

A Loose Garment of Identifications

I confess: I was baptized as an infant. I was not born a Baptist. I was not raised a Baptist. Still, I am a Baptist. I know this because my church told me so when I joined. I joined a Baptist congregation that affirmed my infant Baptism. Being Baptist and all, it was the congregation's decision to make – though I am left with a “Baptist identity” that some would contest. I went to Divinity School identifying as a United Methodist refugee hanging out in a Baptist camp. I was really into the exile narratives. Dean Leonard (author of the preface of this volume) joked that if you scratched me I still bled Wesley. He was probably right, particularly if you scratched me while talking about grace. *I confess: there are parts of what I learned as a United Methodist kid that I want to keep.*

I grew up in Winston-Salem, NC, on the campus of The Children's Home. My father had grown up there as a resident and my mother, like me, as a “staff kid.” The church was literally the center of our community. Our work, our play, our lives radiated out from it. I grew up in a church that was made up of young people with hard stories. The kids in my neighborhood knew the world was complicated – full of challenges and injustices. In a church made up mostly of children, we learned the daily practice of resurrection.

In the middle of my southern hometown, I grew up side by side with rural and urban kids of different race. I grew up with a sense that our faith called us into action, it called us into working for a better world. It was a community – and a church – built on love and hope.

I confess: I am an ordained Baptist Minister.

Yes, I am an ordained Baptist Minister that was baptized as an infant. Truthfully, it really was not until the process leading up to my ordination that I came to seriously identify as Baptist. I was ordained by a congregation that knew and loved me well. They identified my gifts for ministry, and invited me to minister with their youth and young adults. They stood in line to place their hands on me in an act of blessing while I wept with joy, transformed by grace. Being Baptist and all, it was the congregation's decision to make – though it left me in an interesting place as I later tried to interpret believer's Baptism to young people discerning a call. *I confess: I have never been so sure that I was Baptist as I was the first time another was leaning back in my arms, submersed in the baptismal waters.*

I confess: I share my home, my bed, and my life with a man named Ron. The fact that I dearly love another man and have covenanted to spend my life with him was well known by the Baptist

When I was in middle school the church at the Home was dissolved and became a chaplain's ministry. My family moved to a church across town. I was heavily involved in the youth group and served as a youth representative on several councils and committees. I loved church, and took my commitments seriously, but I asked a lot of questions. By the time I was graduating from high school I found myself bumping up against a church culture that suggested faith primarily meant accepting what you were told.

I left for college both committed to my Christian faith and increasingly frustrated with church. This was the early 1990's, and with Cold War gone the culture wars took center stage. The horrors of the early years of AIDS thrust "homosexuality" into the limelight. I remember attending a church conference with my father where they talked for hours about the exclusion of homosexuals from ordination – the threat and abomination they represented. Later that day I told my father that God may be real, but certainly couldn't be found in church.

congregation I joined, the same congregation that later ordained and called me just months after they blessed our union when we made a more formal and public declaration of our covenant on our tenth anniversary. When I initially came back to church I did so as a Baptist, because it was a Baptist congregation that would have me – it was their decision to make. These congregational decisions I mention were not made in isolation or on a whim. They were decisions that were preceded by prayerful discernment. My congregation chose their practices in accordance with biblical study, attentiveness to tradition, and a sense of where God was calling them. I came to learn and love the prophetic Baptist tradition that claimed me. While many of my younger Baptist peers were wondering whether or not “being Baptist” was worth holding onto, I was falling in love with a way of doing Christianity that seemed well situated to respond to a changing world. *I confess: I get excited when I talk about Baptists.*

While in college I became heavily involved in campus justice movements. I was involved in work around sexual violence, racial reconciliation, gender equality, and the abolition of the death penalty. I knew my faith and my family story had something to do with my commitments to justice work, but I had not yet learned how to articulate the connection. I found church boring and consumed with protecting the status quo, so I distanced myself from it.

As I began dating Ron, I came face to face with the aggressive condemnations of Christians bent on saving me from eternal damnation. Rarely did I see those folks so interested in the gender of who I was dating show up in the places where we were speaking out about injustices on our campus or in the larger world. I wore a cross around my neck, but kept it hidden under my shirt. I knew that I saw the face of Christ in the broken and often angry folks I encountered as an activist, but I still couldn't name what that had to do with church.

