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GTU Distinguished Faculty Lecture, 2011

What Has Scholarship to do with Activism? Reflections on 15 Years in the Trenches

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When I asked Dean Holder and other former distinguished faculty lecturers what this lecture should be like, to a person they told me to say simply whatever I wanted to say to the GTU community at this point in my career. It could be, they suggested, as free-wheeling as I liked. So, this lecture is both considerably more personal and more reflective than my usual scholarly presentations. It has been helpful for me to write, and I hope it will be helpful for you to hear.

The year was 1959, and I was a fifth grader at William F. Fox Elementary School in Richmond, VA. My mother was one of the elected officers of the Fox School PTA (Parent Teachers Association) and had been actively involved with that group for quite a few years, since both of my older brothers had preceded me as students at Fox. In the late Spring of that year, I came home from school one day to find my mother sitting alone in the kitchen, looking very sad. After explaining to me what had happened to her that day, she concluded by saying, “I felt betrayed by people I thought were my friends; I was angry, sad, and embarrassed, but I decided I had to go anyway. The issue was too important to let my personal feelings get in the way.”

To understand what my mother had done that day, you have to understand what was happening in Richmond, VA and indeed all over the south during that time. In 1954, the US Supreme Court, in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, had outlawed the so-called “separate but equal” segregated plan of most schools in the south. In 1956, the Supreme Court finally defined the kinds of remedies and timetable that schools had to follow, essentially to integrate all schools as quickly as possible. In Virginia, the governor, Lindsey Almond, and long-time US senator, Harry Bird, Jr., responded by launching a program they called “Massive Resistance” to the court orders. Part of this program permitted, indeed encouraged, school boards in Virginia to vote to close all the public schools in their area to prevent integration from occurring. So, in February of 1959, the Prince Edward County school board in Virginia closed all of its public schools to stop the de-segregation of one of the county high schools. The Richmond public schools were under similar pressure to integrate, but the city school board was more divided on what it should do. Many prominent and vocal citizens, including the editor of the city newspaper, wanted the Richmond school board to close the city’s public schools just as Prince Edward County had done. Ultimately, the Richmond board determined that if they were to take such a significant step, it needed to be confirmed by parents and teachers; so, they decided to ask every school in the system to send elected representatives to a meeting where they would vote on whether or not to close all the schools. The Board promised to follow the decision of this city-wide vote to close the schools or keep them open and begin de-segregation.

And now we get to my mother. Since she was an elected PTA member and would be in the delegation to vote, she was called by the Fox PTA president a few days earlier and told that the delegate group of 8 people planned to meet at the school and go together to the city-wide meeting. On the day of the vote, when my mother got to the school at the appointed time, she could not find any of the other delegates. When she went to the principal's office to ask if anyone had seen the other PTA members, thinking perhaps that she had gone to the wrong location, she was told that the rest of the group had met there about 45 minutes earlier and gone on immediately to the downtown meeting. Mother realized at that moment that they had purposely told her the wrong time because they wanted her to miss the vote. As a long-time member of our church's inter-racial council, she had very sympathetic views towards integration; those views were well-known and clearly in a minority at Fox School. My mother was not an activist; in fact, she was generally the quintessential southern lady, polite, "sweet," retiring in public, and quite shy. But rather than coming back home quietly after such a public betrayal and embarrassment, she left the school, got on a downtown bus, got herself to the meeting, and took her seat in the very row where the other Fox PTA members were sitting, just before the vote was taken. She cast her ballot along with the rest and then came back home where I found her after school that day.

That conversation with my mother, though it took place over 50 years ago, is still crystal clear in my memory; it was one of the pivotal moments of my childhood. I

was so proud of my mother's courage. When it really counted, she put aside her personal preferences, feelings, and even her deep socialization as a southern lady and acted on her strongly held moral convictions in a public manner. Her sense of justice overcame her personal qualms and fears. That act of courage by my mother became for me the ideal of what was expected of a Christian in situations of conflict. While I have not always been able to live up to that ideal, it has certainly stood as a deep motivating factor in many of the things I have tried to do in my adult life.

