

This is an audio transcript for the Stone webtext *Stone, Composing the Sonic Sacred: Podcasting as Faith-based Activism* published in *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy*, 26(1), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/26.1/disputatio/stone>

## **Kairos 26.1: Stone, Composing the Sonic Sacred: Podcasting as Faith-based Activism – Transcript**

by Jonathan W. Stone

Transcript

### **Track 1 – Introduction: Appeals to Doubt**

JENNIFER MICHAEL HECT (on Krista Tippett’s *Speaking of Faith* podcast): You have to be a little bold and a little brave in most periods of time to be a doubter. And, I liked them. I also was surprised by them, because the dominant history basically suggests that doubt is very modern and that we had a few doubters in the ancient world, but basically doubt is a modern phenomenon.

ADAM NARLOCH (co-host of *The [De]Constructionists Podcast*): This is an episode about doubting, deconstructing, and belonging.

HECT: And I kept seeing it everywhere. And so I just wanted to tell that story... to- to sketch it out.

NORLOCH: Because one of the things that we- we definitely believe in is that we need each other. That’s one of the points of this podcast...

HECT: And then when I did the research for it, I found it was much more cohesive and self-knowing than I had ever dreamed.

JOHN WILLIAMSON (co-host of *The Deconstructionists Podcast*): You can’t... This is not something you should go through by yourself, alone.

NADIA BOLZ WEBER (On *No Barriers Podcast*): I’ll put it this way: When people talk about, like, quote, like, “having faith”, it feels like the onus is on the individual. Like, “I have to have, like, faith in a sufficient quantity and the right quality, both at the same time, in order to have enough faith,” right?

NARLOCH: Yeah, I mean, if you’re here, if you’re wrestling, if you’re wondering about things—asking questions that are forcing you out of your comfort zone—the first thing you’re gonna wanna do is find a reclusive place to just sit in your closet and try to figure things out and feel alienated...

WEBER: I’ve always seen faith as a team sport and not an individual competition, so, meaning we take turns. I mean, I believe in creating a culture of turn-taking in the sense

that there have been times where other people in my life have had to believe something for me because I just couldn't believe it in that time in my life.

NARLOCH: ...and it starts to be a lonely place and that's not good. So that's one of the reasons we've created this space for whoever you are and wherever you believe and whatever that looks like, this a community where you can hear people talk about the implications of this whole deconstructive process. So...

WEBER: And so, sometimes, I think we just hold out and we are believing something for someone else on their behalf. And that's, like, this beautiful, sacred work that we do. And then they do it for us.

JONATHN W. STONE: [music titled "ADRA var.A" by QuKr plays in the background] Welcome to "Composing the Sonic Sacred: Podcasting as Faith-based Activism," my contribution to this special issue of *Kairos*. I'm Jon Stone, assistant professor of writing & rhetoric studies at the University of Utah. You've just heard a collage of voices. Folks on podcasts talking about the process of religious doubt and questioning. The various tracks in this project will center on these podcast voices. As a word of caution, though: some of what I present here will cover topics and include language that some listeners might find triggering, including frank acknowledgement of LGBTQ+ trauma and discrimination, violence against women, slavery, and, in the context of China's one-child policy, abortion. I have curated and present these stories and the voices that tell them not as an endorsement, but as an opportunity to consider the arguments and the activism therein. It is in that spirit that I'd like you to listen to another. This is the voice of Rachel Held Evans. Here Evans is discussing the release of her 2018 book *Inspired* which came out amidst a flurry of other titles about the Bible:

EVANS [on *The Bible for Normal People* Podcast]: I think it's—it's really good to see people kind of wrestling with and rethinking the Bible. I just think that we're at a moment culturally—uh, particularly here in the US, I guess—um, where we're seeing that how we have been—at least how Evangelicals have been reading the Bible over the last few decades is just untenable. Like, you can't keep reading it like an instruction manual or a science book or a history book. It-it falls apart when you impose that—those standards onto it. And I think, just, a lot of us hit that reality kind of at the same time and are trying to, sort of, forge a path forward.

STONE: On May 4, 2019 Rachel Held Evans, the Christian author, blogger, and columnist you just heard died unexpectedly after a brief illness at the too-young age of 37. As you might have sensed even from that short excerpt, Evans brought a brave and progressive voice to evangelical Christianity. In the face of a culture that privileges religious certainty as its guiding principle, Evans had the audacity to suggest that questioning and even doubt might be useful and not antithetical to faith practice. While living, Evans—an apparent "wolf in sheep's clothing"—experienced significant criticism within her community, criticism that continues even now that she's gone. She also received incredible support. In fact, she became a bit of a lightning rod—an example for religious folks of all stripes in what might be called "faith transition." The transition that Evans modeled was not necessarily one from belief to disbelief, but instead from a position of settled certainty to

one of active questioning and searching. Her own faith transition, which she chronicled in her books, her blog, and as a guest on many podcasts, inspired a large following and, arguably, a new progressive movement in and across various orthodox religious traditions.[1] Religious doubt, a taboo subject in churches reliant upon maintaining a contingency of devoted parishioners, was suddenly a topic that many were finding fellowship around—and they were doing so outside of church! It is no coincidence that this kind of new religious fellowship occurred in concert with the rise of social media platforms and communities. In these new, resonant and interactive places on the internet, church suddenly had competition with other, albeit virtual, sacred spaces.