And yet, I have never been quite so gay as when I have been identified as a Baptist minister. The juxtaposition of the two draws attention to the ways I am marginalized. Though I was fortunate to serve a congregation that had room for me to be known mostly for my work with young people, I knew that for many in our pews my standing up front mattered differently because it meant they belonged, too. I knew that the blessings the church bestowed on me were politically loaded, even if we did not want them to be. I knew that, at least to some, when I walked out into the world, I was known as “that gay Baptist minister.” Because I identified with a Baptist church, and because I identified with a loving man, I was a border-dweller – a hybrid – both a part of and separate from all at the same time. Even in my inclusion, I was understood as one to be included. I was a walking paradox.

Just saying, “I’m a Baptist minister, and this is my partner Ron,” still makes me laugh. I was invited (and still am) to sit on panels, speak to other church groups, guest lecture in classes – to stand up in front of the gathered body and confess: I am a

I followed church news, and all around me it seemed that pastors were being brought up on charges or churches were being “disfellowshipped” for blessing same-gendered relationships or celebrating the gifts of gay or lesbian identified Christians for ministry. Though I was thankful that there were places I knew were working for change, I stayed away. It was all just too exhausting.

Years later, after several bouts with depression and lots of failed strategies to numb the ache that I carried with me day and night, I accepted that it was time to go back. I longed for church – for a faith community that came together in worship and love. I began to bump into church folks in activist circles. I am sure they had always been there, but suddenly I had eyes to see.

The first time I met with the woman who would become my pastor and friend (and later supervisor), I told her that I was scared that if I came back to church, it would lead me to going to seminary. Two years later, I enrolled.

gay Baptist minister. I colluded (and sometimes still collude) with well-meaning folks trying to understand. I confessed to my ridiculous paradox, and then tried to make sense of it, answering questions about scriptural interpretation, offering a range of ideas about sexuality, and telling my story of how I came to “know” who I am. I let myself become one of the *good gays*, the gays that are “just like us, but different,” because it was the only space offered, and though I had not set out to find that status, in many ways it was pretty easy for folks to read me in that way. I made myself easily intelligible, an “acceptable other.” I was being created in the image of...I don’t know what...but I am not sure it was God. I was being created and re-created, being constituted and re-constituted, by this public discourse about homosexuality and Christianity, and I was implicated as a co-creator. *I confess: I am getting tired of explaining myself in ways that are more about making other folks comfortable than doing the Gospel work of reconciliation and resurrection.*

I began my formal theological education bent on coming to understand God. I figured that if I studied hard enough I could think my way there. I learned a lot that was really useful – but ultimately came to recognize that there were limits to the whole thinking project. At some point you just reach the edge of mystery and stand in awe. I began to find new ways to talk about my experience of God, and eventually came into the beginnings of practicing contemplatively oriented prayer. It would take a few years for those practices to root themselves – I was pretty skeptical. However, those years in school represented a major shift in the focus of my attentiveness. I also found ways of praying in which my body and my spirit no longer felt so divided.

I developed a strong identification with the Lazarus story in John 11. I loved Jesus calling to Lazarus to “Come out!” (11:43). I had known the darkness, and I was emerging from my tomb, following the voice of Christ.

There is an over-againstness to that conversation that no longer works for me, a way of understanding and being understood that is dependent on the stability of our identities worn anxiously. I am getting tired of trying to figure out what it means to be an insider and outsider at the same time. I am getting tired of being the litmus test by which some other Baptist is determined to be a good liberal, a good moderate, or a good conservative. I am getting tired of being the “other” by which your identity is constituted. I am tired, but not angry – really, please hear me when I say that. I am just feeling done with the pattern of this conversation.

I am ready for what is emerging – new ways to talk and think about being Christian, and about being Baptist. I am ready to pay attention to a discourse through which God is creating and re-creating us *in God's image*, through conversations that speak us into new ways of being.