Oh, yes, the outcome of the vote in Richmond: we learned the next day that the city of Richmond public schools would remain open and begin de-segregation because the motion to close them had been defeated at the city-wide PTA meeting--- by ONE vote.

I have told you this story because I believe that everyone's life is made up of a series of such touch-points that mould them into the people they become and in part stand behind many of the decisions they make later in life. My particular involvement in justice issues and activist causes throughout my career finds its motivation in great part from a number of these past moments. In my teen years, I, too, became active in the fight for racial justice and de-segregation in Richmond. Later, after college, I participated in anti-war marches during the Viet Nam era, while at the same time working as an American Red Cross hospital caseworker with wounded servicemen at the Valley Forge Army Hospital in Pennsylvania. It was through this latter experience that I began to understand that my particular gifts and limitations were better suited to

academic work than activist work. When the Red Cross promoted me to casework supervisor in order to move me to a front line hospital in Viet Nam, I decided that it was the appropriate moment to put my new self-understanding into action, and I left the Red Cross to enter graduate school. Was that a kind of cop-out? Yes, probably it was, but I had learned some hard lessons about myself in my time working for the Red Cross. Whether I did not have sufficient maturity at that time or whether I simply did not have the psychic make up for such an intense form of social work, I knew that I could not emotionally survive much longer dealing so directly and daily with the bloody chaos that war always seems to leave behind: young boys, now missing arms and legs, or paralyzed, or hooked on drugs; distraught families completely unprepared for welcoming their strong and hardy sons back as invalids or worse. I realized that I needed to move my activism to a more indirect and protected space if I wanted to keep going for many more years. Graduate school and, as the unofficial motto of the University of Chicago had it, “the life of the mind,” seemed to promise a more sustainable setting for continuing to work on the issues I cared most about.

During my graduate school years and my first couple of decades as a biblical scholar and teacher, my justice concerns continued to find expression, even if somewhat modest expression, in the same manner which, I believe, most scholars who wish to support activist movements tend to use: in some of my publications and in some of the classes I developed and taught. I had strong commitments to feminist work in biblical studies and to the greater inclusion of other marginalized voices in

the discourses of biblical scholarship. While not all of my scholarship was directed toward those issues, enough of it was for me to feel I was actively supporting issues that I cared about. This form of scholarly activism through publications and occasional classes taught was (and to some extent still is) a fairly wide-spread practice across many academic disciplines and was also viewed as a very legitimate expression of scholarly activist commitments, as long as the so-called “advocacy” writings were balanced by other “real” scholarly projects in a scholar’s publication record. That mixture was certainly the case in my publications and in the classes I taught, and I was generally fortunate enough to be able to move forward in my career with only slightly more than the usual number of academic collisions and political gaffs. The academic world, even the often belligerently agonistic world of New Testament scholarship, really did seem to be my natural element, and overall I was comfortable and happy in what I was doing professionally.

In the early 1990’s what was then called the “Gay Liberation Movement” began to make national headlines. While the movement had been developing since the early 1970’s, it was generally under-reported and mostly under the radar of the wider public. The twin issues of “gays in the military” and “same-sex marriage” raised the level of public and political interest in this movement. Additionally, I have always believed that the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 as America’s greatest rhetorical enemy and danger provided one of the major motivations for the conservative faction’s public “outing” of the so-called “gay agenda” as the next

greatest danger to America's values and future. We always seem to need some target to hate and fear in order to jolt the electorate into action, especially the action of giving money. Of course, the "agenda" of "gays in the military" and even "same-sex marriage," while certainly of concern to many gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, was of considerably less immediate worry than the continuing dramatic death toll being exacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the early 1990's, if gay men, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgender folks had actually been in control of some public agenda, you can bet that serving in the military and participating in the rituals of heterosexual marriage would not have topped that list. But these two issues were what many in the heterosexual majority seemed to care most about and so, they became the defining public issues of the last two decades for LGBT people. One of the many burdens carried by minority groups is their inability to define the terms by which they will be judged or even the issues they will be required to fight in the public and political arena; these are almost always determined by the wishes, prejudices, and stereotypes of the majority.

