressing his or her homosexuality. The assumption appears to be that closeted or other homosexuals who keep their sexuality quiet within the church are more tolerable or acceptable than those who do not. James suggested that his problem lies with those whose behavior is more obvious, or those who feel no remorse over their gay lifestyle.

> As long as you're not blatant about it. You know what I'm saying. Well I'm gone do this, I don't care – well, yeah you should care. You know, like a person who is heterosexual who goes around and has intercourse with every woman he can find or with every woman – well, you know. I think if you're struggling with it, you know, if it's someone who says, wow, I'm not quite sure this, I'm really trying to come to terms with my sexual and self identity and I'm trying to deal with this and, you know . . . But if a person is really saying, yeah, this is an issue for me - I don't think that people who are flaming and don't care, I don't think you should go that far either. Just like I don't think men should be going around boasting about how many women they've had, you know. And I say so what. What do you want, a medal? But that's the issue. Yes, I know what the Scriptures say. And I know that God is able to help people overcome addictions, whatever that addiction is, and I believe that.

Toni acknowledged that she believes that many homosexuals lack remorse regarding their sexuality.

> I think there's a certain openness, but I think the openness is sort of a – I don't think it is a, shall I say, well I'm gay, I'm sorry. I don't think there's any remorse. I think they're just – huh, this is just what I am. Ya'll just gone have to deal with it. You know , and I think sometimes in the pastoral position, it's hidden. I think a lot of that. But, because it's been exposed so now, it can't be hidden. Evangelists and, it is, it is awful . . . I mean, you go to some of these larger conferences, I mean they're on the – music directors, choir, pulpit – it covers every area of the church. It's just not musicians. I know some preachers, some pastors who are gay.

When discussing a gospel show that appears on the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network, Wil alleged,

> But a lot of times when you look at shows like the Bobby Jones Gospel you see all these guys up in there, and you know, I mean, come on now. You know. You can tell that these guys are – there's something wrong, that their elevator is not going all the way up to the top floor . . . [They're] very effeminate. More than – and another thing about men, they're more effeminate than a regular woman is. They bend their wrist. They twitch, they twist more than – I mean, come on. So, you can tell.

James finally concedes, "But like I said, the real problem is the whole public thing. I mean, obviously if you're married, people know you're heterosexual, I guess. But I guess they feel they have that right to be public." Toni expressed a similar opinion regarding homosexuals within the church. She said, "[W]ell, as long as you don't bring your lifestyle in the church, you fine. As long as you don't display your homosexuality tendencies in the church, you're fine. Out of sight, out of mind."

While several participants stated that their problem is with those who make their homosexuality a public affair, Wil was more uncomfortable with those who keep it hidden. He shared,

> In churches, I believe [homosexuality] is more prevalent than what we even realize. . .because some people keep it hidden. . . some people have – I think some people are ashamed about it. And I'm like, if you say it's natural, why be ashamed? If you feel like it's part of nature or part of, you know, and God accepts it, why hide it. If you're gay, if you're a gay man or woman, why hide it? I mean, be what you believe. You know. But a lot of people, they hide it. I used to work with a guy, and, this was before I came back in the church. I used to work with a guy, and we were – I mean, the best of friends. We used to drink together, used to party together. He was married. You know, I'm married. We used to get together – he had kids, and I have kids. And, one night after, you know. I was drinking and partying all night long he tried to come on to me. You know, and it hurt me, 'cause I looked at him like a brother. You know, but all along, I'm seeing that he probably had hidden motives. This man was in my wedding. So, it lets me know that, it doesn't matter if you're married – that does not matter. You can be a man that's married, but I can tell you one thing, that there are people that hide it.

The public display of homosexual behavior is not a topic that was taken up, directly, in the literature that I reviewed. There was very little discussion concerning overt behavior, perhaps because there is an understanding that there is no such thing as "gay behavior." Gay men and lesbian women are as diverse as heterosexual men and women. To attempt to categorize their behavior is to eventually stereotype them, which is what many of the participants of this study did. Regarding gay and lesbian behavior, they focused primarily on those who exhibit stereotypical behavior. They did, however, admit that some people are "less obvious" or "able to hide it." Generally speaking, they were more comfortable with individuals who were willing to "hide" their homosexuality or who did not fit the stereotypes than they were with others.

The admonition to keep ones homosexuality private has been described as problematic for the homosexual. While being kept unaware of who is gay or lesbian and who is not may be more comfortable for church leaders and others within the African American community, it is at times very uncomfortable for homosexuals, who are forced

to live a double life. Many black members of the gay and lesbian community acknowledge experiencing an overall lack of support within the black community. They state that they feel pressured to keep their homosexuality private, and are careful not to be "too out," because of the potential consequences to them and their families (Loiacano, 1989). These reports are consistent with the preferences shared by the participants of this study, who said that they prefer that gay men and lesbian women keep their sexuality to themselves.

Gay Men. When asked where they see gay men fitting into the black church, most participants at least mentioned church music departments. Even those who stated that gay men can be found in all areas of the black church emphasized that they appear to be drawn toward the roles of choir director, singer, or musician. According to Isaiah,

> [O]ften times we would say that they end up in the choir, or musicians, or something like that. And, there does seem to be, sometimes, a tendency that they may gravitate toward the arts, because sometimes they have what are referred to as artist temperaments. I don't think it's exclusive like that. I think that they may be involved in other things, because they may not have the artisan's kind of skills.

Isaiah went on to say,

> And I think that they're probably getting mixed messages, because many black churches, and many black pastors, stand up and preach against homosexuality, you're going to hell, etcetera, etcetera. But yet, they have no issue with hiring them as musicians or hiring them in terms of wherever their skills may be, and pay them well for that. Or to allow them to move into certain aspects of the life of the church. And, yet they get condemnation from the pulpit. So, I think they struggle with hearing mixed messages about that.

In response to the question regarding the role of gay men in the church, James stated that many church musicians are gay, but he also cautioned that though such individuals may be permitted to function in that role, that they should not be used as spiritual role models.

> I think gay men have a place. I think, it's like, a lot of our church musicians, some of them are gay. And they're great musicians. But they're gay. And we accept them. And sometimes we – we like them. Because they have a certain flare and sensitivity and creativity. So, I don't know. Again, it goes back to the whole thing of exclusion. I don't think anybody should be excluded. I think we have to be careful that we don't, as we would anything, not use them as a model. I mean, it's just like with basketball players, football. We make heroes out of people, and say oh, yeah, oh – I mean, you know, I don't see how because a person is a celebrity, that would make them a hero. So I think we have to be careful on defining what we mean when we look at somebody as role model or a hero. But again, we don't know who's gay and who's not, unless they tell us. If we know, then we say, well – I don't know, I think there is a certain degree of accountability in any relationship. But I think you've got to be very careful.

Nathan's thoughts regarding the role of gay men in the church were similar to those of other participants. He stated,

> I've seen - some of the best choir directors that I've ever seen have been homosexuals. And, so I don't have the kind of prob – I would have, I guess, and I would really sit down and talk with that person. We had a local Baptist church here where the choir director was even showing up in women's clothes. Women's pants, women's shoes, women's blouses. I do have a problem with that and – let me tell you why. One of the roles that I see the church playing is that of role model to young people coming up. And so, if you just parade any and every thing before them, what kind of models do they have to pattern themselves after? Young men who grow up in a house that is strictly matriarchal are already at a difficult situation because there is no role model to show them how a man acts. And then, if you start bringing that into the church –

Wil recognized that gay men exist in many areas within the black church. Regarding their roles he asserted,

> Nine times out of ten in the Pentecostal church you're going to see them directing the choir. You'll see them in the choir, directing the choir, or singing in the choir somewhere. But, that's where you see the one's that are more flamboyant with it. The one's that are more – they may not be open to tell you that I'm gay, but you can tell by their mannerism, by the way they act, walk, and talk that there's something not right about them. But then you have those that are probably sitting in the pulpit – those that, you know, that may be preaching the Word, that are homosexual. But, like I say, there again, they may be hiding it.

Mitchell, on the other hand, went one step further by revealing that he has developed a different perception of the role of gay men in the church since becoming a minister. He stated,

> Mainly, primarily, you mainly catch them in – before I got into the ministry, you mainly saw them as choir directors or in the choir, that sort of thing. But now that I've been in ministry, it's a lot of ministers that are walking around doing that sort of thing. Actually, they're all over. You're not gone escape it. It's everywhere.

The idea that black gay men are prevalent in church music departments is not a new one. According to Lowe (1998), the black gospel music industry is home to numerous gay men, some of whom have died of AIDS related illnesses without anyone knowing, because their homosexuality what such a secretive matter. Gay men are also found in large numbers as choir directors, choir members, and musicians within the black church (Anderson, 1998; Boykin, 1999; Sanders, 1998). This gives credibility to the statements made by participants, though it does not negate that these are observations of gay men who display the stereotypical behavior described in the previous section. Again, some of the participants acknowledge that there are men who do not fit this model. However, their initial responses primarily indicate a heavy reliance on stereotypical behavior as an indicator of homosexuality.

Lesbian Women. According to the participants, the roles of lesbian women within the black church are not as easily identified as the roles of gay men. They were seen as more difficult to recognize, particularly if they did not fit the stereotype of the masculine lesbian. Participants of this study seem to suggest that lesbian women are more or less invisible within the black church community. James' response to the

question of what he sees as the role of lesbian women in the black church illustrates this point.

> Now, it depends. Now, some lesbian women say that they have to do the butch thing. You know, they have to dress down and – again, that's with that flaming kind of, you gotta wear your hair a certain way, you've gotta sit, you know – like Bonnie and Clyde, you know. Bonnie, they say, was gay, she was a lesbian. She smoked cigars and – but yeah, I think that kind of, a certain image, I think, again, we don't know who's lesbian and we don't know, unless they're in that particular role. Now, all women who dress like that are not necessarily lesbians either. So then you've got to be careful how you define a person – I mean, if they haven't walked up to me and said I'm a lesbian, somebody else might tell me that they are, but I don't know. If I don't know them that well, I don't socialize – so, again, we have to be careful how we judge people. We can't judge people based on how they're dressed. Or how they behave. 'Cause that may not mean anything. It may mean everything, it may not mean anything. So, the whole judgment thing, you know, trying not to have preconceived notions about a group of people, as with black people.

Wil responded to the same question by saying,

> I mean, nowadays you just don't know who is who. And that's just how it is. I mean, it don't, you just don't know who is who. I think, you just can't tell (Laughter). I don't know. You just can't tell. Like I say, you have some people that can mask. And you just don't know who is who. But I'm sure there's – I've heard stories of lesbian women that are pastors. And lesbian women that, you know, that play key roles in churches. So, you know, you never know. But, you can be going to church with people and never know who you're going to church with – all your life. You could be sitting beside Sunday after Sunday, Wednesday after Wednesday, year in, year out – you could be sitting beside a mass murderer. You know. So, you just never know.

Likewise, Isaiah alluded to the idea that lesbian women are more difficult to identify.

> I think they just fall into more of a general category. They may be in the choir, they may not be. But, women, are sometimes more difficult to know and to see and to understand. I tend to believe that gay women have a tendency to want to remain more anonymous in their own approach, because, the taboo against women is different than it is against gay men, I would think.

These responses parallel what is recorded in the literature concerning lesbian women. Lesbians are rarely talked about. According to Gordon (1998), they remain a

hidden part of the African American gay community. Interestingly, as it relates to homosexuality and the Bible, same-sex sex between women is mentioned only once, in Romans 1:26, which is perhaps indicative of the way that lesbian women are, apparently, ignored in the modern Christian community as well. Or, that participants generally find lesbian women more difficult to identify may indicate that they are less likely to fit stereotypes concerning masculinity.

Gay Leadership Within the Church. Participants varied somewhat on their thoughts regarding the appropriateness of gay men and lesbian women serving as leaders within the church. Their responses reflect the significance placed on such roles, especially since most church leaders are viewed as role models. Mitchell's take on the role of lesbian women in the black church appeared to have been influenced by limitations placed on women in the Baptist church, versus those of women from other denominations that he encountered while in seminary.

> I don't, you know, that's – I don't know. Again, I would assume they are just all over too. Now, in the Baptist church it was a little different, because we didn't have female ministers, although the female ministers I have ran across, I mean they're just really – I don't know. They're just, they're not interested in anything. You know, they're real serious – the black women that I ran into. Now, when I was in seminary the white women, they were there just to find husbands. But the black women, I mean, you, uh uh. Just even to ask them, invite them out for a coke, that was something different. I don't think that they were lesbians, I just think that this (points to his Bible) was the only thing for them. So, I would assume they were all over too.

Toni and Wil took a much stronger stance regarding the roles of gay men and lesbian women in the black church. When asked what she saw as the role of gay men in the black church Toni replied,

> Well, all honesty, I don't think [gay men and lesbian women] should be in leadership. They should not, I think they shouldn't be in leadership positions

> operating. Now if they are, been delivered, I have no problems with it. But how can you lead me when you are not doing right? I'm not saying that there's a perfect person in church – a black male might be fornicating. Well, you shouldn't lead the people. You might be committing adultery – well you don't need to lead the people. So I don't think anybody should have a quote unquote role in the church who are really – now there are some sins, we sin daily, but you just blatantly out doing something you know that's contrary to the Word of God, I just don't believe you ought to be in leadership. Because it is contrary to the Word.

Wil, in a similar fashion stated,

> Well, I know at this church, if I ever find out that somebody's homosexual – living a homosexual lifestyle, they won't operate period. And that's not just homosexuals. If there's anybody practicing sin, they're not gonna operate period in a leadership position. Because, first of all, when you have people in leadership positions, those are the people that people see. The ones that, that people that come off the street wanting to change their life, then they see – how can I respect this man or woman, when we were together last night partying and smoking and drinking. Or, me and him had a homosexual relationship a year ago. And how can, you know, and then you have another thing where, you've got people like, you might have a young man that's living a homosexual lifestyle working with young boys. And then, you know, that spirit might jump off onto one of them or they may try something on one of those kids. So, not just the homosexual lifestyle. If I find out anybody is living a lifestyle contrary to the Word of God, they're not going to operate period in this ministry.

Mitchell stated that though many within the black church may object to the idea of homosexual persons holding leadership positions, that these individuals are reluctant to voice their concerns. He shared,

> I mean, there have been homosexuals that I know are – that have been in leadership positions and no one – they just kind of keep it to themselves. And if they express objection, it would be more around the dinner table than at the church. I don't really see them being ostracized or segregated in the church. Definitely not in the black church – not the ones that I have been to.

Isaiah's thoughts regarding the roles that gay men and lesbian women should be permitted to play within the black church suggest that those who are "flagrant" should not be used as role models, while those who keep their homosexuality to themselves should be given more freedom.

> The black church in general – that's been, part of the principle thing – that there are some churches that have just decided that they are going to not use, not to approach, not to involve those who have outward tendencies. And, even in our own context, we – whatever a person's sexual orientation is is one thing, but when, what I would define as being – what I would identify as being flagrant in it, regardless – whether it's dealing with homosexual or heterosexual issues, you know, then I take issue and I take exception to that. What one decides to do in terms of his or her own private life has to be something he or she has to grapple with in their relationship with the Lord.

When I asked him whether there would ever be a possibility of someone who is gay or lesbian serving in a leadership role at his church, he responded,

> They could be. The thing again, is that, kind of like the Bill Clinton policy, we ain't gonna ask, if you don't tell. But now, if there is a flagrancy, in terms of how they present themselves, that becomes problematic for me. But that's not only in terms of homosexuals, that's in terms of, you know, if a pimp comes in here, if a hooker comes in here, if a fellow who's just flagrant in terms of his own heterosexual activities and things like that, then that would be problematic for us.

Leadership within the black church is taken very seriously. Pastors and other church leaders are viewed as role models within the black community (Mays & Nicholson, 1999). As is illustrated in the comments of many of this study's participants, gay men and lesbian women are often viewed as "unfit" for leadership positions within the black church. In many churches, homosexuals may be denied positions requiring ordination, while heterosexuals who engage in premarital or extramarital sex are accepted. Toni and Wil were outspoken in their beliefs that men and women who are active in a gay lifestyle should not serve as leaders within the black church under any circumstances. Other participants were more flexible, stating that only those perceived as "flaming" would be prevented from serving as leaders, provided they kept their sexuality a private matter.

Several participants stated that they have known or heard of gay men or lesbian women who have served in leadership positions in black churches, some as pastors. These persons, however, were for the most part secretive about their sexual identity. The President Clinton "don't ask, don't tell" policy referred to by Isaiah does seem to apply within the black church community as well. Such unspoken rules can lead gay men and lesbian women to hide their sexuality in order serve as leaders within the black church (Sanders, 1998).

Theme 2: Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality

Participants of this study expressed a wide range of beliefs related to homosexuality. They talked about their personal opinions, as well as their doctrinal and theological beliefs. Many of them also shared their lack of understanding concerning the topic of homosexuality.

The Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality theme addresses the participants' personal beliefs regarding homosexuality. This theme is made up of three sub-themes: Perceptions of the Nature of Same-Sex Attraction, Homosexuality as Sin, and "To Judge or Not to Judge." The Perceptions of the Nature of Same-Sex Attraction sub-theme addresses participant thoughts on how men and women become gay or lesbian, and how this relates to their other beliefs regarding homosexuality. The Homosexuality as Sin sub-theme deals with participant notions regarding the sinfulness of homosexuality. Biblical references participants cited as proof of the sinfulness of homosexuality are addressed here as well. The "To Judge or Not to Judge" sub-theme looks at some of the participants' beliefs regarding whether or not they have a right to judge others, including homosexuals.

Perceptions of the Nature of Same-Sex Attraction. The question of how one becomes gay or lesbian has long been the topic of serious debate. There are those who believe that individuals are born with homosexual tendencies, and there are also those who believe that homosexuality is an environmentally influenced or learned phenomenon. Some of the participants of this study expressed a strong belief that homosexuality is not innate, while others expressed some uncertainty.

Isaiah was quite clear about his lack of clarity on this topic. He stated,

> Now, my theology tells me that I cannot discriminate against any person who has a biological – whatever. Whether it's women, whether it's handicapped, or whatever the case – and whether it's homosexual. The question that I have not been able to come to any clear, definitive answer on is whether or not homosexuality is a biological or a life choice, distinction. If it's biological, then I would choose not to discriminate. If it is life choice, then I may approach it differently, and look at it differently.