Towards Identifications

I am writing this knowing that if I wrote it a year from now it would be an entirely different essay, as much as I know that if I'd written it a year ago and read it now I would want to revise it. One of the gifts and challenges of postmodernity is an awareness that knowledge is always situated in a particular time and place, mediated by the language and symbols we can access at that moment, and inseparable from our embodied experiences of the world. It is an awareness that is daunting, simultaneously toppling our foundations and inviting us to be fully present to what *is* right here and right now.

The toppling of those foundations calls into question the limits of any claims I can

make about my own “identity.” As for the idea that deep underneath there is a core self just waiting to be liberated? My toppled foundation #452. That’s been a hard one for me to let go of, but the effect of trying has been a deeper encounter with mystery. In accepting my unknowing, even of myself, I experience humility. I encounter grace. I am constantly being formed by the conversations in which I participate. I can only know myself in relation to whatever strategies I use to make meaning of my experiences and of the body that experiences them. I am less and less invested in my identity, more and more interested in my *identifications*.

The noun *identity* emphasizes the notion of a singular, stable, core-self that we both should and are able to unveil. In contrast, *identifications* is the noun form of a verb – the very structure of the word (an active verb held stable for a moment by the addition of the -ion suffix) suggests fluidity, acknowledging ever shifting matrices of engagements and influences. In its plural form, *identifications* makes room for one to stand in multiple places simultaneously. It acknowledges the experience of finding those multiple places sometimes congruent and sometime conflicting. Whereas *identity* is built on a foundation of core principles assumed to be universal across time and space; *identifications* shifts our attention towards practices, always in conversation with tradition, but finding meaning in particular contexts.

So, I claim Christianity as my primary identification. My faith offers an amazing system of language and symbols through which I read my embodied experiences of the world, but I am still becoming. I am a work in process. I am a sacred creation (and a discursive production) spoken into being through a language of Love – and that process is

Dr. Brian Ammons \ <http://nekkidresurrection.com>

God. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1).

Shifting from an obsessive attachment to the quest to uncover my “true” identity towards wearing a loose garment of identifications has opened me to paying attention to God working in my life through all that I encounter – the lines between the sacred and mundane are falling away. Those binaries have just quit working for me – most binaries have. Understanding myself over-against some “other” always requires my closing myself off (at least to some degree) to that other. It requires a deepening sense of alienation, even from myself. Wearing this loose garment of identifications has also allowed me to let go of the “enough” questions: *Am I Christian enough? Am I Baptist enough? Am I man enough?*

Identifications are less about core essences, more about free associations (in a Baptist polity kind of way). I identify with certain words and gestures and the ideas they represent because they have shaped a sense of subjectivity that, while always incomplete, is an attempt to speak about how I am reading what is going on with my body-self. Talking about my identifications pushes me to think about what I *am* primarily in terms of what I *do*. The *practices* take center stage. And yet, just as I am constantly reading and interpreting other people’s practices and gestures, they are also reading and interpreting mine. Despite the intention of my performance, of how I string together those practices, I have little control over how I am understood. My practices can play with words, symbols and gestures, juxtapose them onto one another in creative and interesting ways, reshape them and place them in new contexts, offer them up to those around me; but I cannot

Dr. Brian Ammons \ <http://nekkidresurrection.com>

escape the systems of meaning through which they are read, nor can I control the route they take through those systems. So, I tread lightly, working out my salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

While identities are fixed and require clear borders (which then must be defended and protected), identifications are fluid and multiple. We identify with Christ, we take on that posture, and so we follow on a journey towards Jerusalem, taking on that practice. Full of hope and fear, but trusting in the Mystery, we journey with whomever else shows up on the same road; engaging in conversation and story-telling; tending to one another's bodies/spirits; praying, walking, and resting together. We travel together for a while, then shifts in pace or the need for rest bring us new travel partners. We keep traveling, following that which is life-giving, leaving the dead to bury their dead. We hold our identifications loosely, so there is room for the movement of the Spirit. We are emerging, and the journey defines us. *Sexuality and Sexual Practice*