The public debate, increasingly vitriolic and de-humanizing, over the "agenda" of those "pushy homosexuals" that marked the early 1990's put me into a serious moral quandary. By this point, I was a tenured full professor with a significant list of relatively well-received publications, a growing following of doctoral advisees, and, most important of all at that time, a potentially far-reaching project on social location and biblical interpretation in collaboration with my friend and colleague, Fernando

Segovia. I was also a lesbian, but that part of my life was not generally public knowledge. I was and am a very private person, and I have always kept my professional life and my personal life carefully separated. I was comfortable with that separation and had no desire to change it. I also could not help but remember how difficult it was for me to survive the daily personal tragedies I encountered in my earlier direct activist work through the American Red Cross.

However, much of the debate over homosexuality was being funded and fueled by Christian organizations and Christian speakers and writers who were drawing on the Bible as a major support for their de-humanization of gay people. The Bible was my area of expertise; how could I remain silent? Gay kids were being thrown out of their homes or sent away to damaging “ex-gay” programs by their Christian parents with the support of their Christian ministers and churches (and this is still going on today). Some were finding suicide to be the only way out of their misery. Others were turning to drugs and other forms of addiction to lessen the pain of rejection. This was not a debate over the genre of the Gospel of Mark, as interesting as that debate is; it was a debate over people’s lives. How could I remain silent? I remembered what my mother had done, many years before, and I realized that like her, I was facing issues that were too important to let my own personal feelings and preferences get in the way of what I needed to do. I also gained a much better appreciation of how amazing and difficult my mother’s actions had been those many years ago because shifting out of the happy path I had, with a lot of hard work, created for myself to something very

different and much more public was one of the hardest professional decisions I have ever had to make. I don't want this to sound as if I was some kind of martyr; remember that I was a tenured full professor at the time. I knew that whatever I did was unlikely to put my economic survival on the line---many others have risked far, far more for the causes they care about. Still, being called degrading names, receiving vile letters, nasty e-mails and voice messages, losing the respect of some colleagues and even friends is not a situation anyone in her right mind would look forward to. All that and more, I realized quite rightly, would be my lot.

By 1994, I was on the faculty here at the GTU. Much of the reason I accepted the position in Bible at PSR was because I believed that PSR was one of the few schools of religion in the country at that time, which would be open to, and maybe even enthusiastic about, my desire to move into direct activism for LGBT people, and I knew it would be far more open than Vanderbilt University in Nashville could ever be. I was right. By 1997, PSR trustees, administrators, faculty, students, and alums were all joined together to help PSR take its next public steps in support of the LGBTQ communities. By 1999, we had secured start-up funding for a new Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) at PSR, and in 2000 the Center opened its doors with me as its founding executive director and Dr. Bernie Schlager as its newly hired Program Director. My scholarly work now needed to answer not only to the academic world but also to the activist world. Really from 1997 on I have spent a large portion of my time meeting with the leaders of other

LGBT activist groups, both secular and religious, speaking in venues large and small all around the country on the “Bible and homosexuality,” learning the hard lessons of how to be a successful administrator and problem solver, and trying to become the kind of fund-raiser the Center, like any small non-profit organization, needed to secure its present and future. These experiences at CLGS ground my reflections on the relationship between scholarship and activism. In some ways they are quite idiosyncratic, reflecting only my personality and the particular issues I was dealing with; in other ways, they are more universal, reflecting the kind of gains and losses any dedicated scholar might encounter in working closely with an activist movement, becoming in fact, a “movement intellectual.” I want to turn now to some of the things I have learned about balancing scholarship and activism. I know I have spent rather a lot of time this evening detailing my particular path to becoming involved a second time in direct activist work. I have done so because I thought it might be valuable for you to understand why I have ended up where I am and also, perhaps, valuable for me to rehearse that journey again for myself as I am looking toward the next chapter of my career and life.