Within this sonic composition for *Kairos* (itself not unlike a podcast), I will present several examples of this kind of religious activity as it's shown up over the last several years on popular podcasts. In fact, here's another short collage of podcast hosts discussing the experience of doubt across a variety of circumstances and on programs with diverse audiences, from Krista Tippett, a well-known voice on NPR affiliated stations, to Rhett McLaughlin and Link Neal ("Rhett and Link") a comedy duo who made their Christian faith crisis public on their podcast called *Ear Biscuits*[2], to Brian G. Murphy and Fr. Shannon T. L. Kearns who host a weekly Bible podcast and host it on their website "Queer Theology."

TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "A history of doubt," with historian and poet Jennifer Michael Hecht. We'll look at the contribution of skeptics, cynics, and others who've followed the human impulse to challenge what is given and to doubt. Hecht has explored a rich tradition of doubt across the ages, as graceful life philosophies and even as a driving force in religious reform. This way of being in the world defies the narrowness of religious and atheist certainties in our time.

MCLAUGHLIN: So, even in the midst of a very vibrant Christian faith, I would have doubts. Uh, you know, I— I'd hear a little something about how the Bible came together, you know, about how the 27 books of the New Testament were kind of put together and how the canon came together and I'd be like, "this doesn't seem as clean as maybe I thought that it might have been." Um, I would think a little bit about the resurrection of Jesus and I'd be like "that's, that's a tough thing, that's a tough thing. But that's the whole point: it's tough. I have faith." And what I would typically do, is I would, like, have these sessions where I would re-derive my faith. But also, I would do what I think a lot of Christians do—is that, when you have a doubt about something, you go and you read a Christian expert. You know, we call it apologetics in Christianity—somebody who can basically defend the faith.

BRIAN G. MURPHY: From a queer perspective, like, what's so queer about this passage?

FR. SHANNON T.L. KEARNS: For the first part, I feel like Thomas gets a really bad rap in this passage and as someone who has... whose life has been shaped probably more by my doubt than by my faith, like, I've always kind of identified (MURPHY: mmm) with Thomas and didn't like Jesus' rebuke. But, I remember in seminary, I was in a preaching and worship class and we were assigned this passage and it was right at the time that I had started my medical transition and I felt like, kind of, a walking, talking trans 101 lecture [Murphy laughs] and I felt like every time someone encountered me they had some kind of rude question about my body and about surgery and about—I don't know—all of that kind of

stuff. And I was reading this passage and I really identified with Jesus' frustration with Thomas about, like, "Why do you need to see my scars in order to believe that I am who I say I am?" And it was the first time, really, that I had seen my own story represented in scripture. Not, not in this direct correlation, right? Like, I didn't feel like Jesus. But in the fact that in what Jesus was going through, I thought echoes of my own story. And that really changed how I approached scripture and so this passage has become really important to me.

STONE: In these clips you've heard a few examples of how faith and doubt get discussed across a variety of podcasts and by a diverse group of hosts. Links to full episodes for all the podcast samples I feature can be found in my works cited list at the bottom of transcript page accessible on the main site. I'll transition now to Track 2, where the discussion of the sounds of faith, orthodoxy, and internal activism continues.

## Track 2 – The Sounds of Faith, Orthodoxy and the Resonance of Internal Activism

STONE: [Nine Inch Nails – "2 Ghosts 1" fades in and plays in the background] So why are podcasts so attractive as resources for folks in middle of faith transition? Well, in ways distinct from other online platforms, podcasting emulates worship spaces. Indeed, podcasts can *sound* a lot like church, with some featuring charismatic hosts in pastoral or pseudo-pastoral roles, and others featuring testimonials—interactive discussions among several people in various stages of faith, from transition to crisis and beyond. This sonic element is not unique to religious themed podcasts, but when paired with subjects like faith-based struggle, crisis, and alienation—topics not generally welcome in a church setting where faith *promotion* presides—the voice of an inspiring host speaking from personal experience or a dynamic discussion between several individuals openly discussing doubt, difficulty, and even disillusionment with faith traditions can be incredibly evocative.

STONE: Sound studies offers a number of scholarly inroads to understanding the power of the voice, many of which revolve around the voice's seeming (but inevitably fraught) connection to truth, presence, or the grain of the authentic self.<sup>[3]</sup> I've footnoted some of those resources in the transcript of this piece and will have a bit more to say about the sonic rhetorics of podcasting in a moment. Suffice it to say for now, that when ensconced within orthodox religious traditions where exclusive access to Truth reigns supreme, hearing the voices of those who speak in the familiar vernaculars of that orthodoxy, but who offer other possible truths—or even "Truth" with some unorthodox contingencies!—well, that can be a powerful and moving experience. Importantly, and as those I feature throughout this piece discuss, talking about doubt openly inspired many to challenge the power dynamics at the heart of their religious communities. Freedom from the burden of certainty led many to challenge other orthodoxies, from inherent patriarchal traditions and leadership structures to embedded ecclesiastical homophobia. My argument in this piece, then, is that activism within conservative religious traditions is a crucial, if often overlooked, form of social change. Further, podcasts with their sonic equivalencies to church and their potential for broadcast-size audiences are an excellent medium for such work. My hope is that listeners in rhetoric and composition—whether they come from a religious background or not—will tune into the ways that podcasting might bring sonic

nuances to activism in other conservative or orthodox communities. The most successful voices for change in this arena don't argue from high horses or in the tones and cadences of moral superiority. Instead, they do so in affirmed meekness and with an ethos of empathy, patience, and shared experience.