James shared a perspective on the issue that asked what some would consider to be a very good question. Discussing a conversation he had with a friend, he said,

> But then, someone brought to my attention, I said, do you think that some people are actually born with the tendency to be homosexual? Are they acquired, are they cultivated? They said, they don't see anybody, in the way homosexuals are ostracized in our society, who would just take it on. If they didn't already have it. If it wasn't innate. So that gave me something to think about.

Even though James entertained the idea that homosexuality may be innate, he also reasoned that God is able to change the sexuality, or at least the sexual behavior, of the homosexual. He continued,

> But then, you know, I guess what we have – and, if they become Christians and God's Spirit convicts them of that, convinces them that it's a sin, then God changes them. I can't change them. Only God can change another person. And I'm not gonna go around and say, well, you no good dirty sinner. I say, I'm a no good dirty sinner too. I just don't do the same thing you do. I might do something else, but it's all sin.

Nathan also took into consideration the possibility that individuals are born gay. But he went one step further by stating, in effect, that being born gay was not necessarily a justifiable reason for engaging in homosexual sexual behavior. He noted,

> [I] recognize, you know, medical doctors are saying to us that for many individuals the business of homosexuality or lesbianism is an innate situation. That they're born with deficiencies and hormones and all that – I don't argue that. I do argue that sexual fulfillment and sexual gratification is a learned process. There might be people who were born where, for men, the chest area is more fully developed – but I still say that how you find gratification is learned. Men have to learn how to have sex with women. Women have to learn how to have sex with men. Men have to learn, I guess, how to have sex with men. And so, while there are some innate things or biological situations that you might have to face, the actual process of gratification is learned, and I don't think you have to accept the theories put forth.

Mitchell's opinion regarding the nature of homosexuality is that men and women are not born gay. He discussed the reaction he received during a Bible Study where he, as the leader of the study, shared this opinion.

> The only objection that came up was in a Bible Study we had, in which one person expressed the fact that they were not, they did not agree with the position I took on that. I think they misunderstood what I said, but, they made it quite clear that they thought that it was not a choice, it was a medical, biological thing, and, that you don't have, you don't choose your sexual orientation – that it is chosen for you from birth. So they were very upset that I – and they, in so many words they accused me, they used the word bigotry and all that kind of stuff was used, so I, you know, I do think that, some of my statements were taken out of context. But, I mean, this is not a popular profession. I'm not trying to be a cheerleader here, be the most, Miss Congeniality or anything like that. You take the good with the bad – the praises with the boos.

Toni also believes that men and women are not born gay. She also introduces the idea that sexual molestation may or may not influence sexual identity development. The following description of one of the ministry classes she teaches illustrates her thoughts.

> And so, I talk about how prominent it is, and how it can become. And it's a spirit that operates in your generation. And how people say – I don't believe you were born gay. I don't believe that. But I do believe there is a generational curse that

> is passed down through generations. And so I deal with that, and I deal about how I was molested by a female in my family and how that plants a seed in you, and would have you thinking, okay, is this normal, because you know it wasn't right, but what? And how seeds are planted in you spiritually, when you grow up there's two ways you're gonna act – you are either gonna be promiscuous with men, or vice versa with men gonna be with women, or you're gonna be attracted to the same sex. And so, because that's what your experience is with. And, then I try to teach people, well what causes me not even to be attracted to men, but what causes me to be attracted to women, 'cause some people have never been raped or molested, but they have this attraction. Okay, then, I go – it's really an in-depth thing that I talk about, is, okay, what caused that root for you to be attracted to another woman? And so, I, it's an – I normally spend about an hour, hour and a half just discussing the homosexual issue, because a lot of people have questions when it's opened up to them. But they just won't come out in the open and talk about it.

Wil compassionately shared his thoughts about the possibility of sexual molestation affecting sexual identity development. He said,

> You take a young boy that's growing up in a household and he knows nothing about the homosexual lifestyle. But you might have an older uncle or somebody that is trying to make this young boy something that he's not, trying to make him a woman, as far as, he's having sexual relations with him where it's so unnatural, God didn't intend for that to happen. So, in this young man's mind, this man is laying on top of him, having relations, and doing whatever he's doing with him. And so, he's growing up. And now he's confused. He doesn't know whether to feel this way or that way. And so, he's dealing with all this stuff and dealing with, what should I do? Is it natural for me to be with a man, or this or that. And so, when you've got stuff like that, you really have to have compassion on people. You know, and so, a friend and I we were talking about that. And he told me that, and it really shed some light on a different perspective for me. Because, I used to really be harsh on homosexual males. Oh yeah, I really used to think harshly. I used to not give them any slack.

Isaiah, too, mentioned the possibility of sexual molestation or one's environment influencing sexual identity development. He shared,

> A question I would raise, as to whether or not, how many persons turned out to be gay or homosexual because of sexual abuse or similar things. And what does that have - or what kind of home environment. And even still, that may be more of a life choice or again something that's biological. But I would try not to discriminate against anyone who is born a particular way.

Nathan, like several other participants, sees changing one's sexuality as a possibility for homosexuals. He shared that he has known individuals who have done just that.

> Now you try to resolve some issues through communication, through dialog, through mediation – I think if the church keeps teaching, keeps preaching, some things will happen that will cause folk to have to – and I don't want to use the term shame, but some of it will make folk have to look at themselves and raise the question – why am I doing what I'm doing? How did I get in this situation? And what do I do? I've seen in this city a couple of people that I knew, and that everybody knew were homosexuals, and I've seen them change, and get married and have families . . .What I hope is, that, given a purpose and a sense of meaning and direction in life, many of them come around. They get older, and they come on around. Many of them don't. Many of them still play the roles, as the little boy would say, of AC/DC.

Toni shares the news of her uncle's "conversion." She shared, "I have an uncle that was [homosexual], but thank God, God delivered him. He's married to a woman and he's out of it."

Wil's words reflect that he does believe individuals can change their sexual orientations, but that the responsibility for such change lies with the individual rather than with the church. He said,

> [P]eople have to be honest. If they're in that lifestyle and they want to change, they have to be honest about it. And then, you have people who are in that lifestyle that don't wanna change. You have people who are in that lifestyle that come to church and feel like they're praising and worshipping God. Anybody can praise God, but not just anybody can worship God. 'Cause you've got to worship God in spirit and in truth. You've got to have a pure heart. And everybody, I mean, we all fall daily. But you can't practice sin and feel like you're getting into the presence of God. It does not happen. Like I said, there are people that come to church that are living a homosexual lifestyle, there are people coming to church who are living in adulterous relationships – that are doing all kind of stuff contrary to the will and the Word of God, and they feel like they're okay. No, that's not the truth. That's the furthest thing from the truth. So, the person has to be honest. If they want to come out of that relationship, then, they have to be honest about it and seek help. The first thing is, admit it. Anything. You know,

when I was drinking, the only way I could get help was when I realized that I had a problem. And then I sought help. And I opened my mouth.

James had some thoughts about homosexuals changing their sexual identity. He shared, "[I]f [homosexuals] become Christians and God's Spirit convicts them of that, convinces them that it's a sin, then God changes them. I can't change them."

While sharing family information about one of his former church members who is gay, Nathan seems to suggest that environmental factors can affect sexual identity development. He stated,

> I do worry about what motivates and pushes us to those things. For instance, I had a young man in this church whose mother was just strung out on everything. She was just rebellious. She has now come in, and repents, regrets how she raised her boys, because she really just turned them over to her mother. And that youngest boy, the grandfather would be on his case, on his case – go out and play football. But he'd hang around in the kitchen with the women. And, he's not in this city now, 'cause he doesn't want to be around his grandmother and grandfather. He's openly gay – everybody knows, I mean, you know.

Nathan and Wil shared a common theory regarding why some women within the African American community engage in lesbian relationships. Nathan shared,

> One of the frustrations we have – I've got two daughters. So many of our men are killing each other around drug issues, or they're locked up in prison. The question is, who are the women going to go with? Who are they going to marry? We're teaching them to stay within the African American community – and there's nobody in the African American community for them to marry. The white girls are already after the African American boys. A number of them are so strung out on drugs or locked up in prison, gay, so what happens? Women end up finding satisfaction with other women. It doesn't make me the happiest camper in the world, but I understand what's going on.

Wil's thoughts mirror Nathan's. Wil stated,

> One thing is, for women, because of the lack of quality men that are around, for the lack of being able to have a functional relationship, that women may turn to other women. Not in hopes, or not thinking about a lesbian relationship, but their feelings may gradually grow to one another, and one thing leads to another. And they're – 'cause, like I said you can take two average women that don't even think

about that. I know of women right now that have gone to the lesbian lifestyle that you would have never thought – and, it's, one thing that it's so prevalent that the emotions run so high. But for men, like a man like me, you aren't going to trick me into nothing like that. I don't care if I can't find a good woman. You know what I'm saying, I'm going to be by myself. So, it's just, emotionally it's real draining on people – I believe.

Toni admits that there are some things that she doesn't understand about gay men and lesbian women. Although she is pleased with those who have chosen to leave the homosexual lifestyle behind, she is somewhat critical of them as well.

I mean, you know, and sometimes I think, just like people who have been delivered from it, man, have an awesome testimony and have an awesome ministry to help other people come out of it. And one thing I ask people who are lesbian or homosexual or gay men, I say, okay, if you are in this lifestyle, why have you got to hide? If it's so right. Why do you have, why do you have to fight so much? Why do you have to defend so much if it's right? And then secondly, if it's so right, then why when you come to church and something happens and you give your life to Christ, why would you come out of it - if it's so like Christ . . . 'Cause I've had people say, well, you know, the Lord delivered me, the Lord brought me through with that, I am through with that life. Why do you have to be through with it, if it's right – if God condones it? So, there's got to be something in you to know it's not right, and it's not normal.

Wil was also somewhat critical of individuals whom he perceived as lacking boldness regarding their homosexuality. In a statement similar to Toni's, he said,

[I]f you have a strong belief in anything that you're in, and you believe God sanctions it, why be scared about it? You know, be up front and honest with yourself if that's the lifestyle you live, then why hide it? So, a certain element of fear about it would let you know – that would let the light click on in your head – okay, if a person is scared about this, then, no, they know that something's not right.

African American's beliefs regarding homosexuality, and the nature of same-sex attraction are not easily discerned. There appears to be some confusion over whether homosexuality is biological in nature, or if it is a choice that a person makes. The participants of this study split over the issue, though the near consensus that

homosexuality is a sin seems to suggest that they lean more toward the belief that it is a choice. This is consistent with Cohen's (1999) analysis of the black church, which claims that black church leaders view problems such as drug addiction as sicknesses that can be acknowledged, discussed, and dealt with, and view homosexuals as sinful, and as a result, neither acknowledge nor accept their homosexuality.

The perception that homosexuality is a sin that stems from a choice a person makes perhaps contributes to homophobic feelings. Though the participants stated that they are not homophobic, some of their comments were homophobic in nature. The black community is sometimes viewed as being more homophobic than the white community. Douglas (1999) disagrees; suggesting that homophobia within the black community is supported by the history of sexual exploitation by whites. She argues that homophobia is sometimes used as a way of protecting the integrity of black sexuality. Because of the history of sexual oppression within the black community, and because of the many sexual stereotypes that have been attached to African Americans, many members of the black community have developed a sensitivity regarding their sexuality. This sensitivity has caused many to distance themselves from any sexual practice that is defined by larger society as unusual or abnormal.

Because of the negative connotations associated with homosexuality, many gay men and lesbian women keep their homosexuality to themselves. Wil and Toni each made statements regarding the secrecy among gay and lesbian persons related to their sexuality. They argue that gay men and women should proudly proclaim their homosexuality if they believe that it is alright to be gay. Their reasoning is that gay men and lesbian women know, deep down, that homosexuality is wrong, which is why they

hide it from others. This argument, however, neglects to take into account the negative repercussions gay men and lesbian women often suffer when they are vocal about their sexuality within the black church. As noted in the section on gay leadership within the black church, homosexuals are often prevented from holding various leadership offices within the church if they are open regarding their sexuality. In addition, Anderson (1998) states that it is sensible for gay men and lesbian women to "maintain a guarded trust" within the black church, because though their gifts and talents may be exploited within the black church, such exploitation should not be confused with acceptance and love (p. 194).

In the discussions on how and why men and women "become" homosexuals, some interesting comments were made. Nathan and Wil's remarks regarding why some women "resort" to a lesbian lifestyle relate to what Hart (1998) refers to as the portrayal of African Americans as a feminine race that has engaged in a "devious and deviant inversion of masculine and feminine identity" (p. 206). In other words, Nathan and Wil suggest that some women engage in sexual relationships with other women because there are not enough available men to meet their sexual and emotional needs. This idea of black women having to take the place of absent black men is not limited to issues of sexuality. Manuscripts such as the "Moynihan Report" suggest that single-parent mothers fall into this category as well. The Million Man March, which took place in 1995, was organized, in part, to address the very issues that Nathan and Wil believe lead some women to adopt a lesbian lifestyle. The high unemployment rate of black men, together with the high rate of incarceration and death by homicide were all issues that the leaders of the March sought to address (Nelson, 1998). These are the same issues that

Nathan and Wil claim have created a shortage of eligible male partners for women within the African American community. There is, however, no evidence in the literature that would confirm the notion that any woman engages in same-sex sexual relationships because of a lack of available male sexual partners.

Homosexuality as sin. At the center of debates on the topic of homosexuality and Christianity is the question of whether or not homosexuality is a sin. This is the initial question, that usually ends up creating more questions than answers, as it did in this study. As for the participants of this study, they each contend that if homosexuality is a sin, it is no greater or worse than any other sin. Wil shared,

> One of the things – I know at times I haven't gone in depth about it, but I have spoken about it saying that my belief from reading the Word is that it's wrong. But God loves everybody. And God created everybody. But, one of the things is that I let people know – there's no big sin or small sin – it's just sin. God does not look at – okay, you tell a lie, that's a sin. If you fornicate, that's a sin. Homosexuality – that's a sin. Adultery – that's a sin. So, God's just gonna deal with the sin issue. Not the name that's attached to it. But, it's an abomination unto God. And that's what I tell the people. But, I don't tell the people in a manner where I badger them or dog them out to make them feel bad where they are. What I want to show them is that there's hope. If you truly have the desire to change your life, you can't do it by yourself. But with the help of God, it can be done. So, what I try to show them is that, look, no matter where you are, there's nothing you have done in your life that God will not forgive you for. And so, it's up to you to make that step to come out of whatever situation you're in.

Mitchell also spoke about the similarity between homosexuality and other sins. He stated,

> I put [homosexuality] in the same category with any sin. You know, if I tell a lie, I am no better or no worse. You know, my sin is no greater or no worse than somebody that goes out, as a man, and sleeps with another man or a woman and sleeps with another woman. We both have committed sins; we both can be forgiven for that sin. I would hope the church would deal with it in that fashion.

James and Isaiah were the only participants who did not refer to specific Bible verses, and Isaiah was the only participant who expressed any serious doubts regarding the sinfulness of homosexuality. Because he is unclear about the nature of same-sex attraction, he said,

> If it a life choice, then it is a sin. If it is biological, it is not a sin. We cannot sin because of things that are beyond our ability . . . There may be people, and again, I've not probed it enough to know, but there may be those who as – no, let me preface it, again. I have heard some of the rhetoric from gay groups that says that there are some things in them that cause them to be homosexual. It's not because they chose it, it's just who they are and what they are. Because of that, if that is true, then I would not quantify it as being a sin. But, if it is that they just saw something and decided they shunned women or they shunned men, or persons of the opposite gender, then I would address it and approach it differently.

James began his discussion by humbly expressing his opinion. He stated,

> If I read the Bible correctly it is. Just like adultery, stealing, lying, cheating, it is a sin, but it's not the sin. You know. It's among the many. It's not – we lift it up. It's no greater sin than murder. We think that murder is the greatest sin of all but it's not. It's among a list of sins. There are no lesser or greater degrees of sin. Sin is sin. Sin is separation – anything we do apart – we do nice things that are sinful, if we do it apart from God. The Bible says that our best, it says our righteousness is as filthy rags. We at our best – we're not good enough. So, it is a sin. It's a sin that can be forgiven. And, again, a person can be a homosexual but not practice it. They can be heterosexual, you know, with fornication and adultery, you know – you can be a homosexual and not be a practicing homosexual.

Later, when I asked whether he had ever discussed homosexuality in any of his sermons, he revealed,

> Now homosexuality, I've not dealt with it in a sermon. Because the Bible makes it very clear – homosexuality is a sin. It's like saying that adultery is okay or stealing. But, the sexual sins tend to be lifted up higher than any other, so we say, yeah, oh, that's awful. It's not awful.

Nathan gave an explanation for his belief that homosexuality is a sin. When I asked if he believed homosexuality is a sin, he replied,

> Yes. Now, let me tell you why. I believe that sin is a transgression of that which God has placed in existence. And initially, the relationship was male and female. And so, when we cross that – it might very well be, but I don't know of male elephants who have relationships with other male elephants. I don't know, it might well be. I don't know of any other species that crosses the line. And so, from a Biblical perspective, it is a transgression of that which God ordered. And so yes. Again, God does not love the sin, but He still loves the sinner.

Similarly, Toni responded,

> I believe it's a sin because the Lord said it's an abomination in His sight . . . It's an abomination in His sight, and He told them to be fruitful and multiply. And that was not meaning you go adopt a child. He means for his seed, the man's seed to be planted in a woman, and you all produce a child. He didn't mean – see I'm getting ready to get real nasty so – carry on.

Mitchell stated, with confidence, that the act of homosexuality is "definitely a sin, according to scriptures." When I asked if he would you differentiate the act from the inclination, he replied,

> Yes. 'Cause any sin – well, the scripture says that to think it is to have done it. If you think it with lust, then you are committing the sin in your heart. It's the same as committing the actual sin. So, yes, I mean, but if, if you, if I'm walking down the street and I say, that man looks nice in that suit, some people might say, well, you might have homosexual tendencies. Well, I just, you know, he looks nice in the suit, you know. So I differentiate – if I'm like, he looks nice in the suit and boy I would like to get that suit off of him and all that kind of stuff, then, in my mind I'm lusting. And, you know, that's the difference that I draw . . . Again, if you deal with the act, you're not dealing with the individual. But people cannot separate the two.

One of the controversial issues that come up when discussing homosexuality is whether or not homosexual sexual behavior can, or should, be separated from same-sex attraction or homosexual tendencies. Nathan reasoned that this is what God does whenever any Christian commits any sin – that He loves us while hating the sin we've committed.

> Again, God loves the individual. He might not like the act, but He loves them. If I believe that Judas could have waited until after the resurrection, and Christ

would have forgiven him even for what he did, then I believe that God can forgive any of us. There's so much for which He's had to forgive me.