To begin with, I want to be clear that I do not think that many, indeed, most people drawn to scholarship and the academic life will find it easy to shift focus to direct, almost full-time activist involvement. I certainly have not found it easy. There are a number of sacrifices and accommodations that have to be made to be helpful and successful in the activist world. For one thing, the personality traits that often draw

people toward scholarship and those that often draw one toward activism are quite different from each other. Early in my time at CLGS, the Gill Foundation in Colorado provided funding to send leaders of small LGBT activist organizations to the prestigious Center for Creative Leadership in Colorado Springs. I was one of the new leaders selected for that training. As part of the process, each of us had to take (again, for most of us) the Myers Briggs Personality Inventory. At the meeting itself, in one session the instructor lined all 40 or so of us up in our “type” groups. I was stunned to discover that in almost every category, I was on the minority side of that group of LGBT activist leaders. Specifically, I was an “introvert” (and I really am an introvert), while the vast majority were extroverts. I was a “thinker,” while almost everyone else there was a “feeler.” Activist work requires a lot of interaction with other individuals and groups. You are constantly traveling, talking, and meeting new people. For introverts, as I suspect many scholars tend to be, who generally prefer being around books to being around people, these are hard tasks to do daily. One must constantly overcome one’s own personality limitations in order to do the job well. Although that kind of compensation is possible, for me at least it has always extracted a fairly high price emotionally and physically. Many non-profit leaders can work a reception as flawlessly as a good politician, meeting and greeting everyone there, whether already known or newly introduced. I have profound admiration for those people. For me, those kinds of situations were a slow form of torture; I did them as well as I could but always with sweating hands and upset stomach.

In contrast, I believe that my predominantly “thinker” orientation, according to the Myers Briggs, was beneficial for the role of a non-profit leader. Many social action non-profits spring up quickly to answer a particular cry of public need, by people whose values and feelings for others drive them to work with those in need, but they are often not as careful as they should be about analyzing the social situation more broadly or planning for the future. As a result, many social action non-profits die out almost as quickly as they earlier arose. From the beginning, I believed that a center such as CLGS needed to be present for the long term in order to serve the LGBT and religious communities. “Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell” may be a thing of the past for the military and the Defense of Marriage Act and other similar legislative hindrances to LGBTQ civil rights may be (deo volente) on the chopping block, but I still believe that full acceptance of LGBTQ people, especially in religious communities worldwide is decades, if not centuries, off in the future. I wanted CLGS to be strong enough and flexible enough to survive and thrive for many generations to come in order to bring about lasting social change. Long-range vision, social analysis, and careful organizational planning are all gifts that scholars and other “thinker” types can offer to activist organizations, which tend to be filled with values-oriented people, focused mostly on the present crisis. [Indeed, in my opinion OccupyOakland could use a few “thinker” types, as could the Oakland mayor’s office].

To bring about significant social change, movements have to be viable and credible over the long-term because, short of a violent revolution, social change is a

slow and unsteady process, taking a few steps ahead and then being pushed a few steps back. In my experience, change is not a linear progression that, once started, inevitably goes forward; it is instead a series of victories and defeats that eventually, over a long period of time may (or may not) wear away older viewpoints. Take, for example, the black civil rights movement that has been going forward for close to a century in this country. Racism has certainly not yet been eradicated from US society; it has changed form since the 1930's or the 1950's, but it is still viciously entrenched in many social structures, despite legal advances, legislative protections, and some cultural changes. That battle has to continue for lasting social change to occur, even though the battle must be fought now in very different ways than it was 50 or 70 years ago. In such situations, protesting and marching, even camping out, are only a small part of the picture; organizing and building stable movement structures are far more important for changing the legal, legislative, and cultural status quo. Scholars tend to have longer vision, studying both past and future, as well as the present; that longer vision and the knowledge it brings about what has happened to other movements and political issues in the past can be a very useful contribution to current political activism. It can help organizations plan for the long-term programmatically and financially, as well as respond in more effective ways to present concerns.