STONE: I have been arguing for the power and potential of the podcast for inspiring internal activism within conservative religious traditions. I have also been using a sounded format to do so. And while I probably could have written this same stuff in an essay, I know that listeners will be more affected by the sound of these conversations than a textual rendering would have afforded. Even so, a move to sonic and other non-textual scholarship remains itself somewhat of a challenge to traditional academic orthodoxies. And while this work is not an explicit *apologia* or defense of sonic scholarship, I could not accomplish my rhetorical goals in a different format. Scholars within rhetoric and composition and beyond have begun to explore just how and why these affordances matter so much. I'd like to briefly mention one.

STONE: In their 2017 article "Composing for Sound: Sonic Rhetorics as Resonance," Mary E. Hocks and Michelle Comstock discuss the development and use of sound in the field of Rhetoric and Composition over the last several decades. In their article, they posit that sounds are "vehicles carrying both semiotic and non-semiotic messages about experience and the environment" and as such, "sonic rhetoric can be characterized as embodied and dynamic rhetorical engagements with sound" (p. 136). This "sonic rhetorical engagement," is characterized as a "vulnerability and sensibility to the sonic environment" that listeners develop as embodied knowledge. Hocks and Comstock characterize this embodied knowledge as "resonance" (p. 136). Resonance is a physical phenomenon related to "the impact of one vibration on another" and used metaphorically to indicate "harmony and connection with a text, a place, an idea, or an object" (p. 138). Hocks and Comstock use the word to indicate "the intimacy, presence, and movement (the 'verb-ness') created by a sound's qualities, like tonality, amplitude, or cadence" (p. 138).

STONE: Resonance in these terms describes well the experience of podcast listening. With the smorgasbord of possible topics and subjects in the audio-sphere, finding a podcast that rings true—topically or sonically—with personal subjectivities is more possible than ever. Layer upon that podcasts about shared religious tradition (itself a resonant experience) and then—even deeper—the marginalized experience of doubt within that tradition—well the resonances begin to sound at a fever pitch.

STONE: Consider in this next clip the experience of Ed Gunger, bishop of the Diocese of St. Anthony in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In the larger interview, Gunger describes how religious experience resounds to both uphold dogmatic traditions but also how it might lead to some of those tradition's eventual fragmentations. Here he discusses the how that process might begin:

ED GUNGER (on *The Liturgists* podcast): The more you hear the stories of people, the more the less you're likely to just try to categorize them in real overly simplistic ways. And yet as a pastor, you know, one of the things you're always doing and wrestling with is thinking, "OK, we want to follow God's standard. We believe that there's the right and wrong issues

or something outside of ourselves.” And so it’s easy to get very very black-and-white. But in historical study, the more you look at how the church has wrestled with things that seemed black and white at the beginning—simple things like the issue of slavery that was so pervasive, how it began to be rethought—you can’t own people!—and the humanization of that...You start realizing that there’s some issues that you talk about them are just not as black-and-white as you had hoped.

STONE: Gunger’s point here is that now-settled notions like the evil of slavery were not always settled. Indeed, slavery as a practice was an institution often supported and justified by the church. The unrighteousness of such traditions are revealed in our capacity to, in his words, “*hear* the stories of people” and find in them truths resonating at a higher frequency than the dirges of tradition.

STONE:A moment ago, I mentioned that activism within conservative religious traditions is an overlooked form of social change. Overlooked, perhaps, because such work may seem impossible or even pointless given the chasms that seem to separate progressive and conservative ideologies. But, as the failures of polarized and polemical rhetoric become more and more evident in our public discourse, we need new tools of engagement. In a political moment marked by intense division, we need new materials from which to build bridges. I choose a religious frame in which to explore this notion for two reasons. First, because conservative religious institutions often maintain orthodoxies which seem to present the “final word” on a number of important issues. Yet, voices like Rachel Held Evans and the others I’ve been sharing seem to be showing that this is not the case. Understanding the methods and successful arguments of what we might call “internal activism” might be useful when it comes to addressing other entities, institutions and ideologies with seemingly calcified orthodoxies—those that seem equally impenetrable to progressive activism.

STONE: The second reason has to do with an interest in the rhetorical methods of those internal activists. Their approach seems much different than other types of progressive activism, which often springs from other (albeit different) certainties and thus ideological orthodoxies—just on a different end of the political spectrum. In my observation, in order to be successful in pushing the progressive needle forward within conservative Christian communities, religious rhetors have a to embody a rather complicated, if not paradoxical ethos: First, they must demonstrate that they are insiders—that they belong to and understand the cultural landscape of the institution. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, but often comes through the performance of religious piety of some kind: through long-time religious experience and participation, Biblical knowledge, or through the demonstration of what we might call “Christian values”—a religious devotion meted out through public acts of charity, grace, and/or ecclesiastical teaching. Second, activists must then deftly demonstrate how an element of institutional practice or policy—or even long-held doctrinal truth—might be in conflict or dissonance with the prevailing and agreed upon values or even the foundational texts of the institution. This can be delicate work and usually not the kind suited for soap boxes or megaphones. And even then, “progress” is not likely to come in the form of broad or sweeping changes, but instead as a small oscillating and incremental steps forward (and often accompanied by periods of retrenchment). Such work can be risky and alienating for those who commit to it, especially if they manage to

build an influential platform. As I mentioned, Rachel Held Evans was often labeled as a heretic due to her work and she eventually left her Evangelical community to join a more welcoming and egalitarian Episcopalian one.

STONE: I've already shared some examples of what this kind of activism sounds like. As I intimated earlier, the work of religious activists often begins when they themselves encounter something within their tradition that doesn't quite add up, or—even more poignantly—something about themselves, such as queerness, that falls outside of a tradition's accepted myths. Orthodoxy often demands a kind of all-or-nothing approach to devotional faith, so finding cracks in the system can be jarring and alienating and speaking up about the cracks, even more so.