My deep longing is for the church to engage a conversation about sexuality that is not caught up in the gender of my partner choice, but rather in the practices we claim by which our bodies encounter the sacred in one another. I long for a conversation about sexuality that is not so concerned about who fits into what category and how or why they ended up there, but takes seriously the implications of our incarnational tradition for the holy mystery of sex. I want to talk about pleasure, about deep and intimate connection, about the permeable boundaries of our body-selves. But, I do not want to have a conversation that makes me Exhibit A, as if my thoughts and experiences of these miracles of sexual practice are somehow freakish and exotic. I do not want to continue to

Dr. Brian Ammons \ <http://nekkidresurrection.com>

walk into rooms with my partner and know that there are folks wondering “Who does what to whom?” Or worse yet, I do not want to continue dealing with folks’ assumptions that they know the answer to that awful question by how we stand, speak, or dress.

When we let go of identities in favor of identifications, then we have the possibility to connect in new clusters and formations, to engage serious conversations about *sexual* practice as *spiritual* practice, to teach our young people what it means to embody love and encounter God in the sacredness of a partner’s touch. Why must we assume that my sexual practice has more in common with other men who partner with men than with other people of faith who approach sex as a form of prayer? Why must we assume that the sexes of our bodies, or the qualities of our gender performance, are the most important aspects of how we extend hospitality to a lover? Aren’t these core spiritual values that deserve to be shaped and informed by our faith? So, why do we hand them over to the discourses that serve only to alienate us from ourselves, one another, and God?

For the most part Christians in recent years have bought into reducing a conversation about sexuality to a debate about “sexual orientation.” As the term is used in these debates, sexual orientation is based in a notion of immutable differences. It is a strategy that derives from a scientific/medical understanding of homosexuality merged with a history of efforts seeking equal rights under the law. The thinking goes something like this: if my sexual identity is congenital and unchanging, then it is “natural” and “God-given,” therefore you must accept me and my relationships. It is a strategy that was adopted from the liberation movements of other marginalized groups and has offered its

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share of successes, but it is also a strategy with significant problems. First off, it sets up the category of “sexual orientation” as a clear-cut binary. Either you are a straight, or you’re gay. If you claim the possibility of choice in whom you partner with you undercut the central reasoning of the argument, and therefore fall outside the categories of analysis. It also assumes that gender is stable, another clear-cut binary. Folks are understood to be either men or women, based on whether they are male or female, and anything else (ranging from those who make “abnormal” choices in clothing and accessories, to those born with ambiguous genitalia) is deemed *unnatural*. Further, the strategy of immutable difference sets up a notion of identity that in its controlling of boundaries, demands that loyalties be chosen between the sometimes conflicting politics of sexuality, gender, race, and class. The effect is that the reigns of the conversation around same gender desire too often remain in the hands of wealthier, white, gay, men – while same gender loving women, people of color, working class folks, and non-westerners are relegated to other conversations about justice. It sets up a system by which we pretend that racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and imperialism are not all products of the same strategies to regulate access to institutional power.

Personally, I also find the logic of the immutable differences claims to be somewhat victimizing. It assumes that if I could change I would...after all, who would choose such a life? *Well, I would.* I love my life. I love the gifts I have come to know because I share my life with the man I love. I am thankful that my experiences with falling outside of dominant norms (so often violently regulated by the church) have opened me to a greater awareness of the other privileges that I carry in our culture as a North American, middle-

Dr. Brian Ammons \ <http://nekkidresurrection.com>

class, white, male – also “identities” that I would argue are not *natural* or simply given, but rather are socially constructed, discursively produced, and far flimsier than they appear to be. Still, those identities are read onto me, and I read them onto myself. They shape my embodied experiences of the world, and thus they shape what I know and how I know it.

Ironically, because within the larger church I am read first and foremost as a gay man, I find it difficult to gain access to many faith-based conversations about other justice issues. At least here in the South, though I suspect it is a broader trend, we somehow have managed to buy into this idea that churches can either take on issues of gender and sexuality or issues of race and class, but rarely both (I pray that the emergent church will take up the hard work to find another path). Despite my childhood experiences, a career as a public school teacher, and a long history of work around other justice issues in the public sphere, when church folk come together beyond the congregational level to talk about justice and reconciliation I am often asked to either straighten up or stay away. As long as I am working with secular activists, the connections between racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, imperialism, and rampant consumerism seem pretty obvious – and the assumption that they function separately and without overlapping targets seems pretty problematic. Still, in both ecumenical gatherings and those recent collaborations of Baptists of different stripes and flavors, rather than being understood as having a unique and possibly valuable perspective to offer on Christianity, power, and politics, folks like me are most often deemed a threat to unity (a unity that ironically seems dependent on our exclusion).