As you might guess, scholars who move into activist work also have decisions to make about their publications and research plans. For me, one of the great joys of the scholarly life is the general freedom nearly all scholars have to pursue the research

projects that interest them the most, for whatever reasons. While teaching requirements and tenure and promotion issues do place some restraints on those choices, for the most part, we can follow the questions, the methods, and the issues in our disciplines that are most galvanizing to our imaginations. As I moved into the role of what I came to think of as a “movement intellectual” (not a “public intellectual,” which I take to be a very different role), I began to realize that both the time I had to conduct my research and writing and the subjects that it was most important for me to address were sharply constricted by the demands of my activist work. What I thought about the role of James, the brother of Jesus, in the early history of Christianity, while enormously engaging to me, was utterly unimportant in my new role at CLGS compared to what I could argue about the meaning of the Sodom story in Genesis 19. In publications, in lectures, in workshops, in classes, in sermons for over ten years, I focused most of my comments and my arguments on those 12 or so verses of scripture that supposedly dictated Christian views on modern homosexuality, along with a couple of supplemental texts, like Genesis 2 (I am sure you have heard that highly nuanced argument, “Adam and Eve; not Adam and Steve”). Such a constriction proved to be for me a significant sacrifice of something that I valued highly in my academic life. I knew that I could be most useful to the LGBTQ movement overall by using my expertise in biblical studies to challenge the often sloppy scholarship being produced by a few socially conservative biblical scholars who were interpreting many of those 12 verses with no regard at all for their historical contexts or often even their narrative, literary, or theological contexts. And I

knew that those were the readings being passed on to pastors and priests around the world as the “true” meaning of scripture, prompting them to tell their congregations that the Bible as a whole condemned modern homosexuality, a statement that could not be farther from the truth. I knew that my real value at this stage of the movement was using my knowledge, skills, and, to some extent, my reputation in my discipline, to contest those interpretations in every setting I entered, but the demand to focus all of my work on this particular body of material was (and continues to be) very difficult for me as a scholar.

You might think that the real problem for scholars in an activist environment would be the temptation to loosen their scholarly standards for the sake of supporting the causes they believe in. I do not think that is actually true for most (though not all) professional scholars who have become involved at any level in activist work. While the pull to make your argument sound stronger than it really is can sometimes be a real temptation, you do not have to be doing activist work for that temptation to exist, as many scholarly essays and dissertations too often demonstrate. It is a danger for any scholarship. Certainly, if you look over the writings from both sides of the homosexuality debates, you can find some examples of writers assuming that the biblical texts say what they want them to say rather than what they actually say. But you can also find many examples of writers presenting nuanced and careful research on those same texts. If you have respect for your discipline, you must understand that it is a *discipline*; that is, it has rules and guidelines and requirements for public

scrutiny and debate as part of its validating procedures. And if you have respect for the causes you are supporting, you also have to realize that shoddy scholarship will ultimately do more harm than good. Your opponents are bound to notice and broadcast any weaknesses loudly. The better and more careful your scholarship, the better and more beneficial it will be for your movement. For example, I have never and will never say that I think Paul supports ancient homoerotic practice as it was known to him; he does not: Romans 1:27 seems clear on that point at least. But I think it is also the case that Paul is not overly supportive of any form of eroticism that was known to him, including ancient marriage, which in 1 Corinthians 7, he just as clearly views as less than an ideal state of life for Christians. Marriage may be ok if you need it as a remedy for lust, but it has little value outside of that context. People who want to say that Paul is against modern homosexuality but in favor of modern marriage are guilty of shoddy scholarship, reading both texts outside of their historical contexts and mostly ignoring the point of the latter one. Challenging and correcting those kinds of statements about the Bible and demonstrating positive alternative readings, is very much the work of a “movement intellectual.” It is one enormously important contribution scholarship can make to activist causes.