STONE: On the next track, you'll hear folks talking on various podcasts about their experience with questioning and doubt. Though this simple act of asking questions may not seem like an overtly activist tactic, remember again how taboo questioning can be within orthodox religious systems. Next, we'll listen in on one particularly effective method religious rhetors use to make successful activist headway: hermeneutics, or careful textual interpretation. As you'll hear, those who develop skills and Biblical hermeneutics are able to demonstrate alternative or more complex interpretations of passages in scripture, shedding new light, or offering complicating nuance on topics seemingly settled by Biblical authority.

### Track 3 – Questioning Orthodoxy and Faithful Deconstruction

STONE: OK, so back to that simple act of questioning. ["November" by Benjamin Tissot {[www.bensound.com](http://www.bensound.com)} plays in background.] In the examples you're about to hear, we hear folks not just questioning internally but talking about it publicly—something that might never happen at church. For listeners, hearing and identifying with the topics and people in these conversations is a participatory experience and in addition to being comforting and cathartic, might encourage their own questioning process, nudging them toward activism.

STONE: Here is part of a conversation between musician David Bazan and comedian Pete Holmes. Years ago, it was through Bazan and Holmes that I became acquainted with podcast conversations happening around and about progressive Christianity. Both the musician and the comedian have deep connections to the faith and, actually, part of their success is connected to those histories. Bazan is the founder of the Christian rock band Pedro the Lion and Holmes has made his faith journey a central part of his comedy, his television shows, and his popular podcast that he calls *You Made it Weird*. In this episode of that podcast, Bazan is talking with Pete about his early experiences in the church:

BAZAN: I never felt at ease, like there was never this moment when everything just kind of came into focus and I was just fully, like...

HOLMES: On fire?

BAZAN: On fire.

HOLMES: (laughs)

BAZAN: I was on fire in like, in the—in the way that I was seeing all this opportunity for reform and was really interested in chasing down the pure form of Christianity in...

HOLMES: You mean in the church. Reform in the church...

BAZAN: Reform in the church, yup. Um, you know and so but where it started was in seventh or eighth grade—seventh grade—I think I saw... there's maybe, there's a book that I think is called *The Light and the Glory* and it was one of these first Christian revisionist US American histories where, you know, Christian Founding Fathers and...

HOLMES: mm-hmm.

BAZAN: ..you know, we've veered away from that and all this stuff. And I remember reading the back of that book in seventh grade... And I was a Christian. I grew up going to Christian school. I learned US history from Christian people, from Christian textbooks—and I remember reading the back of that book and I thought, "This is not right." Like, "This is manipulative." Like, "This is just, it's just two clicks off from the truth."

HOLMES: mm-hmm.

BAZAN: And it just felt icky to me.

HOLMES: Right.

BAZAN: And then in that context, Fourth of July came up and we had this service at church where there was a color guard in there and there was—it was very patriotic. And, uh [. . .] it was a big moment for me where I started to have a s-...this sense that "oh, all of these grown-ups are a little confused about... reality."

HOLMES: Right!

BAZAN: They're—they're getting this wrong. And I remember telling my dad who was the music pastor, who was leading all of these patriotic songs. I said, "I think you're getting these two things confused..."—nationality and faith—"...I don't think—they don't belong together. They're not the same..."

HOLMES: Right.

BAZAN: You know, and it...it was from then on that I kind of...

HOLMES: What did he say?

BAZAN: He said...

HOLMES: A one, two, three, four: [singing] "Shine, Jesus, shine!" [laughs]

BAZAN: [laughing] He said, "Interesting, tell me more."

HOLMES: Oh, really?

BAZAN: Yeah, 'cause, um, you know, I only had that impulse anyway because they were such interesting, thoughtful people.

HOLMES: Your parents.

BAZAN: Yeah.

STONE: In this short interchange you get a sense for the kinds of challenges that can occur to even a young Christian thoughtfully engaging in their faith. His church's overt American patriotism and revisionist historiographical tactics seemed odd or as he puts it "icky" to Bazan, even as a 12-year-old. In his band *Pedro the Lion*, Bazan would make art out of those contradictions as he continued to explore the ways that his community often fell short of what he saw as Christianity's "pure form" potentials.

STONE: Let's hear again, now, from Rachel Held Evans. In this clip from a 2015 appearance on the UK-based podcast *Nomad*, Evans discusses with Tim Nash a bit of her religious biography including what led to her to question and eventually deconstruct elements of her faith. The excerpt here begins with Nash asking Rachel a question about growing up in a conservative religious home.

NASH: So, do you think that's a helpful way for a faith journey to start out? I mean, we interviewed [Franciscan Friar] Richard Rohr recently and he actually said that he felt that that kind of conservative upbringing is not actually a bad way for someone to first enter the faith...

EVANS: Yeah, I just read that. I'm reading *Falling Upward* and I think he writes about that in that book, which I've just now gotten to. [...] Uh, but yeah— I actually agree and much of my conservative Evangelical upbringing was really great. I mean, I-I was in church all the time so I had this whole family of people who I knew loved me and cared about me and were invested in me and, you know, out of a little bit of fear but also commitment um, I, you know, worked hard and made my faith a priority and nurtured a pretty serious relationship, uh, with faith and with God and church and I'm grateful for that. I'm— I'm glad I had a pretty solid, uh, foundation like that. Um, but there are, of course, problems with it too, I think. There's a lot of fear in fundamentalism in particular and I'd be lying if I said that my early faith was not in some ways characterized by fear. Uh, when you imagine God to be a God who punishes people for being wrong, uh, that's kind of scary. And so, even as a child, I thought a lot about all of the people I believed were going to hell. And even as a kid—and this will show what an odd child I was—I remember raising my hand in class after we read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and asking if Anne Frank went to hell.