Dr. Brian Ammons \ <http://nekkidresurrection.com>

Here is my point, the thing I am feeling passionate about and finding life-affirming these days: the emergent posture in regards to sexuality and justice, the truly prophetic stance at this moment, claims that life-affirming sexual practice based in loving kindness is a powerful, sacred, and transforming gift from God. It is good and holy. When *this* is our starting place, then the conversations about “What made you gay?” no longer have relevance. The gender, race, and class of my partner become secondary to the ways in which we honor God through our embodied resurrection practices of sacred sex. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).*

I say all of that, I name my deep longing for a different conversation, and yet I also believe the church still plays a huge role in working for a just and safe world for folks who call into question our assumptions about sexuality and gender. As much as I long for a discussion about sexuality that moves from identities towards identification, from orientations towards practices, I know that we are constituted by a larger cultural discourse. I would love to see the church take the lead in reframing the conversation and moving beyond apologetics that keep us locked neatly in place, but as we do that let us not forget the daily physical, emotional, and spiritual violence that far too many of our brothers and sisters face at the hands of others claiming Christianity as their foundation. I am ready for a new conversation, but I must move towards that without ignoring that the worst of the old conversation is still destroying the lives of people I love.

A Call to Greater Justice

Dr. Brian Ammons \ <http://nekkidresurrection.com>

I spend my time these days studying and teaching at a public university. I work at the intersection of Curriculum and Cultural Studies, and teach undergraduate courses in both Education and Women's and Gender Studies. I have neither given up my ordination nor my commitment to ministry, but I have come to understand that amazing opportunities for engaging and rethinking my spiritual life have come with a willingness to walk beyond the boundaries of the churchyard. Whether I am talking about the role of spirituality in the education process, or introducing the complexities of poststructuralism and queer theories, I carry my identifications with my faith communities with me. Sometimes those identifications are named more explicitly than others, depending on the time and place, but it is widely known among my students and colleagues that not only is my ordination as Baptist minister part of my background, it is also part of my present. I can land in conversations about the relationship between the church and state on Tuesday, teach about the racialized and classed nature of the push for legalized same-sex marriage on Thursday, and then on Saturday find myself functioning as an agent of both the state and the church in performing a wedding and signing a license for a cross-gendered couple. Those practices and conversations leak into one another (which, by the way, makes the signing of those licenses more and more difficult). While I am always careful about the boundaries of my role as a state employee, I make little attempt to pretend that my multiple identifications are clearly distinct or lacking in meaningful tensions. The invitation for me is to live fully within those tensions, to pay attention to how God is speaking through the stretches, and then to relax and trust.

The ideas I have sketched out here have implications not only for sexuality, but also

Dr. Brian Ammons \ <http://nekkidresurrection.com>

for how we think about privilege in relation to race, class, nationality and all other categories of identity that we take for granted. When we absolutize our identities, we set up rigid walls around communities that function as much to divide as to include. We buy into the subtle hostilities in processes of self-definition that needs easily discernable others, *abnormals* by which we can understand our normalcy. That subtle hostility, when paired with anxiety and nurtured by fear, can erupt into hatred and violence. The church has a responsibility to confess and challenge our roles in producing and regulating those systems of categorization and their inherent outcomes.

In the end, I am unsure as to whether or not there is anything really *emergent* about what I have said at all. What is new about paying attention to God working in our lives? What is new about Christ's radical hospitality? If what I am saying is read as disruptive, I pray that it is a result of my joining ranks with countless others over the past two thousand years who have sought to live their lives in the way of Jesus. I pray that I am but one of the countless people of faith from all traditions who opened themselves to the movement of Sacred Mystery in their lives. I trust that God is in it all.