However, it also raises the issue of what grounds or standards are appropriately used to “challenge and correct” the scholarship or interpretations of others. After all, the feminist movement and many other groups since that time have argued very powerfully that all scholarship is “engaged” or “interested” work. So, all scholarship

is “advocacy” work of some kind, even if the advocacy is simply in support of whatever literary, historical or methodological paradigm currently reigns supreme. No one comes to their research as a *tabula rasa* with no questions, no presuppositions, no particular interests driving their work. I hope that I do not need to rehearse again all the reasons and all the research that has shown the important effect of the researcher him or herself and the paradigm the researcher is using on the outcomes of the research done. From the hard sciences to the social sciences to literature and history, the role of the interpreter in the process of interpretation has come under intense scrutiny. In biblical studies, you could almost say that the first half of the 20th century focused on the world behind the text, the second half focused on the text itself as a literary artifact, and the early 21st century is focused on the interpreter of the text. So, you might wonder if recognizing the inevitable role of the interpreter in the creation of any interpretation ultimately relativizes all interpretations, prohibiting one from adjudicating among them. Thus, whatever anyone says about the Bible has the same claim to legitimacy as what anyone else says. While some people do make that argument, I do not believe it is at all the case.

Although I am convinced, and indeed have argued in many publications, that there is not now and never has been a purely “objective” interpretation of a biblical text with no “taint” from the subjective concerns of the interpreter, that does not mean that any interpretation of a text is as valid as any other interpretation of that text. Every era has its own requirements for intelligibility and validity, and every academic

discipline has its own additional requirements for legitimacy and standing. It is certainly true that those “requirements” can change over historical periods and in cross-cultural contexts (the use of allegory as an approved reading method for all literature up through much of the 19th century and its rejection now is a good example of such a change), but while they may change, they do not disappear. I expect to have my scholarly work, whether on those 12 verses of scripture or on anything else, held up for critique and questioning by other scholars. It is that process of questioning and defense, in fact, that assures the public accountability and validity of the work itself, and every scholar should expect such discussion. Just as I expect my work to be tested against the various current standards of biblical scholarship, I also must test the work of other scholars by those standards. So, for example, when someone says that he or she is exploring the historical meaning of a biblical text but then ignores most of the known historical context, they need to be publicly questioned and corrected. Under current scholarly standards there is certainly room for more than one valid interpretation of a biblical text, but affirming that texts can have multiple meanings even within current disciplinary and methodological constraints, is a far cry from saying that a text can mean anything anyone wants it to mean and that every reading is just as valid as every other reading.

I have belabored these, I hope, familiar points a bit because especially in activist contexts these issues seem to arise quite often. I find that people sometimes assume that I have gladly left my disciplinary constraints behind to embrace the heady

world of political and cultural advocacy. Yet, it is precisely by holding tightly on to my disciplinary standards that the work I produce can have the greatest impact on the political and religious issues I care most about. If my work can pass the public scrutiny and questioning of other biblical scholars, its integrity is enhanced and its impact on the wider public is greatly increased. So, to those of you who want to dedicate some of your scholarship, even if it just a few articles here and there, to the activist causes that are most dear to your hearts, please pay attention to what I am saying: you can help your cause most by producing strong, clear, and disciplinarily valid research, which other scholars in your field would support and admire. The sacrifice you make is not in the quality of your scholarship but in the freedom with which you choose your topic or subject matter.

I hope I have indicated that scholarship has a lot to offer to activist work, but I also need to point out that activist work has some good things to offer to scholarship as well. Activists often have very little time to get their points across to others, especially the media with its love of “sound-bites.” When I began working at CLGS, I took some workshops in speaking with the media. In the beginning, I was an utter disaster at that kind of communication. After all, like most teachers, I am used to having at least an hour to make my points, not 10 seconds. Moreover, as a scholar I had been taught to nuance everything I said, to mention all the possible qualifications and hesitations that accompany each point I made. I noticed in talking to reporters, and I have done a lot of that now, that after a couple of minutes of listening to me,