NASH: So when—you-you had fears, you were saying, at a very young age, but when did the actual doubts start to creep in and when did the process of deconstruction begin to emerge in your faith?

EVANS: Yeah, you know, not everybody can remember, like, *a moment*, but I actually can. I was in college at a conservative Christian college here in Dayton, Tennessee—named after William Jennings Bryan who was the prosecutor in the Scopes Trial—so it was a super conservative Christian college. And, I— it was right after the US had invaded Afghanistan in response to 9/11. And as part of that, the press was airing all of this old footage from a documentary about Afghanistan called *Behind the Veil*. And so, it was featuring what life was like for women in that part of the world. And, uh, one scene depicted a woman who

was enshrouded in, you know, the burqa being brought out to the middle of a soccer stadium with a crowd full of people and executed on suspicion of adultery. And I remember watching that—I was probably, I don't know, nineteen years old—and I remember watching it and thinking that everything I had been taught all my life, uh, suggested that after a life of trouble and oppression this woman went on to an eternity of-of violence and torture, uh, because she wasn't an Evangelical Christian like me. Because she had been born in the wrong part of the world at the wrong time. And that was the moment when it all just started to unravel a little piece at a time. And, uh, you know, I absolutely believe in the slippery slope. [Laughs.] Once you ask one question about faith, it's very likely that you will ask another. And so, I went slidin' down the slippery slope. And .... [Laughs.] But it wasn't all bad. You learn a lot and it takes a lot of faith to go down there in a lot of ways. So, but that was the moment it started to fall apart for me and I feel like I've been kind of picking up the pieces ever since.

NASH: So, did any elements of your faith survive that process or was everything deconstructed?

EVANS: Oh, pretty much everything was pulled out for examination. I think part of the problem was that, you know, Evangelicalism gave me many gifts and I'm very grateful for, uh, being raised in that culture for a lot of reasons. But, uh, it—at least here in the US—it does have a tendency to conflate, uh, sort of peripheral or debatable issues with central ones. And so, I'd been taught that if you didn't believe in, say, young earth creationism, you could not be a Christian. Uh, so, I had heard, and-and believed, and sort of internalized this notion that, you know, um, an eternal hell, young earth creationism, um, and a whole other— oh! Forbidding women from teaching and leading—all of these things were absolutely central to the Christian faith, like, as important as the resurrection. [Laughs.] And so, that was a bit confusing, which meant that by questioning an eternal hell, I was essentially questioning my entire faith. So, it all became subject to scrutiny.

STONE: Evans really lays it out here. What is most striking to me about her story is how she frames her unraveling or deconstructive process—not as the acts of a “doubter” but instead as an act of faith. Like Bazan, Evans details a kind of shift in the power dynamic where after serious consideration of the irrational, inequitable, or otherwise troubling parts of a faith tradition (be it young-earth creationism, embedded sexism, or an unjust afterlife scenario), she takes the responsibility upon herself to address and work through all aspects of the faith tradition rather than continue as a passive adherent. “All,” she says “became subject to scrutiny.” It is difficult to overstate the importance of this statement or this process. What Rachel Held Evans represents so well here is that those who are best suited to do “activist” work within the church are those who take it seriously—seriously enough to work carefully, honestly, and earnestly through all of the church's teachings and practices, even (and, perhaps, especially) the unsavory ones. Evans's legacy is a testament to the effectiveness of this process. Her willingness to first question, then carefully examine her faith—and to do so publicly—was both a boon and an example for others to do the same and, as part and parcel to that process, to advocate for change along the way.

## Track 4 – Sonic Rhetorics, Resonance, and Sound Hermeneutics

STONE: [Nine Inch Nails – “9 Ghosts 1” fades in at 0:09 and plays during narrator’s introduction] I’d like to transition now to feature a few more voices of folks who are engaged in the careful and faithful work of serious “scrutiny” that Rachel Held Evans mentioned in the previous section. “Scrutiny” in these examples takes the form of Biblical hermeneutics, an analytical method activists would do well to familiarize themselves with. The art of textual interpretation is one long practiced by theologians as exegesis but available, of course, to all serious students of scripture. The first features Virginia Ramey Mollenkott on a 2006 episode of Krista Tippett’s *Speaking of Faith*. Mollenkott is an Evangelical Christian and a lesbian activist for gay marriage. In the second example, we hear author Carolyn Custis James speaking on a 2017 episode of the podcast *The for Normal People*, which is hosted by Peter Enns and Jared Byas. In this episode, titled “Moving Beyond Patriarchy,” James discusses her work examining the surprising *anti*-patriarchal messaging in many parts of the , surprising because typically the is seen as upholding and not dismantling patriarchal structures. Both invites us to read the in fresh ways that are nevertheless faithful to the text. In so doing so they evoke scriptural evidence challenging so-called “traditional” marriage on one hand and on the other, the inheritance of as a Christian value. Both re-readings might be radically transformative and a powerful exigence to rethink conventional Biblical interpretation and then pass that knowledge along.[4]

TIPPETT (on *Speaking of Faith*): Where do you go in your to think about where you’ve come out theologically?