When asked if he thought a non-practicing homosexual was committing a sin, James responded,

> No. I would not say that person's a sinner. No more of a sinner than the person, you know, we're all sinners, but it's what we do with who we are – if I acknowledge that I have this issue, just like the person who's always a recovering alcoholic. I'm always an alcoholic, but I'm really one when I take a drink. You know. So, you say, yeah, I'm a thief, but I'm not stealing. I'm a liar, but I'm not lying. It's recognizing those weaknesses and those limitations in what you are and who you are, and then not practicing them. Knowing that there's a weakness, but you emphasize your strength.

Likewise, when asked if he would separate the person from the behavior, Nathan answered,

> Yes. Yes. Yes. See, one of the problems that I have is, and I know that it's an antiquated Scripture, and I know that folks say, Oh – but when I read about Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah, and I read about how when the royal visitors came to visit Lot, that the men outside of Lot's house said, give us those men who are in your house, those strangers. And Lot says, let me give you my daughters who have never known men, and they said, we don't want your daughters, we want those men. And because of the sin, Scripturally, of Sodom and Gomorrah, the city was destroyed – the two cities were destroyed. When I read in Romans, and Paul talks about how men have become lovers of men and women lovers of women, they violate that which is considered holy and God has turned them over to a reprobate mind. I keep wrestling with, how do I separate – and I, I'm one of those who believes that God hates the sin, but He loves the sinner. But, if it came to a personal, face to face confrontation for me, how do I then separate my conviction from the act, especially if it's about me performing a marriage. That would be very difficult, and I'd really have to do some serious wrestling with that. I'd really have to do it.

Toni also stated that she separates the person from the behavior. Isaiah, however, was somewhat indifferent on this particular aspect of the debate. He said,

> That's one of those gray areas. I had a student once who, it seems that he was suggesting that he had homosexual tendencies, though that he did not act, enact upon it. I don't recall whether or not he said he had been involved in homosexual activity or not. But, at that point he was not active in that and it was a struggle for

> him. I think it's very difficult to understand, particularly because of the way society tends to treat people. And, you know, if someone came through the door – matter of fact, there have been people here in the community who have been involved with the gay and lesbian movement, who've come to talk with me about some issues, and we've been in dialog about, whatever, those things. And I didn't tell them they're going to hell or kick them out or anything like that. I don't know if that quite gets to your question, but, it kind of falls in a gray area to me if a person has homosexual tendencies, over against if they have homosexual activity. And, I hadn't thought much in terms of where that may fall.

In several conversations centered around the belief that homosexuality is a sin, participants mentioned the Bible as proof of this conclusion, and some cited the fact that same-sex relationships do not produce offspring as further proof that such relationships are not sanctioned by God. Along those lines, Nathan shared,

> [O]ne of the things that concerned me was, if homosexuality and lesbianism became too prevalent, where is our reproductive process, and what ultimately happens to us as a people? I'm concerned about that anyway, because, you know, you hear these folk talking about zero population control, and you know, white folk are telling us that – harping about, we've got to reduce the number of babies born. And so, families for us are having two point two babies – I don't know how you get two point two, but two point two, and the white folks are now having ten. Which means you're seeing, again, an increase in the white population, and a decrease in the African American population – to the point now that we are no longer even the largest minority in the country. The Hispanics have assumed that.

When I asked Toni about her personal feelings toward homosexuals, she stated,

> My personal feelings towards homosexuals. I, I don't, it's not like I dislike them – [I] love them with the love of God. I don't agree with their lifestyle. I don't, I don't, I don't agree with their lifestyle. I don't condone it, I don't believe in marriage, the same sex, 'cause it's just – just like I don't agree with fornication. It's not just, oh, cause you gay, you should – it ain't like that. It's wrong. And so, God never inten – that's not God's divine order for families. And so, I don't – but I'm not one, I'm not a homophobic or nothing. But I just don't agree with their lifestyle. Why? Because God commanded us to be fruitful and multiply. Now, two people of the same sex can have a feeling but <u>never</u> produce a baby, which is the fruit, the seed that is reproduced between a man and a woman in their coming together as one. Every seed reproduces it's own kind, and two people of the same sex will and can never come together and be joined as one in the sight of God and have His blessing – and most importantly plant a seed and reproduce.

Wil also voiced concerns about the inability of gay men and lesbian women to produce offspring within the context of a same-sex sexual union. He said,

> One thing I can say is that, it's just an unnatural act. Men – there is nothing natural about two men going to bed together. When you think about it, the natural act of relationships is being able to reproduce. Two men cannot reproduce. Two women cannot reproduce.

I asked Toni whether she ever referred to Bible verses during the times she has dealt with homosexuality, and she stated that she had. She then shared some of the verses she has referenced, and talked a bit about her interpretation of one of the verses.

> Of course, we all go to the text about Adam and Eve. And how the woman was taken out of the rib of the man. About that. Of course, everybody goes to Sodom and Gomorrah. I go to, about the angel, that the men wanted to come and have sex with the angels, and how – and what people started to realize, it just wasn't the city of Sodom, but it was the people in the city, okay, that were detestable to the city. And, it's the mentality of the people. And, so, I deal with the mental aspect of it. The mental and the emotional sides of it, because, if you are surrounded by your environment, you're either not gonna be like your environment, or you're gone be like your environment (Laughter). So, whatever environment you introduce yourself to, that's what you're gonna become. And so, we are people that, we become what we're around. Even if – and we're an inquisitive people. And so, in that teaching when I talk about Sodom and Gomorrah, I don't believe everybody in the city wanted to be that way. I don't. Some people were forced to be that way because, it's like, they were wanting to force the angels to have sex with them. And so I believe that some people were forced to do it. And I believe some people didn't want to do it, but because they were around it, they participated in it . . . It's another, I can't remember what version that it's in, I can't remember what text it's in either, but, I don't know if it's NIV or Amplified Version where it says, you know, a man shouldn't lie with another man and a woman should not lie with another woman. So I use those scriptures.

At the very end of his interview, Isaiah made a statement that, I believe, summed up his and some of his co-participant's views on the sinfulness of homosexuality. He asked, "Do I think homosexuals are going to hell? I don't know. I don't think they're going at any faster rate than heterosexuals."

Much of the literature on homosexuality and the black church suggests that church leaders place homosexuality in a different category from other's behaviors considered to be sinful. According to Anderson (1998), the black church promotes homophobia. Lowe (1998) also argues that homosexuals are singled out as "worse than others" within the black church. According to Douglas (1999), if this is the case, it may be due, in part, to black people's desire to claim their privileged status as heterosexuals, which is often the only privilege that African Americans can claim. In addition, the idea of homosexuals being singled out as "worse than others" relates directly to the theoretical basis for this study. Subcultural identity theory argues that groups, such as churches or other religious groups, sometimes use "negative reference groups" that they view as "others" or as their enemies, as a means of defining who they are (or perhaps more importantly, who they are not), and as a way of garnering support for themselves, their ideals, and their financial endeavors (Smith, 1998; Wellman, 1999).

Theorists explain that the challenge for religious groups is to "mobilize" movements, resources, and membership. In order to do that, some church leaders rely on an "us-them" mentality to motivate individuals to "support their side." Some argue that the reason evangelicalism has continued to flourish in America is because of its strong opposition to the secular world. The drive to remain separate from "the world" is one of the chief motivators of church attendance and other religious activities. Thus, according to this theory, the ability to identify groups of "others" is a vital part of a church's survival (Smith, 1998).

According to Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock (1996), another important aspect of this process of "othering" that occurs within subcultural identity theory is the oppressive

identity work that takes place. Oppressive identity work deals with how dominant groups force subcultural identities onto groups that are different from them in some significant or fundamental way. The underlying assumption is that the group defined as "other" is somehow inferior to the dominant group. Though the idea that homosexuals are inferior to heterosexuals was not stated by the interviewees in this study, it was implied. Discussions regarding the inability to produce offspring, as well as the overall categorization as homosexuality as a sin, suggest that participants may view gay men and lesbian women as fundamentally inferior. Wellman (1999) argues that subcultural identity theory offers a cogent explanation for why, in his opinion, many religious groups use homosexuals as their primary "outgroup."

This was certainly not the viewpoint expressed by the participants of this study – at least not directly. James admitted that he has seen gay men and lesbian women treated negatively within the black church. He even said that he believes that most people carry their negative views on homosexuality to an extreme. But for the most part, there were no real admissions that would suggest that subcultural identity theory applies to the black church. Of course, it would perhaps be naïve to expect an oppressor to admit that he or she oppresses.

There was a near consensus among the participants that homosexuality is a sin. Each person who stated he or she believed homosexuality is a sin cited the Bible as his or her proof. Nathan said that he has referred to Romans and the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as evidence that homosexuality is a sin. Wil cited First Timothy and Romans. He also read these verses during our interview and shared with me a Bible commentary written about the Romans verse. Mitchell mentioned Leviticus, Romans,

Timothy, and the Sodom and Gomorrah story, while Toni stated she has referred to the stories of Adam and Eve and Sodom and Gomorrah as well as the verse that states that men should not lie with men as they would lie with a woman and vice versa (Leviticus 18:22). The only three passages that were cited in the literature review of this study, but not mentioned by any of the participants, were those found in Deuteronomy 23, Judges 19, and First Corinthians 6. The Deuteronomy passage lists those who are unwelcome in the congregation of God, including "sodomites." The Judges passage is the story of the rape of a concubine by a group of men who originally sought to "know" her male companion. The First Corinthians verse lists the people who will not be permitted to enter heaven, including "effeminate," and "abusers of themselves with mankind."

The exact interpretation of biblical verses that seemingly refer to homosexuality remains debatable. According to Douglas (1999), the Bible is not always clear when addressing the topic of homosexuality. She believes that many of the passages typically referred to on the topic have been twisted and taken out of context.

Though everyone seems to want to use the Bible as proof that homosexuality is, or is not a sin, few people have any real understanding of what exactly the Bible is saying on this subject. Though most of the participants of this study did refer to the Bible at one point or another during our conversation on homosexuality, none of them took the time to explain the context or cultural relevance of the scriptures they discussed. For example, the assertion that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexual activity is naïve in that it does not take into consideration that God had decided to destroy the cities before the "attempted rape" occurred, and that there were other sinful practices within the city about which God was not pleased. In addition, this

particular story deals with rape, not consensual sex (Gomes, 1996; McIntyre, 1997). Also, other reasons for the destruction of these cities are listed elsewhere in the Bible. Ezekiel states that the people of the city were arrogant, greedy, and neglected to look after the poor, all of which is considered detestable to God (Jones, 1994). Still, this verse is referred to more often than any other verse both in this study and in literature on the topic.

The stories of the creation of man and woman are also referred to in discussions on homosexuality and the Bible. Toni was the only participant who stated that she has talked about these verses when addressing homosexuality. There are two accounts provided in the Bible, one in Genesis 1:26-28, and another in Genesis 2:7-24. The stories emphasize the importance of producing offspring and the significance of woman having been created to be with man, and vice versa. These verses have traditionally been interpreted to represent God's ideal for human sexual relationships. Gomes (1996), however, argues that these verses do not present heterosexuality as superior to homosexuality, in part because they do not mention homosexuality at all. He states that these accounts were never meant to be all-inclusive, and that to conclude so places too great a burden on the text. Schmidt (1996) disagrees, stating that these passages present heterosexual marriage as the norm. He states that any type of relationship other than one within a heterosexual, monogamous marriage, falls short of the ideal presented in these passages. Taylor (1995) agrees, stating that God created man and woman to compliment each other emotionally and physically.

Other Old Testament passages, such as the one in Leviticus, and New Testament passages, such as those in Romans and First Timothy, also require a more thoughtful look

at the meanings intended by the original writers. The two Leviticus verses can be quite difficult to comprehend, particularly the first one. Leviticus 18:22 deals with the laws of conduct concerning sexual relationships. These were laws created specifically for a group of people (the Israelites), during a specific time (as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land). These commandments were very strict, and dealt with issues such as incest, sex during menstruation, adultery, and a man "lying with" another man as if he were a woman.

Gomes (1996) explains that context is an important consideration when dealing with this Leviticus verse. He believes that these laws were temporary, and therefore do not apply to modern-day Christians. He goes on to say that the specific behaviors outlined in this verse were condemned because they "defy purity," and because they "weaken the cultural identification" of the children of Israel, not because they are intrinsically wrong. Ethnic purity was extremely important to God concerning the Israelites. This is why a death sentence was appropriate punishment for those who violated these laws. In an unrelated portion of the passage, such behaviors as inbreeding cattle and making clothes from two types of material were mentioned. Gomes questions why many Christians can easily ignore these commands, while holding to the commands concerning homosexuality just a few verses away.

Davies & Rentzel (1993) offer a different view of this verse. They assert that there are three types of laws presented in the Old Testament: civil laws, ceremonial laws, and moral laws. They state that civil laws deal with issues such as testifying in court or borrowing something from a neighbor. They place behaviors such as eating unclean food under the category of ceremonial laws. Civil and ceremonial laws, in their estimation,

applied only to the Israelites. However, they consider behaviors such as adultery and same-sex sex to belong under moral laws, making them relevant within today's culture.

The two New Testament passages referred to by the participants of this study are Romans 1:18-32 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11. In the Romans passage Paul talked about the consequences of willfully denying and disobeying God. He stated that God eventually allowed people, who continued to deny Him over and over again, to do whatever they wanted, even though it did not please Him. The result was that they began to do "shameful things," including men and women rejecting the opposite sex and burning in lust for members of their own gender. Gomes (1996) and Nelson (1998) argue that this verse is not really dealing with homosexuality. They believe that the true problem with the people described in these verses was that they refused to honor God. They claim that the passage is addressing the "fallen nature of humankind," not homosexual relationships. Gomes also argues that the problem here with same-sex sexual relationships was that they were taking place among people who were heterosexual in nature, thus causing them to go against their own nature as sexual beings.

First Timothy 1:9-11 deals with those for whom the law was created. Within these verses Paul lists several examples of the types of people for whom the law was created. Among those listed were what he called "people who defile themselves with mankind," or sodomites. Gomes (1996) notes that Paul does not use the word sodomite to represent homosexuals, but instead uses it to refer to male prostitutes. And McIntyre (1997) states that this verse applies to everyone, because the law was created for everyone, not merely those who do the things listed.

Stone (1997) argues that when the Bible appears to condemn homosexuality, that it is not addressing homosexual relationships, as we know them today, but is addressing prostitution and sex between men and young boys. In other words, the concept of monogamous, committed, loving relationships between consenting adults of the same sex did not exist within the cultures described in the Bible. Taylor (1995), however, argues that verses such as Leviticus 20:13 deal with sex between two men, not a man and a boy. He says that use of the verb *lie* implies consent, not force. In addition, both persons were punished in this verse, which also implies consent.

To defer to the Bible as proof that homosexuality is a sin is a common response. Often times even those who describe themselves as non-religious refer to the Bible for such proof. In fact, everyone seems to have an opinion on this topic (Gomes, 1996). Many, however, do not appear to take into account that some people believe that the Biblical verses used to condemn homosexuality have been misinterpreted and taken out of context. They also, for the most part, ignore that the Bible was once used to justify slavery and other forms of oppression (Douglas, 1999). And as Gomes (1996) notes, the Bible has very little to say about homosexuality, which he believes disqualifies it from being used to prove that homosexuality is wrong.

The danger in using a few biblical verses to prove one's beliefs regarding homosexuality is that it opens the door for what is commonly referred to as "proof-texting." That is, picking and choosing certain verses of scripture that support your point of view while ignoring those that appear to contradict it. Sanders reports that she has found that many liberal scholars negate most biblical texts related to this issue on the grounds that there are cultural and contextual limitations, and that conservative scholars

often ignore the cultural and contextual issues and neglect to consider the difference between what God required of Christians during biblical times and what He requires of them today (Sanders, 1998; Taylor, 1995).

The adage to "hate the sin but love the sinner" also came up in the interviews. Hating the sin while loving the sinner is especially problematic when it comes to gay men and lesbian women. What this requires is that one hate a very significant part of what makes an individual who he or she is, while simultaneously loving that individual for who he or she is. Is this possible? Not according to Anderson (1998). His belief is that it is a contradictory request that cannot be accomplished.

Some members of the African American community contend that homosexuality is a hazard to the black family, placing the future of the race in jeopardy because such unions do not produce offspring (Douglas, 1999). Several of the participants of this study mentioned the significance of procreative power, and suggested that because same-sex sex does not produce offspring, that this serves as further proof that homosexuality is wrong. They cited the Bible as proof that God's intention is that sexual unions produce children. The emphasis these participants placed of the ability to bear children is similar to that which exists in West African societies. Mbiti (1969) shares that in many West African cultures, marriages are not fully recognized until the couple's first child is born. And women who are unable to bare children experience "irreparable humiliation." Though this study's participants did not take the issue to this extreme, their concerns regarding procreation are noteworthy.

"To Judge or Not to Judge." One of the interesting connections that some of the participants appeared to make was to equate having negative feelings toward

homosexuals with being judgmental toward them. Participants who talked about this concept were very clear about their desire to remain nonjudgmental. James spoke, in detail, about his desire to be a person who refrains from judging others. He stated,

> Scripture is very clear about judging anybody. So I try not to, you know – we are human. I try not to – I see people who are alcoholics, I say, well, you never know. I know many people who are alcoholics. I know ministers who stay drunk. They're drunk in the pulpit. And it's for a reason. Sometimes it's personal circumstances, and sometimes the church drove them to drink . . . But, I think God is more forgiving than we are, you know. And, I'm not gonna condemn somebody because they have either chosen, or whatever, however it came about, that they're living this life. 'Cause I know some people who are alcoholics. I know some ministers who are alcoholics and crack addicts, and I'm not gonna judge them. You know, I can't judge. 'Cause I don't know the person's circumstance. I don't know enough about that person, why they're moved in that direction.

He went on to say,

> I say if a person is trying to do the right thing, trying to treat people right, you know, trying to be a loving, caring, sensitive person, what more can I ask for? What they do behind their closed doors is not my issue. You know, it really isn't, as long as they're not doing anything destructive, that's between them and the Lord.

He then shared a story about a member of his church.