they went all glassy-eyed and what I said never ended up on the newscast or in the papers. What I learned from my activist colleagues over time was how to be clearer, more succinct, and more effective in all of my speaking venues. But I have to admit that even after working on these communication issues for many years, I am still much too long-winded for most reporters. I have noticed that many of my activist colleagues now will tell reporters to call me for background information on religious issues, rather than current comments, and I know that is a reflection on my continuing inability to be “sound-bite worthy.” However, as an aside, I have found that it is very valuable to the movement to have someone who can provide reporters with background information, since so many reporters know absolutely nothing about religion (one reporter asked me why the pope allowed Southern Baptist priests to marry but prohibited Roman Catholic ones---where do you begin to answer a question like that? Let’s go back to the 16th century and Martin Luther.....). It is hard to speak clearly, quickly, and effectively on something you care deeply about, and I have been really impressed at how rhetorically powerful and clear many of the activist leaders I have met can be; it is a good lesson for the often rhetorically convoluted world of scholarship to learn. Your work has no impact, if your audience cannot understand what you say or follow your argument.

Activism has also put me in direct contact with pastors, lay people, politicians, lawyers, and the many others who make up any political movement. During the years I worked at CLGS, I traveled more widely than I had ever done before and met a

much more diverse group of people than those who make up my discipline, my school, or my classroom. I heard so many heart-breaking stories and even a few happy-endings that I would never have known about in my earlier life. It is one thing to read about the courage and suffering so many people experience, but it is another thing entirely to see it written on their faces, in their posture, and through their voices. For me activist work has been an enormously enriching experience of feeling that I might actually be directly making someone else's life better than it might have been without my work and my words. And that feeling of human enrichment and involvement has helped me become a better scholar by making me care more profoundly and more fully about how the Bible is used in the modern world. My discipline is now not simply an area of personal interest but an area vital to the well-being and human dignity of many other people. It makes me think about my teaching and how important it is to help the next generation of pastors and teachers learn to use the Bible carefully, for it can be a powerful weapon for evil as well as a powerful healer. I believe I am a more conscientious and passionate teacher now that I have seen, with the seeing of the eye and the hearing of the ear, what an horrendous toll negative biblical interpretations have exacted from the humanity and dignity of millions of people. Before, I knew what biblical history relates about the Bible's too often death-dealing ways, but now I know, as Paul puts it, "face to face." And it makes a difference.

I have also learned that change does not just happen because it should. People have to make it happen. People have to put their skills, their money, their time, and their life's blood into making social change happen. Social liberals, or progressives, or whatever we are calling ourselves at the moment, are very fond of quoting Dr. Martin Luther King's wonderful words that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice." Those are very comforting words for us to hear, but in my reading they find little support in human history. From the "dark ages" to the Salem witch trials to Hitler's Germany, what history actually demonstrates is that human moral and cultural progress is fragile and easily wiped away by fear, greed, demagoguery, and the ravages of poverty and ignorance. Ignorance, particularly, is enormously dangerous. H. G. Wells once wrote that "History is a race between education and catastrophe," and from what I have seen, I am afraid we are losing that race. In the area of religion especially, the ignorance of the American public is on the rise. While many people, as many as 90% according to the Gallop polls, say they believe in some higher power, the majority of those folks, especially the majority of those who identify as Christian, are vastly under-educated in the history, theology, ethics, and even practices of their religion. It is not just the Georgia state legislator, who said, in reference to a bill to allow public teaching in Spanish, "If English was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for Georgia!"; it is the routine person in the pew who seems to have very little clue about the teachings or history of their deeply held religious beliefs---except of course what Pastor Whoever on TV says they should believe and do. The religious door is wide open to demagoguery of all kinds, and the

frightening results of that situation can be seen everywhere across this country. Time is running out; catastrophe looms on the horizon. We must do a better job of educating the public about their own religious beliefs; we must educate the laity, as well as the clergy, in all of our religious traditions to become discerning Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, who can sift the blessed wheat from the hate-filled tares. It is not just gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and queer people who need a safer world; it is all of us.

Thank you.