MOLLENKOTT: Well, for one thing, um, I learned in my, uh, secular [laughing] studies and also in a good Biblical book on hermeneutics, which is the science of interpretation, we’ll say, that you should read for the overall, over-arching themes, not just for little passages here and there that you can yank out, you know, proof texts that you can yank out of context and use to let somebody have it. And there- when you look at scripture, you stand back and you look at the over-arching principles of scripture, there is a trend toward inclusiveness of sexual and gender minorities in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. And that really ought to be the modern church’s guide and inspiration, it seems to me—the overall movement of scripture.

MOLLENKOTT: Adam was originally created — according to Genesis, he was male and — *it* was male and female, the earth creature, the creature of earth. This creature was lonely and God said, “It is not good for the earth creature to be alone,” so put Adam into a deep sleep and divided Adam into the male and female as we know them. And then God brought the female to the male and Adam said, “This is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.” Notice there was no priest there, there was no pastor there, [Tippett laughs] there was no civilly elected official there. There were two people and God and, according to scripture, they became one flesh and Eve is described as Adam’s *ezer* after that, which means a power equal to him.

TIPPETT: mmm-hmm

MOLLENKOTT: I mean, one flesh is a beautiful image, and it's the image that scripture uses concerning married people. But apparently it occurs because of mutual commitment, desire, and concern for one another.

TIPPETT: Is- is that how you understand the tenor of the writings in the New Testament that stress marriage between a man and a woman?

MOLLENKOTT: That it's one flesh, I understand it to be, yeah. Scripture says, be subject to one another out of reverence for the Christ in both of you. Now, that seems to me very clear. So I believe in marriage as a matter of one flesh between two human beings who care tremendously about one another and are willing to make a whole life commitment and concern toward one another.

BYAS (on *The for Normal People*): Does the wanna talk ever endorse a patriarchal culture or society, I guess is a question I would have for you in the way you read it. Or is it all resisting patriarchy in its own way?

JAMES: I think there are ways in which the Bible overtly dismantles it. Like "primogenitor" means the first-born son is the most important. Um, that you have in just the book of Genesis alone where God is choosing son number two. He chooses Jacob and not Esau; he chooses Isaac and not Ishmael; he chooses, um, Judah who's number four and Joseph who's number eleven. He chooses David who's number seven which would just be *outrageous* in the patriarchal world. [...] Um, if you look at the story of Jesus and how he interacts with women, you know, it's-it's-it's a violation of [laughs] the ways things typically work in patriarchy. And it's over and over again where he has public conversations with women. Where a man comes to him because his twelve-year-old daughter is dying—who cares [under patriarchy] if a twelve-year-old daughter is dying? But Jesus drops everything and runs to—turns out bringing her back to life. [...] You know, these are just miracle stories to us but if you told them in the patriarchal world... You know, you have China where they had the one-child policy and everybody wanted boys so if they had girls sometimes they would—now they would abort them because they can- ultrasound can help them with that—but they would- they would- they would kill them! Or just, you know, throw them out.

STONE: In these clips, both Mollenkott and James demonstrate how even basic hermeneutics might reveal overlooked or ignored messages in the Bible—messages that could have significant activist impact. Such readings, while dissonant to some traditional religious teachings, may resonate with audiences disillusioned by orthodox interpretations of scripture. Biblical hermeneutics does not require a denunciation of sacred text, but instead encourages a deeper engagement where the Bible itself becomes a primary means for rethinking received religious dogmas. [Nine Inch Nails – "9 Ghosts 1" fades in at 1:34 and plays to end of Track 4.] Does the Bible, for example, encourage or discourage a patriarchal society? After this segment that you just heard on patriarchy, the hosts of *The Bible for Normal People* press that question with Carolyn Custis James and she concedes that the Bible is not a patriarchy-free zone. But she responds that the Bible is much more likely to offer heterogeneous examples than monolithic ones on most all controversial topics (patriarchy among them) and even the passages often cited as authoritative (Paul's

position on women or same-sex couplings for example) can be nuanced with more attentive interpretation, including attention to translation, context, culture, and history.

## Track 5 - LGBTQ+ affirming Biblical Hermeneutics

STONE: Over the last several decades, no issue has been more divisive in orthodox Christian communities than questions about the place of folks with marginalized sexual and gender identities in the church.

“SCIENCE MIKE” McHARGUE (on *The Liturgists* podcast): When did you know?

PASTOR J. J. PETERSON: When did I know? [exclamatory sigh] Like, five. I can actually... people have asked me that a lot since I began the process of coming out—which was just a little over a year ago. I told my parents last January. I can remember very distinct moments where I had fear and those are the moments I can point back to that I can say “I remember I knew then.” I mean I can talk about stories like when I was five and six, but really when I fully kind of understood it was... the first time is probably in the sixth grade when I was at the beach with my parents, my mom... I was doing something where I was kind of prancing or, you know, cocking my wrist or being, you know—talking kind of valley girlish or something and my mom grabbed him by the arm and pulled me aside and just said “quit acting gay people are gonna think you are” and I remember being terrified that my mother knew.

TABITHA: But throughout transition, I lost my job that I had had for four-and-a-half years because he was a Southern Baptist deacon and he said that it was immoral for someone to change genders. Um, I lost most of my family. My mom told me that she’d rather have that I kill myself and I would, um, that she would have her son, at least, to bury, uh, than me as her daughter.