> I had a member of my church who was a drug addict. And, happened to be a deacon. But he went in for treatment himself – a twelve-step thing, and I went to see him. And he said he had been struggling with it. He came back and, you know, had gotten off course. I came back to the deacons, and they said, well, he either should be kicked off the deacon board or he should stand up and confess before the church. I said, okay. We can do this. I said, but, if he confesses, then we all need to confess. I said I'll tell you what, we'll have confession service. He'll confess, and you'll confess. I said there are two or three of ya'll who've been married once or twice. You want to confess that? I said we'll start it at the door and go to the pulpit. And we'll have everybody – and they said, okay, well, let's - (Laughter). I said, why is he confessing? He didn't do anything to us. Whatever he did, he did it to himself, and he already said he was wrong. And he's already been forgiven. So why am I gonna make him stand?

James shared another story that reflected the progress he has made in becoming a less judgmental person. He said,

> I remember a woman came in the church one time when I was in Brooklyn, and most people came and asked for money. And she walked in, somebody brought her in there ten minutes 'til eleven, and I had to be in the pulpit at eleven o'clock. It was an officer, and I said why couldn't they deal with it? So I'm sitting there waiting to go in. I had already made a judgment. I was going to say, how much do you want? I was gonna give her to one of the deacons, they had this fund, they'd give you ten or twenty dollars. She said, I didn't come here to ask for anything. She said, I don't need anything. She said, I need help. Blew my mind. She was a drug addict and an alcoholic who had lost her children. They had taken her children from her. And she wanted them back. And she wanted treatment. So she could be delivered. Blew my mind. But I made a judgment. From that point on it taught me something about myself. Every time somebody walked through the door, I asked them what is it that you want? I try not to make a judgment. Because she just totally blew my mind. She said I want to be free from the drugs and the alcohol. She started crying, and said, they took my children. I'll never forget – I can see her face now. This was at least twenty years ago. So, try not to be judgmental. Try to free yourself from being – because when you're judging, somebody's judging you. The same way you are. They've already made, in their mind they're saying you're this, and they don't know you. And so I try to take each person as they come.

Nathan also expressed strong feeling about his desire to not judge others. He asked,

> Who am I to start judging you? I might not like the fruit that your tree is bearing, but at least you're tree is bearing some kind of fruit. And, I have to be very careful because, there's so much shortcoming in me, there's so much, you know.

Referring to God's grace and forgiveness, he said,

> [H]e is not just the God of a second chance, He's the God of a third and a forth and a fifth and – and, if God can forgive and keep loving, then who am I to pass judgment and lock you in?

Nathan recalled a situation that reminds him of the effect that judging others can have on a minister's ability to objectively serve within his or her community. He stated,

> But, again, you come to understand that people's sexual preference is their choice. Now, Biblically, I still believe that God made woman for man, okay. And, I have not been confronted with, and I pray hard that I will not be confronted with the

> question of having to marry two people of like sex. One is, state law does not permit it, thank you Lord for the law. And, so, I can always fall back on that. But, I just pray that I, you know – I never shall forget that there was a man in this city at this white church who used to hang around up at the courthouse all the time. And he would just marry couples that would come to him. You know, they'd go get their license. So he married them right there. Well, he had this problem, and that is, that he would not marry integrated couples. He would not have married an African American or European no matter which one – he'd send them to one of us. He wouldn't even recommend that they go to another white minister; he'd send them to one of us in the African American community. And so, I had some real problems with him and I went up to the courthouse one day and told him I had the problem with him. And, so I guess the concern that I'm really wrestling with here – that just as I had problems with him on that issue, what would I do when two females or two males come to me and say – we want to be lifelong partners. I don't know that I could apply my liberalism when I consider the sanctity of the Holy Writ. And, when this church – and, in the fact that this church has not taken a position. I think if this church were ever called upon to take a position on marriage of the same sex, then I would have to do some serious questioning of my own convictions, and that would determine whether or not I would remain pastor of the church. And again, I have no problem accepting or tolerating based on person. It has to do with a doctrinal conviction, based on Scripture.

Mitchell looked at this issue from a slightly different point of view. When I asked him why he thought many within the black church community choose not to address issues related to homosexuality, he said,

> I think as black people we are scared to address anybody really, because of our own history of being judged, because of our color. Because we were thought to be less than a human or less than people. So, when they see us doing that, again, we come back to what happened in that Bible Study setting – the term bigotry was used, oppression was used, shutting people out. So, I think people don't, we don't want to be identified as doing that. That we don't become free from oppression to become oppressors ourselves. So we're scared to, kind of, touch on that issue.

Though only a few of the participants of this study took up the issue of judging others, and how the Bible's cautions against it, I felt that it was worthy of a brief discussion. Nathan and James spoke at length about their desire to remain nonjudgmental toward gay men and lesbian women. Their reasoning was that because they themselves

are imperfect, they have no right to judge the worth of another person. Judging people, in their estimation, is the responsibility of God, not men and women. The problem, however, lies in that they did make judgmental statements regarding gay men and lesbian women throughout their interviews. The idea that gay men and lesbian women are not appropriate role models, for example, is a judgmental statement they both made.

This idea of judgmentalism as it relates to members of the gay community was not addressed in the literature that I reviewed. I have, however, heard comments from gay men and lesbian women that Christians are perceived as being very judgmental.

Theme 3: Treatment of Gay Men and Lesbian Women within the Black Church Community

For the most part, the participants of this study expressed a desire to treat homosexual persons with dignity and respect. During the course of the interviews, they discussed how they believe homosexuals are treated currently within the church, and also talked about how they believe gay and lesbian individuals should be treated within the church.

The Treatment of Gay Men and Lesbian Women Within the Black Church Community theme has two sub-themes: How Homosexuals are Treated Within the Church and How Homosexuals Should Be Treated Within the Church. The How Homosexuals are Treated Within the Church sub-theme addresses how participants reported seeing gay men and lesbians treated within the black church community in the past and presently. The How Homosexuals Should Be Treated Within the Church sub-theme looks at how participants believe homosexuals should be treated, ideally, and what steps need to take place to facilitate such treatment.

How homosexuals are treated within the church. During the interviews, I asked participants how they have seen gay men and lesbian women treated within the black church. They responded by sharing how they have seen other leaders treat homosexuals, as well as how they themselves have treated them.

In describing the role of the church within the black community, James portrayed an institution of great strength and compassion. Regarding the black church, he said,

> [I] think the church has always been a place of hope. It's been that Bethesda, in the Bible Bethesda means house of mercy. It's always been a place where the sick can come, people who are wounded, people who have been hurt. Especially in the black community. We've had to fight racism and bigotry and segregation and – it's been the one place where black people can come and be somebody, and be accepted. And I don't think that people should ever be put down – for being in church. They should be uplifted. They should be welcomed.

He continued by pointing out the need for the church to be flexible, and the reason why, in his opinion, the black church hasn't exhibited this flexibility. He explained,

> The one institution that should be more flexible than anything is the church. Because we're calling it an organism – the church is a living organism, which means it's malleable. It can take several shapes and forms. With each generation it makes changes. The message stays the same, but how we deliver it, how we package it, how we make it sound can change. It can be – God's love is God's love regardless of how you say it . . . My brother once told me, he said that if we're going to reach this generation, and he told me this before he died, he said the African American church is going to have to make a radical change. And we're not willing to change. We're enmeshed in our traditions.

James also shared his thoughts about the Bible's treatment of homosexuality, and the difference between the way that, in his view, God treats the topic, and the way that the black church addresses it. He revealed,

> [B]ut then my other issue is that the Bible says that God so loved the world He gave His only Son, and that Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world. See Jesus, now Jesus never talked about homosexuality. He talked about adultery and marriage. He said some men are, you know, born eunuchs, some become

> eunuchs, and some, you know, whatever. But He never dealt with that. Now the apostle Paul did. Apostle Paul had a lot of hang-ups though. He had hang-ups with women, he had a thing with slavery, marriage, you know, all that stuff. He just had a lot of issues. Not that he wasn't a great man – one of God's great servants, but he had a lot of issues. So he came out – and the Old Testament comes out very strong. And then the Apostle Paul talked about it. But our condemnation of it, you know, we go so far. I think we push it too far . . . I think we push the whole thing of homosexuality. I think our condemnation is more than God would condemn it.

James shared over and over again his desire to make all people feel that they are welcome in his church. In the above quote, he appears to suggest that homosexuality may not have been an important topic to Jesus, as the Bible does not record Him ever discussing it. He also discussed the Bible's admonition that Christians zealously pursue all persons, regardless of their background or proclivities. He shared,

> [I] don't think you should exclude people because you disagree with them on their lifestyle. 'Cause I know a lot of people who live all kind of ways and we don't exclude them. Do a whole lot of things. And we just don't say anything about it, but, you know, but we know, but we don't say anything . . . But we don't try to reach out to that community. We have become so exclusive, so elitist, and we were told to go into all – Jesus said go into all the world. He didn't tell us to be selective. He said go into all the world, in fact, He – that illustration in Luke fourteen he told them to go to the highways, byways and the hedges – He said I want you to go deep in, I want you go into the red light districts, I mean, I want you to go deep in, like, you know, an undercover cop. They go deep in, He says I want you to go as far in – go all the way in there. And compel them and invite them to my banquet. Invite them into my kingdom. And He didn't tell us who would be, He said the poor, the lame, the blind, He said I want you to bring them all. Just tell them to come. Tell them, it's all ready – for them. And I can't tell the Lord who He's gonna bring in and who He's not. Anybody who comes through the doors, God must have wanted them to come in, or else they wouldn't have been there. That's what I say. It may be a little different from what anybody else might feel, but that's the way I feel about it. I think my theology is evolving. I hope it is.

As we discussed his notion about how gay men and lesbian women should be treated within the black church, James talked about his objectives. He stated,

> [I]t's not my intention to assign people to hell, or to badger them and make them feel bad when they leave church on Sunday . . . It's for me to love and to accept and forgive and support, encourage. That's what I see as my role as a person, not just as a pastor, but as a person. Somebody may just need your help. Whether they're a homosexual or not has nothing to do with it. They're people . . . Yes, you give them the issues, but you also give them some resolution. There has to be some resolution to this. There has to be some – how do I get out of this mess?

He went on to say,

> [I]'m not gonna preach a sermon that's gonna condemn them. I may preach a sermon with the healing and deliverance, 'cause that's what it is. Then when I went to seminary they said that was wrong, because they said why would someone be delivered from what they are. And I don't want to sound homophobic either. I'm not afraid of homosexuals, but, you know, I'm probably more afraid of heterosexuals than homosexuals. I don't know. But you see the growing rate of AIDS, you know, the article I was telling you about on teenage gays. So you see them practicing and then – somebody said, well, gays, saying the disease was a judgment on the homosexual. They thought it was only among the homosexual community. But I haven't heard anybody saying anything, because I'm sure that some of their friends have had it. And I don't think it's a judgment of God. It's our lack of being reasonable, thinking about the consequences of our actions. Just like any other disease.

When I asked James how he has seen homosexuals treated within the black church community, he responded without hesitation. He replied,

> Negatively. Very negatively. Even though we know homosexuals, we have homosexuals in choirs, musicians, we still have a negative – at least preachers do. . . I'm not deceived. Not, at least - in certain roles they're fine – as long as they stay in that role of being the musician or this or that. But not in the full life of the church.

As Toni recalled how homosexuality was addressed in the church she attended as a child, she described some of what James referred to as negativity. When discussing what she was taught about homosexuals, she stated,

> Oh, you are an abomination. You gone go to hell. There's no hope for you. You are, uh, you're cursed. You liken unto the city of Sodom and Gomorrah. But some things, I think what they were saying are true, but it's just the way you say them. And it was just like, there's no hope for the homosexual. You know,

there's no – there's that one sin that can't be forgiven. So on that aspect, I think they were wrong in their teaching.

However, when asked how she believes gay men and lesbians are treated in the church today, her response was quite different. She explained,

> You know I really don't, I really don't see them being dogged per se, because we hide behind the mask of Christianity. But on the inside, when you get around other people – "did you see that come up in church today?" You know, so I think it's more of a behind closed doors thing than just out among the people in the congregation. So I don't think, I think it, in some churches, some ministries, it's beginning to be an open issue and, come on let's, you need help, let God do something in your life in that aspect. And then again, I think some people, again, it's all based on ignorance. And that's not a bad ignorance, it's just not no knowledge of it.

She went on to discuss the church's response to issues related to homosexuality in a way that suggests that, though there is not a real sense of acceptance, there is a certain degree of tolerance. She said, "[I] think we become so used to it now, 'til it's accepted – but it's not accepted. You understand what I'm saying – well I understand your lifestyle, as long as I didn't see you do it, it's okay." Similarly, Mitchell shared, "I don't really see them being ostracized or segregated in the church. Definitely not in the black church – not the ones that I have been to."

Isaiah's description of his own feelings regarding homosexuals and the way they should be treated appeared to be somewhat neutral. He said,

> So, I don't have strong feelings one way or the other. I don't want it to be on the front page of any newspaper that, you know, Christ Church is receptive of those who are gay – though we welcome all persons, and there have been persons who've joined here who may have had – nobody's come to me and confessed any – not here in this context, told me that they had homosexual tendencies, or were involved in homosexual activities. But, if a person comes, we don't push them away. We don't keep them from participating in activities, you know, if they are members . . . We want people to come. We know that nobody who comes here is going to be perfect, and everyone is going to have his or her own issues. Some people have issues with alcoholism, some with substance abuse – other substance

> abuse, some may have sexual issues. And, we still want them to come hear the Word of God, and pray that they'll be transformed from whatever it is that is not right and not complete in them.

When Isaiah talked about the way that he has individually dealt with homosexuality within his own congregation, he reinforced the idea that tolerance of others is important when dealing with groups who are different in one way or another. He shared,

> I think that those times that I've mentioned homosexuality and talked about it have been very rare and very few – in terms of specificity. However, in terms of a general understanding of acceptance, or a general understanding of how we relate to people, I've talked about that. I've talked about tolerance. But, never just coming out and, you know, being pro or anti.

In addition, when I asked him why he thought the black church wasn't addressing this issue with tolerance, he said, "Tolerance is a strange word. They are tolerant as long as it can get what it wants out of it. Out of people, regardless of sexual orientation or sexual activity."

Nathan's view of the church's treatment of homosexuals focused more on the changes he has observed over the years. He stated,

> And one of the things that people have said to me, and it's been an interesting thing that the people who said it to me are generally people who are over sixty or sixty-five, who said to me 'God does not like what they're doing, but he loves them.' And that the church must help to redeem individuals, and bring them to where they need to be. That said to me that if people are there now, over against when I was a boy, then the attitudes of people are changing tremendously. And the church is beginning to see itself ministering to [homosexuals].

He went on to say,

> I think in the African American church – the trend is changing and it is becoming acceptable. Well, it's at least being tolerated. I know some Methodist pastors, for instance – we had one Baptist pastor in the area who left the area and went to another state and was killed because of a relationship. And, the people at that church knew that the pastor was gay. You know, he was a good musician. He

> was an excellent preacher. He could sing. And so, the people were happy to have a good, caring, loving pastor. I don't know that there is the negative stigmatism and connotation that there was ten, fifteen years ago. I think people are becoming more tolerant in the church.

Like Isaiah (and perhaps Toni), Nathan also saw tolerance as an important ingredient in the church's plan for addressing homosexual issues. He stated on several occasions that he teaches tolerance of homosexuality within his church. From a personal standpoint he shared, "I don't like the act, but I can love the person who committed the act. And I can tolerate – I have no problem with seeing them as a person – beyond the shortcoming. Because all of us have shortcomings."

When discussing his thoughts about how the church treats homosexuals, Wil shared an example of the compassion he has seen the church extend to homosexuals. He recalled,

> Here, there was a guy that, I don't know, he said he never actually went through with the act, but he was dealing with those issues. But when he was dealing with those issues, we loved him. You know, we didn't ostracize him. We didn't cast him aside. Because first of all, you've got to realize that that's a soul. And, I'll tell you like I said, there's no big sin or little sin. Sin is just sin. What we have to do is restore our brothers and make sure that they are back functioning in their full capacity. And then we also have to look at Galatians six where it says consider yourself least ye also be overtaken in a fault. You could be tempted. I could fall. It might not be homosexuality, but I could fall in any kind of area. So, what I want is, the same grace that I give to you, I want you to be able to give it to me. Now, if I can't show any compassion on you, in essence I'm telling you don't show compassion on me. So, you know, I know in that instance we showed compassion. We loved him through. And we stood by him.

One thing Wil emphasized when discussing his vision for his church was the desire to create a family-like environment where everyone feels comfortable and accepted. When I asked him why he felt issues such as homosexuality are addressed more freely in his church than in others, he replied,

> One of the things that God has placed on me is to make everybody feel a part. Make everybody feel like this is a family atmosphere. I mean, not just – try to make it feel like that – that's how I feel. That I want everybody to feel like we're a family; that you can talk to me about anything. Because we have such an open atmosphere, we do discuss issues like that. Because it is prevalent in our society, and we should deal with it. I mean, we can't sweep stuff under the carpet because, they're dealing with it in the world, so we have to deal with it in the church. And if we can give people the scriptures and based on the knowledge that God has given us, you know, then I think we'll be able to deal with it even better now.

He went on to share what he feels members of the congregation are looking for when they come to church. He said,

> [W]hat people want to see, and what people need to see is – okay, show me how to get out of this situation. Show me how to - you know what I'm saying. And so, that's why I have to deal with these situations, because we have, when you have people – we come to church on Wednesdays, Sundays, whenever we do. And, you've got to realize that outside of that people have their own lives. And they do, in the course of their own lives - they do whatever they do. And so, I don't see them on a daily basis. The things that they go through, they have to be able to come here, whether good or bad, and be able to hear an answer. You know, but based through the Word. So, I mean, we would not do anybody justice if we didn't deal with the issues of the day – the issues, the reality of life. We wouldn't do people justice. [B]ut you know the majority of the congregation just wants to hear the Word. And hear how to better themselves. And I believe we do grave injustices when we <u>don't</u> deal with the issues of life. And even though they don't talk about it, in the back of their mind they want to know – how can I deal with it?

In several of the quotes presented under this theme, there was an underlying assumption that homosexuals should change their sexual orientation, especially if they wish to participate in the full life of the black church. Some of the participants came right out and said this, while others were subtler. For example, in reference to gay men and lesbian women, Toni said, "You need help, let God do something in your life." James said that he doesn't plan to preach sermons against homosexuality, but that he does feel it's important to present the issues, because people come to church wanting to know

"How do I get out of this mess?" Likewise, Wil said "What people need to see is – okay, show me how to get out of this situation." Isaiah shared that he welcomes all people to his church, and he and his congregation "pray they'll be transformed." And Nathan shared that the "Church must help to redeem individuals, and bring them to where they need to be." Each of these quotes, along with others throughout the interviews, suggest that the only acceptable option for gay men and lesbian women, in the eyes of the participants, is for such individuals to abandon the homosexual lifestyle altogether. In all fairness, I must note that Mitchell was the lone participant who did not suggest that homosexuals change their sexual orientation. He also did not suggest that they be fully accepted either.