MATTHEW VINES: And I remember I-I, when I started the conversation—because my parents just wanted to talk about school and I was like, “here’s what I wanna talk about.” I said, “What do you think that Christianity is asking of gay people?” And they just sort of... “mmm”. I and was like, “OK, well here’s what I think your understanding of that is. I think that how you understand it—what Christianity is saying to gay people—is: ‘you come from a family but you will never form a family of your own. And you can fall in love with someone who means the world to you and you *could* build a life with them and a home with them and a family with them, but you can’t. And so you’ll your watch your friends fall in love, get married, have children, and you need to go sit in the corner. And if you do fall in love with someone you need to walk away from that and you need to break your heart every time that you feel too much for someone else.’”

STONE: You just heard the voices of Pastor J. J. Peterson, Tabitha from GracePointe church, and Matthew Vines, author of *God and the Gay Christian* on an episode of *The Liturgists* a podcast hosted by Michael Gungor and “Science Mike” McHargue. The two-hour episode titled, simply, “LGBTQ” aired on May 18, 2015 and on it, the hosts interview a number of people about the status and place of lesbian, gay, trans, and other queer folks in the church. The hosts admit that not even everyone on the staff of *The Liturgists* agree on the issue and so they felt like it was important to explore the issue’s complexity.

STONE: The episode is quite an emotional roller-coaster and, I think, encapsulates a moment in the middle of the last decade when discussions around LGBTQ+ equity in the church were beginning to gain steam, even within more orthodox religious traditions. As a concluding example for this project, I present a longer excerpt from the episode's final interview with Mellissa Greene and Stan Mitchell the pastors of Nashville's GracePointe church who had recently led that church through a transition to becoming fully LGBTQ+ affirming. Greene describes that process as one centered on and led by understanding the Bible more fully, specifically "how we interpret, how we view, [and] how we hear scripture." Even so, Green and Mitchell lost the majority of their twenty-two hundred parishioners, but also gained many new ones in what they call the "process of discernment." I've queued the audio here to the later portion of the interview where Mitchell make an extended argument for LGBTQ+ inclusion using both his on-the-ground experience as a pastor and then using adept Biblical hermeneutics to make his points. Listen carefully to Mitchell and the talents he draws on as a religious rhetor and activist. The *sound* of his voice resonates as pastoral, but is also unmistakably Southern, tying him intimately to the places and people that make up his community. He also possesses remarkable skill as a preacher and as a student of the Bible. As he moves towards hermeneutical analysis, he does so as a teacher and not to intimidate or amaze his audience with his deep Biblical knowledge. Mitchell's goal is to lead his audience through familiar Biblical passages and empower them to read them differently, with new eyes and new ears, and toward a revised conclusion about the status of LGBTQ+ individuals within the church. This is a high-level, and carefully practiced activism. But Mitchell is a great example of what effective agitation for change in a religious setting sounds like. And further, his work a great example of possible when we listen closely to both our sacred texts and our sacred communities.

MITCHELL: I mean, I don't know. We didn't have a manual on how to roll an Evangelical church through this, so these are—it's not like you had the bad people on one side and the good people on the other side. We've lost some of the dearest people in our life—um, hopefully not as friends, but certainly as parishioners. So, at the same time—in the last six weeks—we've probably gotten between us a couple of thousand emails from people treating us almost like messianic figures, you know, just for giving them the right to breathe, almost, which is really to some degree embarrassing that they have to thank us that much. So, it is a conflict of emotions for sure. [...] And what I-I see looking back is that all of the arguing, all of the discussion about *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*<sup>[5]</sup> and what's Romans 1 really mean, and where does pederasty fit into that, and how do you frame Sodom and Gomorrah and Genesis 19? That stuff is important but that's not really—that's not really where the debate is settled. It's settled in the fleshly lives and stories of people. It's-It's the dad that texts me yesterday and says that his six-year-old boy is sitting in his lap and says: "Dad, I've always wanted to be a girl." And-and the silence... the long pause, the little boy—he's not a systematic theologian, and he's also not an abomination, he's a little six-year-old boy—precious. And he pauses and he says, wistfully, "Dad, do you think God ever makes mistakes?"

MCHARGUE: Oh my God.

MITCHELL: See, he's never heard of theodicy. This is a wonderful family; there's been no abuse. So, eventually those kinds of stories in the pastoral setting accumulate. This is not black letters on a white page. This is flesh tones. And it finally drives you back. And you begin thinking, you know, you know we love the text and we have a high view of the text. We just think that the text needs to be properly handled. And, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus five times said, "You *heard* it say..." Everybody was up in arms saying, "You're trying to destroy Moses." He said, "I'm not trying to salvage the guy—it's what you *heard*." And we finally began to figure out that the Bible doesn't "say" it "hears" it "reads." And enough human experiences finally drive you back to the text with the question: "Have we read this right?" And so, it's not all of those experiences like the dad yesterday with the little boy. They don't cause you to jettison the text. And they don't cause you to run roughshod over it or look at and say, "well it's a barbaric piece of anachronistic literature." You don't do that. But you at least, with some hermeneutic of humility, go back to the text and say, "I think the Christian church has a long history of not always getting it right and having to correct itself." There is a developing, unfolding of the text in our lives. I think the text actually says this stuff if the text is treated properly.