The picture that the literature paints of black churches and how they treat gay men and lesbian women is not favorable. The media is full of examples of ministers (both black and white), who openly admit that they dislike homosexuals and who feel they have the authority to sentence them to eternity in hell (Boston, 1999). Most black churches are described as being callous toward, and unconcerned about, those who live a homosexual lifestyle. Some of the literature states that many churches are even abusive to homosexuals, verbally bashing them from the pulpit. Many preachers even make homosexual jokes from the pulpit. Some of the gay men and lesbian women interviewed by Lowe (1998) stated that in the black church when a preacher mentions words like "faggot" or "sissy," congregations routinely break out in laughter and hand clapping.

Though churches are supposed to preach the "good news" of forgiveness and reconciliation with God to everyone, homosexuals are often placed in a separate category. One man shared that he was even taught that homosexuals automatically go to hell when

they die. Such treatment has caused many individuals with same-sex attractions to stop attending churches (Lowe, 1998). This is not, however, the story as told by the participants of this study. Though a few of them admitted they have witnessed gay men and lesbian women being treated negatively within the context of the black church, overall, they did not portray the horrible images that I found in much of the literature. One such image stems from an incident that occurred at the funeral of a man who died from an AIDS related illness. During the funeral, the minister stated that this man was on his way to hell because of his homosexual lifestyle, and that other gay men who were attending the funeral would be on their way there as well if they did not "change their ways" (Boykin, 1999).

The reports given by this study's participants are more like those reported by Cheryl Sanders. Sanders (1998) sees most black churches accepting homosexuals, as evidenced by their participation in numerous roles within the church, particularly within music departments. Boykin (1999), however, asserts that one should not confuse the presence of homosexuals in black church music departments with acceptance of those persons as homosexuals. Isaiah also discussed the "mixed messages" he believes many gay and lesbian persons receive in the black church, in that they are allowed to exist in certain roles, though they still experience condemnation. Boykin reasons that congregations participate in "an elaborate conspiracy of silence and denial" (p. 127). This conspiracy, I believe, produces an illusion of acceptance that is overshadowed by a cloud of homophobia. This is perhaps why the personal reports given by the participants of this study are vastly different from the experiences reported in the literature.

How homosexuals should be treated within the black church. Each of this study's participants agreed that the way that homosexuals are treated within the black church can be improved upon. Isaiah stated that he believes that any attempt to deal with homosexuality within the black church must begin with providing some clarity to many of the confusing issues surrounding homosexuality. When asked what he felt should be done to improve the way homosexuality is addressed within the black church, he said,

> Part of it comes with clarification. Two things – one is, how does ones become homosexual? Again, if it's a life choice, if it's biological. 'Cause if it's something that is given to them by God, then they have to wrestle with, therefore being discriminated because of it. And, that is a question that may be more philosophical, than something that can actually be concretely responded to. The other thing, I think, would be – well, maybe three things – one is the stigma, that is, that society will not stigmatize people based on their association or their affiliation. There are things that – just because there are gay men are women in a congregation doesn't mean that they're going to be looking out to see if they can, perhaps, catch someone, convert them, as they would say, or, you know, make them what they are. Now, you know, my understanding, again, is that gay men and women basically look for other gay men and women. Whether or not they look for straight people and hope that they – now, there are those who have perverted sexual tendencies and look for those who are not, who may not be, and seek to do – but that's whether it's homosexual or heterosexual, in regards to that. But, I think those three areas, specifically.

I asked James what he thought should be done to improve the way that gay men and lesbian women are treated within the black church. Each of his answers centered on creating dialog and discussions with members of the gay and lesbian community. He shared,

> I think there should be some more open discussions . . . Somebody has to be willing to open the discussion and say okay, you have homosexuals in here, how do we minister to people that we're afraid of . . . I think we should, just like Falwell did, when he had the homosexual ministers come down and he talked to them, because he had this strong stance against them. At least he talked. The Metropolitan Churches, they had a group of them that came and talked to him. And that's what we should do . . . Dialog – if homosexuals are willing to dialog and be open and honest about it we should hear them and we should express our

> concerns and our fears and whatever else, and talk. Just like we would with drug addicts, drug pushers, and prostitutes, and anybody else we're trying to reach. We're trying to reach everybody. We're not trying – God so loved the world – He didn't say loved the straight world or the gay world or the white world or the black world – He loved the world. He loved people. And that's what we're supposed to be – demonstrating the love of God with people.

James also talked about the need for people to confront their fear of homosexuals. He said,

> So, basically, you try not to be afraid, greet people as they are. If they haven't done anything to you, then, you know, I don't think there's any more crime or anything in the gay community than there is anywhere else. I mean, you know, gay people are not the ones out there raping women, as far as I know. So, it's a societal thing, and I think we just have to get over our conditioning. We have to get over it.

Nathan's response to the question of what can be done to improve the way that gay men and lesbian women are treated within the black church emphasized the need for education and acceptance. He stated,

> [Address homosexuality] like you address any other social ill. Begin to deal with it, to educate people. You don't have to acquiesce to it. I think there ought to be a constant teaching program so that next generations don't necessarily fall into the same scenario. But you don't ostracize people – you don't put them out. It's almost like, in the schools, you suspend children who are troublemakers. Aren't you really encouraging others to become trouble makers – so they can get put out? And, what do they do once you put them out? There's always somebody standing outside the door, waiting on them to come out, to show them a different alternative. So, to merely ostracize and put folks out of the church because their lifestyle has been different – I mean, you know, a lot of folks are sitting up in church talking about don't drink, course they don't want the garbage man to ever talk about what's in their garbage can.

Like Nathan, Toni believes that education is an important ingredient to any solution regarding the treatment of homosexuals within the black church. She said,

> Education. And the pastor or the leader having an openness and being free enough in their own self – 'cause leaders have issues – being free and healed in their own self, to say, this is what we need. And then they need to tell their

> congregation – these are the issues that we are dealing with. And these are the issues that need to be addressed, and I want you to come on and hear this person. Even if there's nobody in your family life, that you've never been exposed to it personally, it's knowledge, and it will teach you how to better understand and better communicate with people who are in a homosexual lifestyle.

She also expanded her suggestion by including more specific instructions on how churches should go about educating themselves. She shared,

> I think there should be workshops on it. I think there should be people who are, that used to be in that lifestyle, that can effectively teach somebody how you get in it, where does it come from, where the seed was planted, how it affects your life – all those issues need to be addressed . . . I think another thing that needs to be addressed in dealing [with] homosexual men – you know, deal with men who are married, that are bisexual. And, the effects – what the homosexuality – okay, we talk, in the black church, we're on this big family kick. Build a family. Husbands, marry the wife, keep you're family together. Okay, well, what about people start harping on divorce? What about when my dad or my mom is gay, and that's affecting me? Because I was the result of one of those kids. So that devastates you. A secret is a secret. Hell in the house is hell in the house. Confusion in the house is confusion in the house. And so, we're so, in the church we're so harped on – we harp so on traditional issues. Well, let's talk about real issues. What happens when my father has tendencies for another man or I come in the house and see my dad with my mom's clothes on. It happens, and the church is not addressing it. It happens every day. It happens.

Mitchell emphasized what he saw as the importance of separating the individual from the act when dealing with gay men and lesbian women. He stated,

> We have to – we should address it in dealing with the sin of the act of homosexuality and not so much the homosexual. Because I think when you separate the two, then it's easier to deal with. I look at it differently. Again, you know, homosexuals always like to tie their movement in with the Civil Rights Movement, but I can't separate my skin from who I am. You know, when I came out, when my mother had me, it was no discussion of what I was. You know, you don't know a homosexual is a homosexual – although some people say they can see that – you don't know until they let you know, or they tell you, you know, that they're a homosexual. And, they can stop the act of homosexuality. They don't have to sleep with a man if they are homosexual. They can go ten, fifteen, twenty years. But I can never, you know, peel my skin off and be something different. I'm always gone be the same thing. So, I think when we separate it, we deal with the act, and not so much the individual, I think it would be easier to deal with. But, in a lot of instances, we don't. We like to deal with the person, and then it

> seems like you're beating up on the person. 'Cause even the scripture talks about the act, not so much the person. When God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, it was for the acts that they were committing, not just because of the people. The people were wicked, but they were committing wicked acts. So, and that's the reason why He destroyed them. That's the reason why we are judged as sinful people.

Mitchell's comparison of the way he treats people of differing political opinions to the way he treats homosexuals is somewhat of an example of what he appears to mean by "separating the person from the act." He explained,

> I don't have any personal feelings towards them. There are homosexuals in my family – not in my immediate family, my extended family. I know some people that are homosexuals. I treat them like I would treat anybody else, you know. They ask me my opinion, and I'll have to let them know, you know. I look at it no more differently than when I'm at work and I see somebody with a George Bush mug on their table. I don't treat them any differently, but then when they ask my opinion about George Bush I let them know. You know. No I don't, I'm not one of these people that will be outside their house with a mask on, burning crosses and all that kind of stuff in their yard. Treat them like people – that's what they are.

Many of the participants talked about fear, and how they feel individuals within the black church, and the black church as an institution, are afraid to confront issues of sexuality, particularly homosexuality. When I asked how he thinks homosexuality should be addressed, Isaiah answered,

> Toleration and understanding. Even, and not make assumptions as to what it is. Really, and even though they quote Biblical passages to support their claim, more of it is not really as much Biblical as it is social fears. And, the categorization, for instance – if your congregation has an unusually large number of gay men, then they may refer to you as being a gay church. Or, even if you decide to have an AIDS ministry, then they'll say, uh huh, you see, that means he's got to address the needs and issues of – so, you know, many times we may choose to shy away from those areas of acceptance, in light of what we may be categorizing – doesn't have much to do with Biblical – though we'll pull a little passage here or a little something there, but the reality of it is, it's because of our social fears . . . I think it's the stigma. I think that's the main thing. I don't think it is as much, concern as to what God is saying about this – when God may not even be concerned about this issue, as much as we are concerned about it. But, I think it has more to do

with the social stigma and categorization, that may cause people to shy away from openly addressing various kinds of issues.

James' prescription for dealing with that fear is simple and straightforward.

> The only way you can deal with it is confront it. Face it! Face the reality, face the fear, face the issue, face the challenge, and that's how you move beyond it. If you deny it you'll never deal with it. It's like dealing with things in yourself. If you never admit that you're an alcoholic you'll never – you know, if you never say I'm a drug addict, if you never say I'm this, you'll never deal with it. When you say I am afraid of homosexuals, say that, and then you'll begin to do something about it. Go talk to someone who you know might be gay. Somebody who's said I'm gay. And talk to them. Say, you know, I have an issue with you, and I need to talk to you about it. Dialog. You're not approaching them, you're just saying, look, I just want to talk to you about this issue because, you know, I have an issue with gay people, and I'm trying to understand, why you're gay. Did you choose this way? Were you born this way? I'm just, I'm trying to be more understanding. And that's how people approach it, form dialog groups, and then go in, go visit the Metropolitan Community Church here in Knoxville town. They've got a strong church here.

Likewise, Wil expressed that a direct approach needs to be taken in dealing with this issue. When asked how he thinks churches should address homosexuality, he said,

> Up front and honest. . . I think – and that's not just, there again, those dealing with homosexuality – with everything. You have to be honest in regards to those issues, life issues. I believe, one of the things that I maintain is that whatever is going on, I try not to let stuff linger. If there's an issue that comes up, I can't keep letting it ride out and ride out. Because it will set up in the church. I have to deal with it, nip it in the bud, and then we can move forward. In regards to homosexuality, it needs to be dealt with up front. You need to be able to be honest with the people. Let them know how you feel, where you're coming from, and, like me, I'm not taking no mess. And so, if you let people know where you are, they don't have to guess. And so, they don't try to, you know, okay, so maybe I've got a little room to play because – no, if you let them know where you are and where you stand, then that would just stop everything.

One interesting point that Nathan made relates to his perception of how individuals (including homosexuals) respond when they are openly confronted, and how Jesus dealt with people in a much more compassionate manner. After sharing that he

knows people who have, after years of living a gay lifestyle, adopted a heterosexual lifestyle, he asked,

> Now, what would have happened had you had a direct confrontation with them? You might not have ever gotten them to come around. And so, I just think that confrontation – you know Jesus is brought a woman who supposedly is caught in the act of adultery, didn't bring the man, but they brought the woman. I really wish I knew, cause I could really use it, what Jesus wrote in the sand. But I do know He said ye who are without sin, cast the first stone. And the Scripture says that from the oldest to the youngest, they walked away. You don't win folk by openly confronting them.

He went on to say,

> I believe that people change because they learn better and consequently, without even wanting to or thinking about it, they have to do better. Yeah, but you aren't going to change me just standing up in my face (gesture of finger pointing). You know, you can call me all kind of low down dogs – you keep telling me that, and I might start trying to figure out how I'm supposed to act like a dog. But you start telling me that I have some worth and some dignity, that I am somebody, and I start thinking, you know maybe, maybe I am somebody. Maybe this will open another door. Of course I'm always amazed at what you find in high places. I'm always amazed. You walk into corporate offices – you know, the leader of the corporation might be gay or might be on drugs, might be – you don't put him out. You don't fire him from being the head of the corporation if he's making money. You try to bring him around to where he needs to be.

Toni's description of one of the classroom lessons she uses when addressing homosexuality illustrates the compassion and understanding that Nathan believes are necessary in order to create an environment where people are free to change, or not change, in their own time, at their own pace. She shared,

> [W]hen I go to that text in this teaching about this, I talk about when God, when Jesus met the woman at the well. He built relationship with her first. Because they weren't supposed to be communicating. How can a young Samaritan woman have communication with a Jew? And that's where we are. How am I straight and you gay – I ain't suppose to be having no communication with you. But what He did was got her in first. And then He dealt with her relationship issues. But He drew her in first, 'cause he open armed her and said – you know what, if you really knew who I was, you would be asking me for a cup of water. And that's what we need to do to them. I'm not coming to kill you or destroy you, but if you

> really knew what I have to offer you, you would be coming to me for a cup of water. You know, and so, all I'm trying to do is lead you to Christ. I'm trying to lead you to healing. That's it. And so, we don't deal with the broken issue – we don't deal with the issues of their lifestyle. We're dealing with the overall scope of the lifestyle. And what we think about – the church – you being with another man, you're nasty. You're being with another woman – you're nasty. That's the only thing we look at, instead of, what is it that you need that you're not receiving.

The lack of the knowledge, skills, and compassion necessary to effectively minister to the gay and lesbian community is noted in the literature. Ninety percent of the black churches contacted by Lowe lacked the resources to address the needs of this group, and outreach ministries specifically targeted to gay men and lesbian women are virtually nonexistent within black churches (Lowe, 1998). This appears to be the case among the participants of this study as well. Many of them voiced concerns over issues related to homosexuality about which that they are confused. They suggested that open dialog through workshops and other teaching and learning opportunities should be initiated. And though they shared the belief that homosexuality is an issue that needs to be addressed within the black church, few of them are actually doing anything to address it within their own churches.

It is important to note that none of the participants suggested that gay men and lesbian women should be accepted within the black church just as they are, with no expectation that they change their sexual lifestyles. This relates back to the overwhelming belief of participants that homosexuality is a sin. Because they believe it is a sin, they believe it is a behavior that needs to be stopped. This, Dyson (1996) argues, is an unfair request. He believes that the black church should begin affirming healthy gay and lesbian relationships.

The attempt to treat gay men and lesbians with dignity and respect, simply because such treatment is their birthright as human beings, is a first step that Anderson (1998) encourages churches to take. Rather than basing how it will treat homosexuals on theology or other religious convictions, he, like Mitchell, believes that a good place for the church to start would be face to face, as human beings with equal rights to a relationship with God and each other.

Theme 4: Sex and Sexuality Within the Black Church

Issues of sex and sexuality have never been entirely comfortable for anyone to discuss. Parents have always struggled to discuss these issues with their children, and adults struggle to discuss them with each other. So, it comes as no surprise that churches, too, struggle when it comes to these issues.

The Sex and Sexuality Within the Black Church theme consists of three sub-themes: Black Churches/Black Families-Issues of Sexuality, The Controversial Role of Women Throughout the History of the Black Church, and Homosexuality as a Sensitive Topic Within the Black Church. The Black Churches/Black Families-Issues of Sexuality sub-theme looks at how information provided by participants suggests that black families and black churches both tend to either ignore issues of sexuality or portray them as negative topics. The Controversial Role of Women throughout the History of the Black Church sub-theme addresses participant thoughts on how women have been treated within the black church, particularly those who aspire to leadership roles traditionally held by men, and how such treatment is affected by their perceived crossing of traditional gender roles. The Homosexuality as a Sensitive Topic Within the Black Church sub-

theme looks at how the sensitive nature of this topic affects the way it is addressed by the black church.

Black churches/black families - issues of sexuality. When it comes to issues of sexuality, black churches and black families mirror each other in the ways they address, or fail to address, such concerns. Within both institutions, issues related to sex or sexuality tend to be ignored, or easily dismissed following a "just say no" type prescription.

When I asked what he was taught regarding sexuality while growing up, James responded,

> But, it just never came up. I mean, I learned about it, obviously when my sister was born and I'm ten years old, I had to do some quick figuring out here – that this baby just didn't, you know . . . But generally though, you didn't have much conversation – most of it was, you know, don't do it, it's bad. And it seems, like someone used to say, well if you're teaching a child from the time they are little that sex is bad, and then when they get married then you say now it's okay – well, it doesn't quite work like that, 'cause you've already gone – and you know I'm, my understanding of the Bible is that the body's not evil, there's nothing sinful – God put sex, the whole thing in us, you know, but it's the misuse and abuse of it – and it needs to be talked about. And we talk about it now. I talk about it, I'm open with my young people, and we just have these little honest discussions. The thing, you know – see, the problem we run into is that we prefer them to abstain, but you know they're not going to abstain.

Nathan's response to the same question revealed a conflict between what he was told, and what he actually saw. He recalled,

> Well, we were taught that it was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve . . . And so, while we were taught that the acceptable standard was male and female, we saw other experiences. We saw it at school. We saw some instructors who were gay. Both male and female. There were one or two instructors who were lesbians. And I can remember in my junior high school a homosexual who taught Geography. And in the high school a homosexual who taught French and Spanish – played the violin exceptionally well. So, while we were – and then I think I saw some of it even at the church. And so, while we were taught, and it was

emphasized that the acceptable role, or the acceptable relationship was a male/female relationship, we were exposed early on to homosexuality.

When I asked him what kinds of things people said about individuals in the community whom they assumed were gay or lesbian, he replied,

> Around children – very little. Very little. You know, when adults discussed it, they discussed it primarily between adults. And, when they would see you listening, they would make statements like 'little rabbits have big ears.' But, for that matter, for instance, growing up in a strictly religious community, as children we were not allowed to have relationship with a young woman who got pregnant out of wedlock. And when people would start talking about her, they would say – 'you know she fell and broke her leg.' And, as I grew a little older, I was trying to figure out what the devil does breaking your leg have to do with having a baby? But, people attempted to protect children from those kinds of discussions. And, so you had a struggle that you were always wrestling with because you heard one thing on this side, and yet you saw the reality on the other side . . . Without any explanation. But, among young people, we soon learned to talk among ourselves and to talk with other older young folk, so that you found out what was going on.

He continued by saying,

> [W]hen I was young people didn't talk about sexuality around children. I think you learned more from talking with your older friends and from your experiments than you did from people sitting down talking about the birds and the bees. I remember one time I asked my grandfather, well, my step-grandfather – I asked him about the birds and the bees, and he said to me 'what damn birds and bees.' You know, so I knew to let that alone. But I think people felt uncomfortable knowing how to talk to you about it. And, again, you learned your lessons out in the street.

Toni's experiences were much like those of her contemporaries. She revealed,

> [I]n my household I think, more so, you were taught by what you saw. Unfortunately I never had nobody sit me down and say – this is what a young lady should be, this is what a wife should be, this is what a woman should be. So, I think I learned it by what I saw . . . No one ever sat down and told me that some people have feelings for the same sex. That wasn't discussed. I mean, 'cause, in households back in those days, or even now, sometimes that topic – you're cursed if you bring it up in the house. So, because it was such a sensitive issue, being that it was so prominent in my family on my dad and my mother's side, those issues were never discussed unless there was a heated argument and somebody throws it up in your face. It was so abnormal that, you didn't touch it.

She continued to discuss her experience by talking about the way her family handled the issue of homosexuality, given that her father, as well as other family members, were "known" closeted homosexuals. She said,

> Well, you know, I never knew about homosexuality until later on in years. Until I started asking questions about, why my dad this and why my dad this . . . My grandmother used to say all the time – I used to hear her in conversations with other family members saying "well you know, he's a faggot" or "he's a punk," you know. "His friends are faggots," and I'm thinking – what's a faggot, you know, what's a punk? You know, and so then I started to ask what are those terms and, "Oh, you'll just learn about it later; it's stuff a child shouldn't know about." And I was a very inquisitive child, and I – I remember one day going to the library and looking up – well, a cigarette, a dry piece of wood. Well, why are they calling him a cigarette or a dry piece of wood. I'm thinking – that's not what they mean. So, I guess even as a child I would kind of put two and two together, and notice, okay, something about this is not right.

When I asked Mitchell what he was taught regarding sexuality growing up, he answered,

> Not that much. My mother really didn't talk about it that much. It was just not something that came up. Like I said, I found out on the run. By the time she wanted to have the talk with me it was a little bit late . . . I was told that, you know, sex and all that kind of stuff, that was something that was saved for marriage – I didn't heed that advice.

When I asked where he received information on sex and related issues, he replied,

> Media. Just watching TV. Talking to friends, peer groups and what-not. You find out a lot of information that way. Not all of it was the best information, but, I mean, you kind of weed and wade your way through the myth and what is true and what is false.

Isaiah also shared that he received very little information about sex and sexuality within the context of his family growing up. He recalled,

> Did not have a whole lot of discussion in terms of my growing up in regards to that. Even, I remember in elementary school, and from elementary school on up, of seeing persons who we perceived may have had other gender issues, in other words they were homosexual; now we would understand it, we just thought they were sissies or something, as we defined it. And, never really had any intense discussions as it pertains to it . . . They were not issues that we needed to address necessarily. I just don't remember there being a forum whereby we talked about

this. Of course, I don't even remember directly, though my sisters said that they do, remember my parents talking to us about sex at all. They may have, but I just – it may have been at one of those times when I wasn't interested in the conversation.

Wil talked about the absence of discussions on sex and sexuality within his household as well. He stated,

> Well, actually, my mother never sat me down and talked to me about sexuality. My father – he was not in the home. Out of six kids living, I was the only one that really basically had a relationship with my father. But no one sat me down and talked to me about sexuality – what's right, what's wrong, according to society. No one ever sat me down and talked. I guess I just – growing up in the housing project where I grew up – you know, you never saw anything but male and female together. So, I guess that was enough to show me, based on society, how a man or woman is supposed to act.

Wil also talked about the lack of discussion on this topic within the church. He said,

> But I never really – this is only the second church that I've been in. And this is the first church where I've ever heard sexuality being discussed openly. And I feel like in the church that's what we should do. We should be the ones talking about it. But my first church, that I grew up in, it was never discussed.

James too talked about how sexuality was addressed in the church where he grew up. He shared,

> Well in the church I grew up, I guess –part of that was that we never really talked about sex. That was my original point. We learned about sex on the streets. We really never – not that I don't think the we couldn't have, it just never came up. My parents never said, well don't go out, don't have sex. You know, they weren't those type of people. But it just never came up. It was something that, I guess we felt, I didn't feel free to talk about.

The times that sexuality was mentioned within the church setting appeared to be rare. James recalled,

> Anyway, so we never really talked about sexuality. We never talked about sex in the church. I remember one time we did. One time we did have a – as I was getting older and I was with my father's church and I was becoming his associate,

> and we had this little - two minute, three minute, someone just said we were afraid to talk about sex in the church. And it was just like, we quickly moved on. But we never really talked about it. It wasn't until later on in the Seventies, I worked in a small church in the Northeast, and we had people come in from Planned Parenthood to talk to those kids about how to use protection and all that stuff. And they went through the whole thing with sexuality, and that was a good thing. The pastor was very open. He would have these seminars and workshops with married couples. And that was a very good - and this was in the Seventies, this was the early Seventies. So that was a good thing.

Though Isaiah did not recall issues of sexuality being addressed in the church where he grew up, he did offer some insight on why some churches may appear to be more tolerant than other regarding issues of sexuality. He said,

> [Churches] are tolerant as long as it can get what it wants out of it. Out of people, regardless of sexual orientation or sexual activity. But then pastors and others may stand up and preach against it, church members may still murmur and gossip about somebody in terms of his or her sexual orientation. And if they will allow people in, that doesn't mean that they're not going to be the object of ridicule either from the pulpit or from the pew.

Toni discussed the way that homosexuality was addressed in the church she grew up in. She stated,

> Yeah, they were, they – well you know she likes women. You know, more so, you know she likes women. But I didn't know – what do you mean she likes women? I like women too. I have a girlfriend, you know. And so, as I had stated, those things were hush hush. But they were discussed at a point, where you could hear them, but they weren't explained to you. And so you would hear though – you know she likes women or he likes men. And that's for the most part, unless the preacher got up and was preaching, just out blatantly damnation, hell, brimstone against them.

She also talked about some of the ways she believes the church errs in its approach to dealing with sex. She shared,

> I think, so, in the church we have been blinded. We are asleep to the fact about sex, we'll tell people don't, well you don't need to do it – the Bible says don't do it. Okay, well that's not telling me nothing. As I say, how can you tell me not, don't do something that feels good? Hey, come on. Or, okay, we just shouldn't say, man shouldn't lie with another man and woman shouldn't lie – tell me why.

> And so, so long in the church we have not given or taught why not, we have just left it as, just don't do it. Or, it's just not right. Okay, well, it's a sin, it's a big sin. Okay, what's a big sin, and what's a little sin? Sin is sin. And so, I discuss issues like that that most people won't touch.

Mitchell seemed to think that sexuality, and homosexuality, are addressed differently within the black church with there being more objection to fornication and adultery than homosexuality. When I asked if he had seen or heard homosexuality being addressed within the black church, he replied,

> No. Not from the pastor or the leadership of the church. I mean, yeah, your friends and groups like that, that you would, you know, you get off by yourself and talk about that kind of stuff. No, it wasn't, it was not preached from the pulpit . . . People just ignore it. They try to look beyond it. I mean, I think you would get more opposition if you put a person up for a – if you had a person that wanted to be an elder, say, in this church, if they were sleeping around with twenty different men and they're a young lady, than you would if it was a homosexual man and everybody knew. You know, I don't think they would – it would be some objections, but, not much.

He also discussed the way he believes the church should approach the issue. He shared,

> You have some churches that are just adamantly opposed. You know, if you're a homosexual, you're gone burn in hell and all that kind of stuff. Getting away from that sort of - and then on the flip side of it, just, anything goes, just float your boat. Getting back to the true scripture, true teaching in church. Not so much preaching, but teaching. And tackling these subjects. Then we have to, you know, AIDS is another thing that just runs rampant in our community, and the church seems blind to the issue. We don't want to touch it – don't want to deal with it. Cancer, alcoholism, drug abuse – and then on the flip side of it, in heterosexual relationships – womanizing, and women just, a different man every day. You know, not being scared to deal with these subjects, because they are reality. We do live in a real world, you know. And that real world comes into the church every Sunday and has to be dealt with. And often times we don't deal with it. We concern ourselves more with tithes and offerings. Pass the plate around ten or fifteen times, making sure, you know, the pastor has a nice car and make sure the church is well kept. Then we don't deal with the spiritual aspects of a person's everyday life. And I think once we get back to that, then we can start dealing with some of these issues.

One of the difficulties in discussing sex and sexuality in a church setting is the desire to present a message that is consistent with the precepts of the Bible while realistically addressing the needs of the congregation, many of whom engage in sex outside of marriage. This issue is particularly troublesome when dealing with adolescents. Defending his desire to encourage sexually active young people to use condoms, James said,

> It's not that I advocate them, 'cause people say, well, you make it sound like you're advocating them having sex if you tell them to use protection. I say no, because I know they're going to do it. 'Cause they're young, and they don't think of the consequences. I say at least use protection. If you care about that person, even if you don't care about your – if you care about the other person, then use protection. So we try to be more honest about it than it was when I was – I tell young people, I tell their parents if you're afraid to talk to them about it send them to me, I'll talk to them. I'll talk to them about anything they want to talk about.

Nathan talked about the dilemma involved in discussing, or even providing, birth control information within the church. He shared,

> [T]he one thing I have not done, is I have not passed out condoms on a Sunday morning. But then on the other hand, my wife retired from the Department of Children Services, after thirty years in foster care and adoption, and she works at Positively Living, which is a program that deals with catastrophic and terminal illness. And one of the things that they have at that place is a basket, and as you come out, there are condoms there, all you have to do is reach your hand in there and – you know. We do teach, we have taught and preached about abstinence as the sure, safe method. But, we also say that if you're not going to be good, at least be careful. That's different I guess from a whole lot of other folk. They'll tell you that, that's just where we are. But – I'm just down to earth. I told you I'm a country preacher.

James introduced the topic of AIDS and its impact on the black community into our discussion. He stated,

> It's, I mean, AIDS is growing because people are getting it, from somebody else. You would not believe the statistics. If I showed them to you would not, you would say somebody made these figures up. AIDS is the highest cause of death of people between the age of sixteen and twenty-five. Highest – even above

homicides and accidents. I'm saying, this is just - so, these are the issues that, I'm looking at our young people – a doctor once told me, not here, but in another city, that at least ten percent of your people in the congregation will have AIDS. And see, I've known people here that don't even know anybody that ever had it. But I've known too many people who've had it and died from it.

He went on to share,

I even have a whole sermon on it, because I talk about the total health. Talk about spiritual health, physical health, economic health. So, we talk about those issues. But the statistics are devastating. We're gonna wipe ourselves out, statistically. I mean, they may find a way to keep us going – it's, I don't, it's unbelievable. So, I think, in our discussion, it's not so much saying, well you know, don't have sex, sex is bad and dirty. No, it's not bad and dirty. Sex is a very pleasurable, nice experience if, you know, as long as you're just not going around with everything – but, at the same time you're saying, you know you're going to have it, use protection.

Nathan has also incorporated discussions on AIDS into his sermons. He said,

[T]he earlier part of this year I did a couple of sermons here on AIDS education, and learning to accept and tolerate and deal with the fact that AIDS is a reality. And that, if it is not in your house, it has at least affected somebody you know. And you can't pull the cover over your head and say it doesn't exist. It's here. So how do you deal with it? And, you've got to remember that some of the diseases that Jesus dealt with in His day were catastrophic. Leprosy was a catastrophic illness. And, you were ostracized. People put you outside of the city. And you couldn't come back. And yet Jesus was out there dealing with the lepers.

Isaiah too has addressed the topic of AIDS with his congregation. He stated,

We have had some AIDS workshops here, because of how it afflicts and affects the African American community. And, we understand that, still, a disproportionate number of those who are infected are those who are homosexual, though, as we're hearing statistically, there are some others that fall into those other categories.

The black church and the black family have been described as being interdependent - each one necessary for the other to strive and survive. The significant impact of the black church on the black community is well documented by Caldwell, Green & Billingsley (1992). From slavery to the Civil Rights Movement to modern day

issues such as homosexuality, the black church has held within its hands the power to help change the way the world sees African Americans, and the way African Americans see themselves.

The participants of this study discussed the ways they have seen sexuality addressed in their own families and communities, and the ways they have seen it addressed within the context of the black church. What their responses reveal is that there are similarities between the way that sexuality is addressed both inside and outside the church. Primarily, participants reported that issues of sexuality are ignored in both environments. When these issues were discussed, sex was often demonized – defined as something that is bad and should be avoided. This is perhaps due to an overall fear that many African Americans have of sex in general, which stems from the sexual oppression that occurred during slavery (Douglas, 1999). Attempts by the dominant culture to define black sexuality and black families as abnormal have left many African Americans feeling defensive. One example of such an attempt was the sexual exploitation of Sarah Bartmann, whose naked body was viewed, as a source of entertainment, in seventeenth century Europe. Physically, her body was compared to that of an orangutan. (Douglas, 1999). The desire to create psychological distance from such dehumanizing incidences may contribute to homophobia within the black community, causing issues of sexuality and homosexuality to be ignored altogether, for fear that African Americans may, once again, be defined as abnormal (Hart, 1998).

Part of the reason that sex is so difficult to discuss within the African American community relates to the history of black sexuality, and the shame that many African Americans experience because of the myths and stereotypes that have been attached to

them as sexual beings. African Americans have historically been portrayed as bestial and sexually disgusting. They have been demonized and defined as sexual perverts. Part of the reason for this was to create an atmosphere where it was acceptable for white women to fear black men, and for black women to be used and abused by white men (Dyson, 1996).

In an effort to neutralize the effects of these myths, some middle-class African Americans tried to distance themselves from what were viewed as "deviant" forms of sexual behavior. Many such persons have fought very hard to gain a sense of dignity and respect as sexual beings (Douglas, 1999). According to Harper (1993), they attempted to accomplish this by "stifling discussion of black sexuality generally" (p. 246). This same stifling appears to have permeated into the twenty-first century, because, as is evident in the above quotes, the participants of this study report that, for the most part, neither black families nor black churches are openly discussing issues of sexuality. Generally speaking, participants did not see the lack of discussion about sexuality within their families as problematic. Though Toni implied that she wishes someone had taught her what it meant to be a woman and to be a wife, male participants did not appear to share this desire.

It appears that both the black church and the black community lack a healthy understanding of sexuality, which has proven to be problematic. Dyson (1996) states that black churches continue to teach that sex should occur only within the bounds of a monogamous heterosexual marriage relationship, yet they fail to address the struggles of their parishioners regarding issues of sex and sexual desires. Because sex and issues of sexuality are rarely discussed in any detail, issues like AIDS and teenage pregnancy are

allowed to run rampant within the community, as well as within the church. To their credit, some of the pastors in this study stated that they are beginning to address issues related to AIDS with their congregations. However, none of them said that they incorporate discussions regarding homosexuality into their lessons or sermons dealing with AIDS. The statistics regarding AIDS in the black community are chilling. One in 33 African American men may be infected, whereas that rate is one in 139 for white men. For African American women the numbers are one in 98, and for white women one in 1,667 (Billingsley, 1999). Needless to say, this is an issue that the black community cannot afford to ignore.

As uncomfortable as topics related to sex may be to discuss both inside and outside the church environment, many of the participants of this study seem to be saying that it is pertinent that these issues begin to be addressed in an open and honest manner. Hicks (1994) concurs, emphasizing that the problems that the black church is dealing with today regarding sexual issues are problems that the church itself created. The only way to solve the problem, he notes, is to begin to talk about these tough, sometimes embarrassing issues.

The controversial role of women throughout the history of the black church. Biblical passages requiring that women submit to the authority of men have historically called into question the appropriate role for women within the church. In addition, the patriarchal system upon which the Bible is based has led many churches to penalize women for behaviors that men regularly "get away with." African American women theologians and other scholars have begun to address these issues. James noted,

> [B]lack women talk more about being womanist than feminist. Black women theologians are saying womanist – they have a womanist perspective, and not feminist which other, you know, white female theologians tend to speak about. But, it's about liberation and just looking at people as people. Not that you don't look at them as a woman, but you say that's a person, not just somebody I assign to this particular role.

Some of the double standards that have existed within the church include women being held accountable for becoming pregnant out of wedlock, while their sexual partners are allowed to remain anonymous. Nathan recalled,

> [W]hen I came along, for instance, it never happened, thank God, in our church where I was growing up, but I heard about churches that called meetings, and brought young ladies before the church when the young lady was expecting, without being married. And she would have to apologize to the church, you know, it just always seemed funny to me that if it took two to tango, why it was that the male was never brought up also. But, there was an attitude of a lot of people that boys are going to be boys and they're going to sow their wild oats. Girls must remain pure for marriage.

He continued,

> I go back to the point that I made to you earlier. Young women who got pregnant years ago, they'd have to have a church session on her. Not now. If you started talking about bringing them up before the church – you'd be afraid to bring up the fact that she's expecting and unmarried. 'Cause you'd be afraid that she might tell who the daddy is. And then you're really creating havoc. What happens if the daddy is a deacon or the preacher? Now you've got a <u>real</u> muddy brook on your hands. So, I don't think people are so willing, anymore, to make open spectacles of individuals.