MITCHELL: The text has always been an unfolding, progressive revelation. The nature of the text has always been that it's a time-release capsule that unfolds over time. Human consciousness grows in its capacity to hear things. God didn't change his mind on slavery between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our consciousness grew to such a capacity that we could finally hear the text. And—I told you guys the other night when we were just hanging out a story I heard on a reel-to-reel of Martin Luther King Jr. who at 26-years-old found himself a Baptist pastor. And, you know, he said, "I was a nepotistic son and grandson of two very successful pastors who did believe. But I'd gone through Boston University. My mind had been stretched. I had seen too much pain. And I read the text and I thought—my God!—I'm not a Christian! I don't believe!" And you even remember in "Letters from a Birmingham Jail" him saying that it was at that table in his kitchen that he finally came to faith and heard from God. But he said as a young man—a preacher, wrestling with the text—he said, "You tell me how I was supposed to read 1 Peter 2." You know, when anybody says to me, "well the text is plain." "OK, I'll give you a plain text: 1 Peter 2." King said I would read that text and it would make me hate the Bible.

1 Peter 2: "Slaves be submissive to your masters even if they beat you without cause. For to this you were called, for Christ left us an example."

MITCHELL: Now I have sympathy for how that text could be read on the surface. I have sympathy for the fact that it took a growing consciousness to finally be able to read that differently. But King said, "One day I was about ready to throw the Bible through the wall as I had read that text again." And he said, "Something inside of me said 'keep reading, Martin'." And he said, "I now believe that something to be the Holy Spirit. And I continued to read:

MITCHELL: "...be submissive to your masters, even if they beat you without cause. For to this you were called, for Christ left us an example. When reviled he reviled not again but entrusted himself into the hands of him who judges righteously. And all we like sheep are going astray but have been brought home by the shepherd of our souls'."

MITCHELL: And he said, “It hit me. This text was no more a defense of slavery than it was a defense of the crucifixion of God. But it was simply saying in a world where dastardly diabolical things like slavery and crucifixions happen, God is so utilitarian, economic, and redemptive that he can even take the vilest thing and turn it to an act of grace and mercy by which he redeems.” And it was that that then emboldened him to call his friends and say “bring even your children to the march at Selma” knowing that the dogs would be on their arms and the water cannons because they would bear in their body the sufferings of Christ which were incomplete. It’s that kind of reading of the text that finally gets beneath this thing that we’ve been saying, “Well the Bible plainly says...” The Jewish people taught us to do “midrash” with the text which is to wrestle with it. And when people ask me, “how do you read Paul the way you read him?” I’ll tell you how—he taught me how. Because Paul wasn’t writing scripture in his mind. He was a Jewish rabbi following Jesus, who was treating scripture the way that it’s supposed to be treated, and that is—wrestle with it! So, the way I read Paul is the way Paul read Moses. Paul didn’t just give us fixed and final propositional truth. He gave us the methods of wresting by which we do our Bible reading. That—I’m- I’m sorry to go into a theological thing here. But it’s that process—that’s what caused us to go back and say OK we’ve got all this incarnational embodiment of lives and these people deserve us to go back to the text and say “have I read this wrong?” and doggone it, we believe we have. And we’re trying to read it *right* now. And that’s why we’re treating the LGBTQ community differently. We’re trying to be faithful to the text.

STONE: [“ADRA var.A” by QuKr plays in the background] In this Kairos project, I’ve worked to bring progressive Christian voices from several popular podcasts into concert with one another in an effort to demonstrate the sound of faith-based activism. I hope listeners now have a better sense for what makes the sounded format so effective for this kind of work including some of the methods religious rhetors use to accomplish it. To be sure, activism within cherished orthodox religious traditions can be delicate work. As such, I hope you’ve heard the commitment and care rhetors bring to the task. And given that faith is such a personal and consequential experience, the stakes for believers couldn’t be higher. Advocating for and affecting change in these communities is therefore a labor of love and requires study, patience, and empathy.

STONE: Once again, I’m Jon Stone and this has been “Composing the Sonic Sacred: Podcasting as Faith-based Activism.” Thanks for listening.

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## Additional Resources

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[1] Evans began writing a blog in 2010 and her first book, *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions*, was also released that year. (*Evolving* was republished with a new title, *Faith Unraveled*, in 2014.) Three more books followed: *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (2012), *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (2015), and *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (2018).

[2] Calling *Ear Biscuits* a “podcast” is true but not the whole story. *Ear Biscuits* episodes are recorded to video and uploaded to YouTube. An audio version is also created and uploaded to podcast distributors. This episode, titled “226: Rhett’s Spiritual Deconstruction” has over one million views on YouTube.

[3] Jonathan Sterne’s 2012 collection *The Sound Studies Reader* is a useful primer for exploring sound-related topics and debates. For example, the book includes Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice” and Jacques Derrida’s exploration of presence in “The Voice that Keeps the Silence” among other important essays. A foil to Sterne’s thinking might be found in the work of Walter J. Ong (1982), and in particular in his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. I have written at length about these debates and especially on Sterne’s problems with Ong in my 2018 essay “Rhetorical Folkness: Reanimating Walter J. Ong in the Pursuit of Digital Humanity.”

[4] See Alexandra Cavallaro’s (2015) excellent article “Fighting Biblical ‘Textual Harassment’: Queer Rhetorical Pedagogies in the Extracurriculum” for another perspective on the power of hermeneutics in countering anti-LGBTQ Biblical rhetorics.

[5] Mitchell is referring to the translation of the Greek words “arsenokoitai” and “malakoi” that appear in 1 Corinthians 6:9. While both are descriptors for homosexual activity between men (which was common in the Corinthian culture the letter was written to address) there is ongoing debate about how to interpret the verse and specifically whether Paul was condemning homosexuality in general or in the exploitive sense inferred by many translations of the terms in question. See Robert Karl Gnuse’s (2015) *Trajectories of Justice: What the Bible Says about Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality*.