James also remembered the days when such behavior took place in many African American churches. He recalled,

> That's like those days when the women got pregnant, the young girl got pregnant and she had to stand up before the congregation. I said, did she get pregnant, unless there's somebody, you know, and then let that person come up with her and confess too. Confess it, I say you confess it to Jesus, that's all you need to do. He didn't tell you to confess anything to me. Confess it to Jesus.

Another hotly debated issue deals with whether or not women should be permitted to become preachers. Though woman preachers have been accepted within the Pentecostal church and certain other denominations for many years, Baptists, as well as other "more conservative" denominations, have been slower to acquiesce to this notion.

James, a Baptist pastor who fully supports women as preachers, talked about his thoughts regarding women and ministry. He said,

> But this thing about women and ministry, I mean women have such wonderful gifts of sensitivity and imagination. They can talk about issues that men – different accounts of women characters in the Bible. I had one woman, a friend of mine, come do our Women's Day a few years ago – she talked about Recovering Bad Girls. Oh – somebody wrote a book. I said oh, I wish you would have of done that. Somebody published a book called Recovering Bad Women, and she talked about the woman at the well. I mean, only a woman could handle a passage and speak through her own experience or her own spirit in that kind – I couldn't handle a passage like that and speak with the kind of sensitivity that a woman could bring to it.

He went on to discuss how this issue has been dealt with in his own church. He shared,

> [I] think it's good, in fact, we have an associate minister who's a woman. We had a woman, first time, do a revival service for us – Carolyn Knight, she's a great preacher. And not just for a woman. She's just a good preacher. So, trying to break those barriers down – but, yes, roles are shifting, and it's a good thing. Role changes are good. It has a lot to do with sexuality. I have a book on spirituality and sexuality. It talks about the interplay between sexuality and spirit, and the importance of it. Because sexuality is the great driving force of the human experience. So, yeah, it's a good thing that we're no longer just confining people or consigning people to a certain role. This is the way you are supposed to be and this is the way you're supposed to behave. And if you're a man this is what men do and if you're a woman this is – no.

When I asked if he has experienced any backlash for having an associate minister who is a woman, he responded,

> Yeah. I have. Well, I have women – one woman on the deacon board and another one coming, in the probationary, we do a probationary thing for a year. So, yeah, some people refuse to be served. You know, they don't want a woman serving them communion. And I notice that sometimes some people stay home

when my associate preaches. She preaches at least once a month, and some others are accepting. And it's funny – it seems that most of the reaction is from other women. Most women that I speak to say it's other women that are the issue. And most men have been helpful – like in job situations. Women say that men have been the ones who have helped them. The women won't help them. So, it's an interesting thing. And so, it's something. You know, in the community, because we live in a very conservative – it's the Bible Belt. There are, more churches are beginning to ask my associate to preach, which is a good thing. But, you know, there will always be those who won't allow a woman in their pulpit. You know what I'm saying. 'I'll never have a woman –.' And that baffles me, 'cause I'm way past that. I mean, it's not even something I think about twice . . . But you know, it is a good thing, that things have changed, because we lose so much talent by just saying, well you can't do this because you're a woman. Who am I to tell somebody they can't do something?

Though Nathan was, for the most part, supportive of women ministers, he did have one complaint. He shared,

> I do have one problem, and I've said this to a number of women across the country. That God called them in their femininity to preach. And immediately after they get the call, or at least when they start pastoring, they've got to get their hair cut into a boyish cut, they've got to start wearing pant suits all the time, and they've got to start acting like they are competing with men. I argue that God can use you as a female. My mother-in-law has been a pastor of one church in the Church of God forty-nine years. She does not get her hair cut in a boyish style. One lady said to me, the problem is that it gets in the way while you're preaching. Then get you some pins, pin it back or do whatever you need to, but I contend – my wife and I used to have a real problem about women getting their hair cut, we've come together on it now. You know, I'm one of those who believes that a woman's hair is her glory - and so when they start getting it cut I just go Awh! But, I do have this problem, that so often women who enter the ministry seem to be in competition with men.

When I asked Mitchell how he felt about the issue of women in the ministry, he said,

> Beforehand, before I went to seminary, I probably, like most people in the church, in the Baptist church, I didn't, I didn't see it. But as I searched the scriptures and read for myself, I see how that is possible, or how God used women and He can use women. He, I mean, He created this. It's His game, it's His rules. I can't change them because I don't want to sit under a woman's administration. But as far as women pastoring – I still have difficulty with that. I have not found that in scripture, so, it's something I still struggle with. But I pray if I am wrong, that God will change me. But I, I don't have any problem with women in ministry. None whatsoever.

The appropriate role for women within the Christian community has always been debated. From the clothes they should be permitted to wear, to the offices they should be allowed to hold, varying interpretations of a handful of Biblical passages have caused churches to differ in their treatment of women across the board (Montgomery, 1993). The controversy over female preachers was raised by some of the participants of this study. The overall indication was that they are accepting of the idea of women being preachers. James, who is a Baptist pastor, shared that he has a female associate minister at his church. His descriptions of some of the negative reactions he has seen in his members regarding his female associate suggest that this is an issue with which certain members of the black church community continue to struggle.

Cole (1978) suggests that matters have been complicated, particularly for African American women, because of their history of oppression. In order to more justifiably work them like animals, white slave owners attempted to strip black women of their femininity. White culture taught her that she was not a "true woman," that she did not measure up to the white prototype of femininity. It is therefore understandable that black churches, holding to a morally conservative black middle class perspective, might seek to undermine this concept of black women by requiring that they adhere to a strictly passive mode of behavior. This may also help explain why a double standard existed in the case of young women who became pregnant out of wedlock. Perhaps they were treated differently in an effort to preserve their honor.

Homosexuality as a sensitive topic within the black church. There are some topics that are more sensitive than others within most religious communities. It would be

difficult to find a more sensitive topic than homosexuality within the African American church community. Regardless of how the participants of this study choose to address homosexuality, it is obvious that this is not a comfortable issue to address. There are many reasons why homosexuality is difficult to confront within the church. One of them is the responsibility many pastors and church leaders feel for their parishioners, and the executive duties that go along with running a church. James talked a lot about how easy it is for pastors to become overwhelmed with the administrative aspects of pastoring, leaving little room for constructive, compassionate ministry to people's innermost needs. He shared,

> [Y]ou can so easily become institutionalized, because the institution makes demands on you, and then you say, well, you know, I can't do it. I can't speak out. I can't go. People will not speak out in the pulpit against certain things. When I say something – I've said something privately to somebody about how bad the school system is. Somebody wrote me an anonymous note, saying, well before you speak you should – and sent me the superintendent's newsletter telling how wonderful – I said, well what do you expect . . . But then you've got to measure what you say. You've got to always live up to other people's expectations of who you are, rather than you speaking the truth as you see it. It may not be the complete – but it's as you see it. But it's hard to do that when you have to be pastoral. You can't get up and hammer the people – and I don't believe you should, you know, hammer people. People do need healing and uplifting and encouraging. But at the same time they need to know the truth.

Toni also discussed the importance of pleasing church members, which can cause leaders to compromise, and to shy away from controversial issues. She stated,

> [I] think we as the black church get wrapped up in numbers. When you start teaching certain things, they say you offend, and they leave. But, the difference in an offense is, if you teach it in the spirit of love and compassion, and, but you teach the truth, 'cause people want to hear the truth, then I think it comes across differently. I think it's not, I think we become so used to it now, 'til it's accepted – but it's not accepted. You understand what I'm saying – well I understand your lifestyle, as long as I didn't see you do it, it's okay, so.

Toni pointed out another aspect of ministry she believes makes it difficult for some preachers to address homosexuality. When asked what she thinks gets in the way, she said,

> First of all if you're in it yourself. You're dealing with tendencies and you're dealing with feelings yourself. You have family members who are in the lifestyle. Or if you're just a traditional preacher – the life, death, resurrection, hell (Laughter) – Paul, Jonah, Peter walking on the water, Meshak, Shadrack, and Abendnego. You know, we get caught in a cycle where we're not branching out to really – the church is in need of teachings like this, because these are the types of people – we talk about the End Time Harvest, well, that's part of the End Time Harvest – people who are coming into our church. The people who get wrapped up – you know, you always say well I just want to be accepted – I was accepted by my own kind, I wasn't accepted by my parents. And so, people are looking for somewhere to be accepted. Not somewhere where you're gonna kill me and badger me. But where you can love me and accept me for who I am. And people say – well the Bible says with love and kindness have I drawn thee. Let me draw you first. Then we'll deal with your issues.

Part of the difficulty also lies in the way churches are organized. Often times, particularly in smaller congregations, all of the pressure is placed on one person, the pastor. James revealed,

> [Y]ou not only have the congregation, but you have people in the congregation. So you're not just dealing with three or four hundred people. You're dealing with individuals, and their issues. And you're one person. I don't know a psychologist who has three or four hundred clients. . . And then, they want you to have all the answers. And I don't have all the answers. I'm trying to deal with issues in my own life.

When I asked James if he had ever discussed homosexuality in any of his sermons, he answered,

> No, I have not. I have not addressed that issue because it's so sensitive – publicly. Privately I've talked about it, but not – it's like abortion. Now, you know, my view is – my private view is that women shouldn't just have abortions as a birth control method. Women have a choice. Now publicly I say women have a choice, and a right to make the decision. But in private I say, if they would have used protection it wouldn't have, you know. . . But no, I have not publicly addressed that. And I would do it with a great deal of apprehension. Because, of

course a lot of people would be offended, I'm sure. And those for whom that might be an issue, I don't know whether I would be helping them or not. So I'm not sure I would get at it.

I later asked him why he felt that the black church in general was not addressing homosexuality in a more forthright manner. He answered,

> Fear. Fear. Fear. Just afraid. Our phobias about homosexuality are steep in fear. And we think it's religious traditions, you know. But I don't know about all that. But, it's fear. I think primarily it's just unfounded fear. Just irrational. It's just one of those things we get irrational about. We have this fear – and you know what it is? We're afraid we are homosexual. That's what homophobia is based on – our fear. Because, if a homosexual approaches a person who's heterosexual, the first thing they think is what did they see in me that made them approach me. Now that's for a man. Now I don't know what our women would feel. But for a man, he'd think, why is he coming to me? Maybe because you're cute, and he's looking at you, wants you 'cause you're cute (Laughter). I don't know. But that's a natural thing. But it's fear.

Toni also talked about the fear aspect, as well as how many church leaders are not prepared to deal with issues related to homosexuality. She said,

> Fear. . . Fear of, again, offense. Fear of, well, I don't want my kids to know. I don't want my kids to be surrounded around this. That's an issue that don't need to be discussed in the church, you know. The Word of God didn't tell us to discuss this in the church. . . [A]nd then sometimes, we as preachers or pastors or leaders, is, we're not educated about it. We don't want nobody to question us because we don't want to look stupid. And so we have a church full of people, and a whole lot of leaders who are not studying.

Mitchell too addressed the issue of fear. When I asked him why he thought homosexuality isn't dealt with in the church, he responded by saying,

> People are scared to deal with it. Scared to talk about it. You know, when I brought that up in the Bible study, the person that, you know, this was a person that I thought, well, I think she probably had a lot of respect for me, but, that was just something that touched it off and, while people were nodding their heads when I was speaking beforehand, you know, they kind of got quiet when she brought up the objection. And, even some of them that were nodding their heads beforehand and came up to me afterwards, kind of chimed in with what she was saying. So, I think that's just something that people are scared to talk about or scared to deal with. But if they catch me out there with a woman or something,

then they have no problem bringing that up or talking about how wrong I am for doing that.

Nathan's response to the same question was quite interesting. In his response, I believe, lies one clear-cut answer to why churches refuse to touch this issue in a way that will bring about change. He asked,

> But, why should they? Why make an issue of something when you can deal with it in another way? Why pit people against each other. And if you try to make it an issue head on, that's what you're doing. When Martin King and the rest of us were marching in the civil rights movement, we made an issue of the discrimination. So what happened? Those who were in favor of segregation became stiff necked and stiff backed and it became a real confrontational issue.

He also noted,

> And I guess, you know, one of the difficulties is not only with the question of homosexuality – one of the difficulties is getting people to tolerate and accept people who are different from themselves in a way . . . Yeah, I think the core issue is not so much just your sexual preference.

Isaiah placed the issue within the context of American culture, and the importance it places on issues of sexuality. He said,

> I think there are some challenges that are going to be there, simply because we are a people – meaning that, we are a society that ebbs and flows by sexuality, whether it's heterosexual issues or homosexual issues. We make more decisions based on sex than we do on other things. And until society gets to the point where they can look at people and understand them beyond their own gender, or their own sexual preferences, then we're going to always be one that will be uncomfortable with that. Now, you know, for myself, I'm uncomfortable talking about [homosexuality] because of the fact that I'm not clear. I don't buy into the very radical or the very conservative perspectives that are espoused from the Bible. And then, I don't also – I would not be out in a gay rights march, you know . . . Again, I guess that is reflective in terms of what I preach. I'm not anti, I'm not pro, per se. There are, the thing I guess I say often is that, there's just so much about it that I do not understand.

During most of my interviews with the participants, there appeared to be a bit of evasiveness when it came to answering some of my questions. For example, even when I

asked Nathan simple demographic questions or other questions about his background, he often jumped right into a dialog related to homosexuality, while disregarding my original question. James also spent quite a bit of time discussing issues that were not directly related to the questions I asked. On the other hand, both Isaiah and Mitchell seemed reluctant to elaborate on their answers, even when I probed them. These types of responses are to be expected when dealing with a sensitive topic. Just as homosexuality is a hard topic to discuss within the church community, it was also a challenge for pastors and church leaders to grapple with this topic during these interviews.

Another indication of the sensitivity of the topic were the various contradictions I found in each of the interviews. Wil stated emphatically that he wants every person to feel that they are a part of the church, and to share in the decision making process within the church. Yet, he later said that he would not allow any "known" homosexual to serve in a meaningful way in his church. James and Nathan stated over and over again that they did not feel they had the right to judge homosexuals, yet each made judgmental statements toward homosexuals, particularly as it relates to the ways they each perceive gay men and lesbian women behaving. Toni also stated that she "has no problem" with homosexuals, yet throughout the interview listed numerous problems that she does indeed have with gay men and lesbian women. Isaiah and Mitchell were the most consistent throughout their interviews, but as I stated above they were also the most guarded. Almost every participant at one point said that you could not look at a person and tell if he or she is gay or lesbian, yet also gave examples of cases where they "just knew." I believe that these contradictions point to the uneasiness participants may have felt dealing

with this issue. I think they also signify the lack of knowledge pastors and church leaders have concerning this issue.

Nathan's question of why should black churches address the controversial issue of homosexuality is a significant one. He referred to the Civil Rights Movement, stating that during his involvement in the Movement, he found that some churches were resistant, causing groups of people to be pitted against one another. Likewise, he argues that some churches today likely avoid dealing with issues of homosexuality for fear of creating similar divisions within and across churches and other community groups.

Though there was not unanimous support from black churches for the Civil Rights Movement, there was support from enough individual churches to see the Movement through (Wilmore, 1998). If there is ever to be any real change regarding the issue of homosexuality within the black church, there will likely have to be a similar willingness to alienate those who do not understand the significance of the problem.

Several participants mentioned a "fear factor" concerning homosexuality. They believe that many church leaders ignore this issue because they are afraid to deal with it. Though fear was not mentioned in the literature as a reason why some churches neglect to address this issue, it was mentioned frequently by these participants. What exactly they are afraid of was not clearly articulated. James stated that he feels the fear is irrational and unfounded. At one point in our interview he said that he believes people are ultimately afraid that they themselves are homosexuals, causing them to ignore the topic altogether.

Summary

This study consisted of six participants. Five are senior pastors of black churches, and one is an associate minister in a black church. In-depth interviews were conducted in an effort to explore their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes regarding homosexuality and how it is addressed within the black church. How this issue was addressed in the past, and how it can best be addressed in the future were also explored.

Four major themes emerged from the interviews: Gay and Lesbian Behavior, Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality, Treatment of Gay Men and Lesbian Women Within the Black Church Community, and Sex and Sexuality Within the Black Church. Sub-themes were also identified which correspond with the four major themes.

Participants' perceptions of gay and lesbian behavior were discussed. Gay and lesbian behavior, as they described it, pertained primarily to men and women who fit the stereotypical images of how gay men and lesbian women look and act. Participants used traditional gender roles as a barometer for homosexual proclivities. Persons who deviated from the traditional definitions for female femininity and male masculinity were suspected of being gay or lesbian, though most participants admitted that sometimes it is difficult to tell if a person is gay or lesbian. Overall, participants expressed a tolerance for gay and lesbian individuals who kept their homosexuality private, but were reluctant to grant full approval to what they described as "flagrant" or "flaming" individuals, particularly when it came to appointing such individuals to positions of leadership within the church. Generally speaking, gay men were said to exist in large numbers in church music departments, while lesbian women were described as being more difficult to identify within the church.

Participants' beliefs regarding homosexuality were also discussed. Their perceptions of the nature of same-sex attraction varied from a firm conviction that persons chose to become homosexual to questioning whether or not there may be biological factors that affect homosexuality. Nearly every participant stated that he or she believes that homosexuality is a sin. Isaiah stated that he was not sure, and that his answer would depend on whether or not homosexuality is a choice, or if it is biological in nature. His reasoning is that if it is biological, then it cannot be a sin because persons cannot sin because of something they are born with. Most participants cited the Bible as proof that homosexuality is a sin. Several Old and New Testament passages were referred to. Some of the participants talked about their beliefs regarding judging others, stating that they did not believe that they had the right to judge other people, particularly gay men and lesbian women.

The treatment of gay men and lesbian women within the black church community was addressed. Participants talked about how they have seen gay men and lesbian women treated within the black church. Some stated that they have not seen gay men and lesbian women abused or treated negatively within the black church, whereas others said that they have. All of them admitted that improvements are needed in the way issues related to homosexuality are dealt with in the black church. They suggested that open dialog needs to take place concerning this topic, and that church leaders need to deal with their fears regarding homosexuality so that they can begin to address the needs of this population.

Sex and sexuality within the black church was also addressed. Parallels between the ways that black families deal with issues of sexuality and the ways that churches deal

with issues of sexuality were discussed. Participants' descriptions of the ways sexuality was, or in most cases was not addressed within their families revealed that some African American families are neglecting this issue. As they talked about the ways they have seen sexuality addressed within the black church, the same conclusion is implied, that black churches are also neglecting to address issues of sexuality. Some of the participants also talked about the controversial role of women throughout the history of the black church. They discussed the debate over female preachers, as well as some of the double standards that have existed in the church regarding men and women. Participants also addressed homosexuality as a sensitive issue within the black church. They stated that many church leaders and church members experience a great deal of fear and apprehension concerning this topic, which is why many choose to ignore it altogether.

The interviews for this study revealed that participants have a lot to say regarding the topic of homosexuality and the black church. The four major themes, as well as the sub-themes, are representative of the responses of the interviewees. That there was not a complete consensus on any of the themes or sub-themes suggests that pastors and church leaders within the black church are somewhat diverse in their beliefs and convictions.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to explore the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of pastors and church leaders of black Baptist, Pentecostal, and other churches regarding the issue of homosexuality and how it is addressed within the black church. How this issue has been addressed in the past, and how it can best be addressed in the future are also explored.

The significance of the black church within the African American community is well known. From a historical perspective, it was spiritual leaders such as Nat Turner and Henry Highland Garnet who encouraged slaves to rebel against the institution of slavery. Their proposed methodology for such rebellion was different, but their message was the same. The role of the black church in establishing schools within the African American community is also noteworthy. And it is difficult to think about the Civil Rights Movement without recalling the many meetings that took place in churches or the many ministers who participated in the Movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Wilmore, 1998; Mays & Nicholson, 1999).

Because the black church has historically played a significant role in virtually every significant shift within the African American community, and because of problems such as the high number of individuals in the African American community who are being diagnosed with HIV and AIDS, discussions around issues of sexuality have become all the more important. Part of the objective for this research was to help bring a pertinent issue, that of homosexuality and the black church, to the forefront.

Another reason I chose to research this topic was that I found a significant void in the literature regarding this issue. I was first introduced to the topic in a magazine article I read. As I began to follow up on that article, I found that virtually no one was talking about homosexuality, and how it is dealt with within the black church community.

It was for these reasons that I felt it was prudent that homosexuality be addressed within the context of the black church; because if homophobia is ever to be addressed in the black community, and if African American gay men and lesbian women are ever to be given a legitimate voice within this community, the black church has to be willing to wrestle with it's own views regarding homosexuality, and in this wrestling, find a way to inspire the black community to do the same.

Because this research deals with the treatment of a group that has, historically, been marginalized by the black church and the black community, addressing this topic within the context of a Cultural Studies department is appropriate. Issues related to gender, race, and sexual orientation are commonly dealt with within cultural studies. Cultural studies research tends to address issues related to groups who, like gay men and lesbian women within the black community, have been ignored within the larger society.

I interviewed pastors and church leaders because of the immense power they have within the black church and community. Some of the literature reports that black pastors have a reputation for being insensitive to members of the gay community (Lowe, 1998). I wanted to allow them to give their own first person accounts of how they see homosexuals being treated within the black church, and how they believe homosexuals should be treated in the black church ideally. As a Christian, I also had a personal interest. I have personally witnessed insensitive and verbally abusive remarks toward

gay men and lesbian women emanate from African American occupied pulpits. I wanted some answers as to why this is allowed to go on, and what can be done to stop it. What I found, rather than concrete answers, were more questions.

I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with each participant. These interviews yielded four major themes: Gay and Lesbian Behavior, Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality, Treatment of Gay Men and Lesbian Women Within the Black Church Community, and Sex and Sexuality Within the Black Church. Each theme is comprised of several sub-themes.

The sub-themes under Gay and Lesbian Behavior are Gender Roles, Public Display of (Perceived) Homosexual Behavior, Gay Men, Lesbian Women, and Gay Leadership Within the Church. Participant responses imply that perceptions of gay and lesbian behavior are heavily influenced by stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a gay man or lesbian woman. Their level of discomfort with individuals who fit these stereotypes indicates that such individuals are likely to be treated differently than their more closeted counterparts, within the black church.

Sub-themes under Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality are Perceptions of the Nature of Same-Sex Attraction, Homosexuality as Sin, and "To Judge or Not to Judge." The participants' discussions regarding the nature of same-sex attraction suggest that they have not completely resolved this issue, meaning that they are perhaps open to learning more about theories on how individuals "become" gay or lesbian. Discussions on Homosexuality as Sin revealed that these participants have strong feelings related to the topic of homosexuality. Even though they mentioned scripture as proof that homosexuality is a sin, my feeling is that their beliefs regarding the sinfulness of

homosexuality stem more from their emotional and social feelings toward homosexuals than from biblical convictions. Regarding judging other persons, contradictions within interviews lead me to believe that being non-judgmental is a characteristic that participants hope to attain and believe they should attain, yet their responses indicate that they have not yet reached this goal. Though a couple of them stated that they do not feel they have the right to judge others, they did just that during their interviews. This suggests that pastors and church leaders may attempt to hide their negative thoughts and feelings toward gay men and lesbian women during discussions on this topic.

The Treatment of Gay Men and Lesbian Women Within the Black Church Community theme is made up of two sub-themes: How Homosexuals are Treated Within the Church and How Homosexuals Should Be Treated Within the Church. Participant statements that they have not seen gay men and lesbian women "mistreated" within the black church are suspicious, but not surprising. Though a few of them did mention that they have seen or heard of some negativity, the overall presentation was that this is not a major problem. Though their perceptions are valid, I suspect that gay men and lesbian women within their congregations would have altogether different perceptions of how gay men and lesbian women are being treated within the black church. Regarding how homosexuals should be treated within the black church, I believe that the suggestions offered by participants were good ones. However, my opinion is that this is not a high priority for them, and that even though they have suggested that these changes take place within the church, that they will likely neglect to implement such changes in their own churches within the near future.

Sub-themes under Sex and Sexuality Within the Black Church are Black Churches/Black Families – Issues of Sexuality, The Controversial Role of Women Throughout the History of the Black Church, and Homosexuality as a Sensitive Issue Within the Black Church. Participant responses suggest that black churches and black families deal with issues of sexuality in similar ways. It appears as though individuals, whether they are church leaders or lay members, incorporate their family's way of addressing sex and sexuality into the way they address these issues within the church. By basically ignoring issues of sexuality in both environments, the black community has created monumental problems (such as the lack of AIDS education). Comments on the role of women within the church suggest that women, particularly those in leadership positions, are sometimes perceived as masculine. This may lead to assumptions that they are lesbians.

One interesting difference among participants occurred along generational lines. Toni, Wil, and Mitchell, who are in their late twenties and early thirties, expressed more "conservative" views regarding homosexuality. On the other hand, James, Nathan, and Isaiah, who range in age from mid-forties to early fifties, were much more "liberal" in their responses. For example, Toni and Wil spoke out against gay men and lesbian women serving as church leaders under any circumstances. Mitchell also voiced strong opinions regarding gay men and lesbian women. James and Nathan, however, stated that gay men and lesbian women do have a place in the black church, and expressed a desire to refrain from judging such persons. Likewise, Isaiah confessed that he is not even sure that homosexuality is a sin at all.

This was very surprising, in part because older individuals are often perceived as being more conservative. In addition, the three middle-aged participants are Baptist pastors, and the Baptist denomination is viewed as one of the more conservative religious organizations within the black church community.

During the interviews, some of the participants were noticeably uncomfortable. Their body language suggested that they were uneasy either with the process of the interview, or the topic being discussed. Their comments also suggested that homosexuality is a sensitive topic to discuss within the black church community. Many of them shared that they believe that church leaders are afraid to address this topic. I would agree with this assessment. I believe that the black church is deathly afraid of this topic, which is precisely why it is not being addressed.

These four themes imply that pastors and church leaders recognize the existence of a gay and lesbian contingent within the black church, but that they have many questions about how to appropriately approach and minister to them. They do not appear to think of gay men and lesbian women as a "lost cause." The themes also help to confirm the sensitive, emotionally charged nature of this topic. Though each of the six participants appeared to fight with great ferociousness to keep his or her homophobic, stereotype-based beliefs from emerging during the interviews, what was revealed was that church leaders, like everyone else, are human beings. They too have prejudices, some of which were revealed during the interviews. Their humanity is no excuse for their ignorance or their insensitivity. But it does, perhaps, help others understand their plight.

This study was theoretically based on subcultural identity theory. Subcultural identity theory states that groups, such as churches or other religious organizations, identify "outgroups" or "negative reference groups" as a way of establishing and strengthening their own identity and solidarity. In essence, this theory argues that a church or groups of churches might construct an "enemy" group against which to compare itself, creating an "us-them" mentality. A subcultural identity theory of religion asserts that the evangelical church continues to grow in the United States because it is in opposition to the secular world (Smith, 1998; Wellman, 1999).

According to Wellman (1999), many religious groups use homosexuals as their primary "outgroup." Boston (1999) has cited several examples of religious leaders using gay men and lesbian women as a negative reference group in an effort to rouse their supporters and persuade them to send monetary contributions. Based on subcultural identity theory, I believed that I would find that the participants of this study had either participated in or witnessed homosexuals as an "outgroup" within the black church. Based on their responses during the interviews, I did not find this to be the case. They stated that gay men and lesbian women were not viewed as better or worse than any other "sinner." I believe that in order to truly ascertain whether subcultural identity theory applies to the black church's treatment of gay men and lesbian women, the alleged "outgroup" will have to be addressed, along with the dominant group. In other words, gay men and lesbian women need to be interviewed.

The historical use of scripture in the oppression of African Americans did not factor into participants' discussions on using the Bible as proof that homosexuality is a sin. One would be hard pressed to find a pastor today who would point to Ephesians 6:5-

9 as proof that slavery, as practiced in the United States, was justified in the eyes of God, according to those verses. This, however, was not the case during the Era of Slavery in this country. There were many preachers who held up this verse (and others) as undisputable proof that slavery was a part of God's plan for black Americans. In addition, the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) has long held that its racist beliefs are founded upon a foundation of Christianity. Yet those of us who cling to justice and fairness shun such ideas. Likewise, I wonder if, fifty or one hundred years from now, society will gasp at the thought of Genesis 19 (the story of Sodom and Gomorrah), and similar passages of scripture, being used to condemn homosexuality the way we gasp now at the thought of the Ephesians verse being used to justify slavery. I don't know the answer to that question. I suppose only time will tell. Meanwhile, I think the Christian community should humbly and cautiously approach this issue. There are at least two sides to every argument regarding homosexuality and the Bible. Each side needs to be respected and heard. Hopefully this research will help facilitate such understanding.

Prior to beginning this research, I closely examined my biases related to this topic. I tried to identify areas where these biases might interfere with my interpretation of the data, so that I could take extra steps to insure that that did not happen. As I read and re-read what I have written in this dissertation, particularly the conclusions I have made, I, at times, find it difficult to believe that *I* am the one who wrote it, because parts of what I have written are very different from what I personally believe. Realizing that conveying my personal beliefs is not my objective, I am pleased with this result. My qualitative research group was also helpful, in that they were able to see some things in the transcripts that I did not notice, perhaps because of my biases.

Also, some of my initial biases were based on ideas that I accepted as facts, regarding this topic. During the course of this study, I have developed a healthy degree of uncertainty concerning many aspects of the debates about homosexuality and Christianity. This uncertainty, I believe, made it easier for me to manage my biases during the interpretation of the data. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), during qualitative research, researchers and participants may experience shifts in their construction of knowledge as more reasonable constructions are discovered. This is what I experience time and again during the course of this research, causing many of my biases to fade into the background.

Recommendations

The various ways this topic should, in my opinion, be approached in future research, are many. During the interviews for this research, the responses from interviewees suggest that they do not personally engage in the type of negative behavior toward gay men and lesbian women that is recorded in the literature reviewed for this study. It is my opinion that, during the interviews, the participants of this study may have felt uncomfortable sharing any negative treatment of homosexuals they have witnessed, or been a part of, in the black church community. Gay men and lesbian women, who have perhaps been the recipients of such treatment, may be more forthcoming regarding this issue. Therefore, future research should focus on the experiences of gay men and lesbian women within the black church. My guess is that their perceptions will differ from those of the participants of this study. In addition, church leaders and gay and lesbian church members from other regions of the country should be interviewed. Other racial and cultural groups should be addressed as well. It is possible that there are

regional, and other differences, which were not accounted for in this study due to the homogeneous nature of the selected participants.

Data from the interviews also revealed underlying issues related to this topic that should be addressed in future research. Based on information provided by the interviewees, black families are not dealing with issues of sexuality any better than black churches are. Both institutions have neglected to address sex and related topics in a forthright manner. The way that churches are responding to the AIDS crisis in the black community should also be addressed in future research.

Lastly, scholars from both sides of the debate over what the Bible "really" says about homosexuality need to be given a safe, neutral place where each argument can be presented and heard. Future research should focus on asking both sides to explain what they believe regarding the Bible and homosexuality, and then presenting those arguments together in a way that is impartial and fair. This will require researchers to, as much as is possible, suspend their own beliefs – at least temporarily. I also think that sooner or later the Christian community will have to grapple with this issue just as it did with other once controversial issues such as slavery, racism, interracial marriage, and divorce.

What I hope this study accomplished was to bring into the open a secret issue that the black community, and the black church, have tried to keep hidden for far too long. I hope that by participating in the interviews, the participants were able to challenge their own thoughts and opinions regarding homosexuals and their place in the church. I hope that future researchers will see this as a topic that can be approached from an academic perspective, and that they will take up this issue and engage in related research.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

(1) General/Personal Information
- Tell me a little about yourself.
- What was your family like growing up?
- What were you taught regarding appropriate male/female gender roles?
- What were you taught regarding sexuality?
- How were these issues addressed in the church where you grew up?
- Talk to me about your academic training.
- How did you decide to enter the ministry?
- What preachers have had an impact on you – particularly in your decision to become a pastor?
- Can you share a defining event that affected this decision?
- What theologies have impacted your ministry?
- Tell me about your church.
- How would you characterize the average member of your church?

(2) Sermons
- What kinds of things do you preach about, primarily?
- What kinds of social issues do you address in your sermons?
- Have you ever preached about or discussed homosexuality in any of your sermons? What did you say?
- Are there any specific scriptures that you refer to when addressing homosexuality?
- Would you be inclined to differentiate between gay men and lesbians in a sermon? Explain.

In an effort to differentiate their personal feelings from their theological beliefs, I will then ask:

(3) Personal thoughts regarding homosexuality
- What are your personal feelings toward homosexuals?
- Do you believe that homosexuality is a sin? Why?
- Are you aware that there are homosexuals in the church setting?
- Where do you see gay men fitting into the black church community?
- Where do you see lesbian women fitting into the black church community?

(4) Experiences regarding homosexuality within the black church
- How have you seen homosexuals treated by the black church in general?
- How do you think homosexuality should be addressed within the black church?
- Why do you think it is/isn't addressed that way?

- What do you see as barriers to homosexuality being addressed that way?
- What do you think can be done to improve the situation?

(5) Debriefing Questions
- Is there anything that you would like to add that was not addressed in my questions?
- How did you feel about the process of this interview?
- What other comments do you have?
- I will issue a reminder regarding confidentiality and informed consent information.

APPENDIX B

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

First of all, I would like to state that if you choose to participate in this study, the information you provide would be kept confidential. You will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym (false name) to help protect your anonymity. For this study I will be interviewing senior pastors of black Pentecostal and Baptist churches in order to better understand their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes regarding issues related to homosexuality.

What does it mean if I participate?

If you choose to participate you will be interviewed two times. The first interview will take between one and one and one-half hours. During the second interview, which should take between one-half and one hour, you will be given the opportunity to examine the transcript from your first interview. You will also have an opportunity to add information to or subtract information from that transcript. In addition, you will be given the opportunity to provide additional information on this topic that you have become aware of between interviews. The second interview will also give me an opportunity to seek clarification on or follow-up on any of your statements from the first interview. With your permission, both interviews will be audio taped so that they may be transcribed with accuracy.

What are the benefits and risks of participating in this study?

Though there will be no direct benefit to you, your participation will contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic of homosexuality and the black church. This information will be beneficial to pastors, ministry leaders, families, and all those interested in this issue.

There are no physical risks involved in this study. However, as you discuss this topic, you may become more aware of your personal beliefs based on what you reveal in the discussion. In addition, because the interviews will be conducted face-to-face, I cannot guarantee anonymity.

Can I choose to stop the interview if I want to?

If you agree to participate in the study, you are under no obligation to complete the interview. In addition, you may refuse to answer specific questions or stop the interview altogether at any time. You will be given a copy of the Statement of Informed Consent for your records.

_____
Initial

Who will have access to my interview information?

The information you provide in your interview will be kept confidential. You will be given an opportunity to choose a pseudonym (false name) that will be used anytime information from your interview is reported individually. I will personally transcribe the interview tapes, after which I will erase the tapes. Prior to their erasure the tapes, along with the Statement of Informed Consent, will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the University of Tennessee. Myself, and my dissertation committee chairperson, will read the transcriptions. I will also form a small group of fellow researchers who will read the transcripts in order to help me understand the information presented in the interviews. Your transcriptions will be anonymous – your real name will not be on them. Each person who reads your transcription will sign a Pledge of Confidentiality, which means that they promise not to share that information with anyone else. I too will sign a Pledge.

This study will result in a dissertation, which is part of the requirement for my doctoral degree. Though portions of the study may be published, your name will not be associated with any such publications.

Who may I contact if I have a question?

You may direct any questions regarding your participation in this study to:

Dutchess R. Jones
djones9@utk.edu

Dr. Joy T. DeSensi, Dissertation Advisor
desensi@utk.edu

Educational Administration and Cultural Studies
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37996-2700
Phone: (856) 974-8555

I _____, have read and understand the above description of the research being conducted by Dutchess R. Jones. I agree to participate in this study and understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I agree to participate in the interview process and for the interview to be audio taped.

_____ _____
Name Date

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX C

STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY BY TRANSCRIPT READERS

I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews provided by the participants of this study. I understand that by signing this pledge, I am agreeing to keep the information contained in these transcriptions confidential. I will not discuss the transcriptions, or the discussions regarding the transcriptions, with anyone other than the researcher. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

_____ _____

Name Date

_____

Signature

VITA

Dutchess Renee Jones was born in Oak Ridge, Tennessee on May 14, 1971. She graduated from Oak Ridge High School in 1989. The following August she entered Roane State Community College, and in August 1991, transferred to East Tennessee State University (ETSU). In December of 1993 she graduated from ETSU with a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology. After working as a Program Counselor at the Detoxification Rehabilitation Institute, she entered the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August 1995, and in August 1996 received a Master of Science degree in Human Performance and Sport Studies.

In August of 1996 she entered the doctoral program in Cultural Studies, and in December of 2001 was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Education, with a concentration in Cultural Studies in Education.