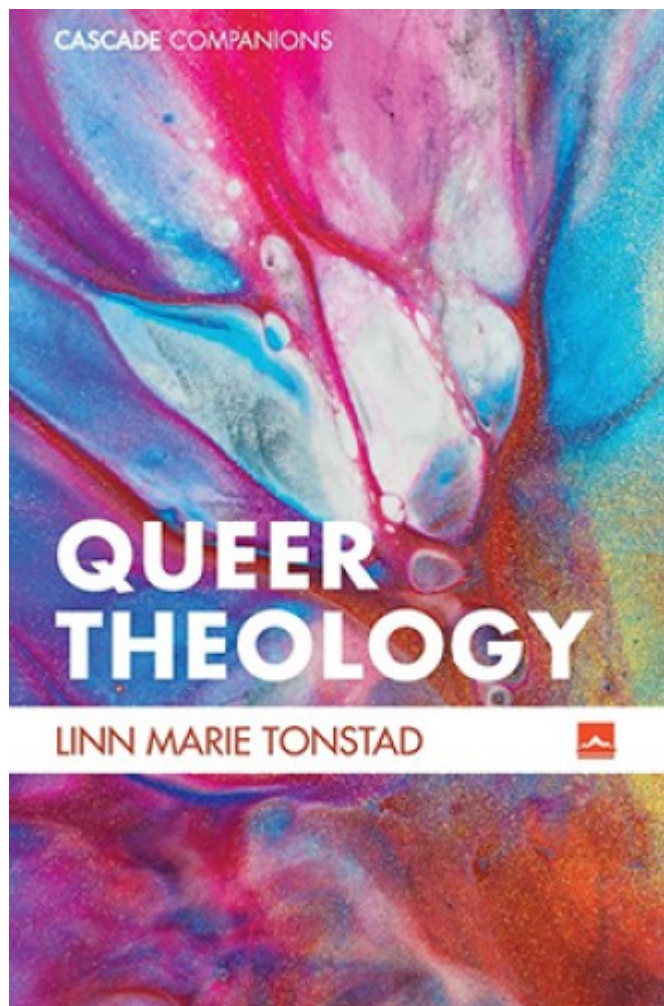


Doing theology with the assumption that queer people belong

Linn Marie Tonstad summarizes a far more interesting conversation about sex and gender than the one I grew up with.

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [September 11, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Queer Theology

Beyond Apologetics

By Linn Marie Tonstad

Cascade

I grew up in an evangelical church, where I was taught what I call the partition theory of gender, more commonly known as *complementarianism*. In this view, Genesis 1:27 (“male and female he created them”) means that God created not only sexual dimorphism, so that some people have *these* parts and other people have *those* parts but also gender. God created men to reflect half of his nature and women the other half, sort of like the United Nations apportioning territory. Men’s job is to kill dragons and rescue princesses. Women’s job is to dole out hugs and wipe tears.

It goes without saying that if a dragon attacks your city, you should try to help kill it, frighten it away, evacuate people, or put out fires. (In writing about this, for example, I am hoping to help kill the dragon that is partition theory.) But such work is everybody’s responsibility. In the Bible, women drive tent pegs into the skulls of invaders, fund Jesus’ ministry, and preach the resurrection. In life, women fight fires, write books, and lead organizations. Whatever Genesis is telling us, apparently the Bible doesn’t have a narrow view of gender roles.

The development of queer theology points to a far more interesting conversation about sex and gender than the one offered by partition theorists. Linn Marie Tonstad offers a fascinating précis of that conversation as it has developed thus far.

To begin with, she discusses the ways in which theologians have worked to defend the inclusion of queer people in the church and to find queerness or things analogous to it in salvation history. She writes about the closeness of David and Jonathan, the way Abraham’s many life changes mirror the existential wanderings of a trans person, and the tendency of the church fathers to see gender and sex as “temporary accommodations” designed to populate heaven.

But Tonstad is also at pains to show that queer theology needs to move far beyond this point. You can’t spend your whole life as a thinker defending your own existence. What happens if we take the various experiences represented by the word *queer*—lesbianism and gayness, gender fluidity or transformation, asexuality, intersexuality, an unnamable sense of alienation from what one feels is one’s

assigned place—and do theology as though these were normal (or at least theologically information-rich) ways for a person to be?

Given the writing styles of many of the authors Tonstad summarizes, the book's clarity and readability are major achievements. If her writing resembles her classroom practice, her students are lucky indeed. I learned a number of interesting facts from the book (for example, that 18th-century Moravians used to sing a worship song about kissing and licking the hole in Jesus' side, which they likened to a womb).

Tonstad neatly summarizes centuries of philosophical development to show how gender and sexuality have come to be regarded as constitutive parts of the self (an assumption that Gregory of Nyssa, for example, would not have shared). She points to theorists who accept this framework and still argue for the divine goodness of being queer. She points to others whose understanding of queerness—some people's lack of fit with common scripts for gender and sex—is based on a rejection of this framework. These thinkers portray all versions of gender and sex as oppressive and fictitious, no matter what they are. Tonstad offers a clear primer on academic queer theory and the handful of theologians who have closely engaged with it.

However, Tonstad is so dedicated to unsettling assumptions and de-defining terms that she creates an atmosphere in which self-contradiction flourishes. In one place, for example, she suggests that queer theologians should not make any normative claims. Not too many pages away, she claims that queer theologians need to clarify the "vision of humanity" that they "want to promote," followed by several concrete suggestions. That's pretty normative.

Near the end of the book, as an example of the more radical possibilities that queer theology opens up when it isn't simply making a case for itself, she refers to the "ecclesiology of abortion" that she developed in an earlier work, *God and Difference*. She argues that the church is always the object of Christ's judgment (true) and therefore should stop worrying about faithfulness (which she conflates with patriarchy, likening both to a kind of inheritance). Instead, it should distribute Christ's body willy-nilly, as though waiving exclusive control over it. She calls this idea an ecclesiology of abortion because it is intended to disrupt (and even obstruct) the goal of reproducing a church faithful to Christ across generations.

I cite this example because it perfectly exemplifies the combination of conceptual boldness and argumentative carelessness that makes *Queer Theology* both a bracing and a frustrating read. Consider also the way Tonstad entangles the ideas of faithfulness, success, inheritance, and patriarchy. These are very different things. Inheritance, for example, is not inherently patriarchal (I received my chin and my superstitiousness from my mother). More fundamentally, the effort to be faithful has never presumed success, so to tell the church that it will fail and be judged does not mean “stop trying.” And I take faithfulness to be a relationship with a living person, not (as Tonstad seems to assume) a static deposit that is protected for the sake of the next generation. There are so many less tendentious ways than this to argue for open communion.

One chapter is dedicated to summarizing the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, a central figure in queer theology who looms large in this book. This is where Tonstad shows us what a theology deeply informed by late 20th-century literary theory looks like. It looks like a mess. The tendency of such theorists is to say something like “there cannot be a simple dichotomy between X and Y” while at the same time presenting their own ideas as the total rejection of another set of ideas, which they simplify past recognizability. In other words, they disclaim dichotomies so that they can foster them.

So, for example, Tonstad interrupts her own summary of Althaus-Reid to say that her ideas are too rooted in the body, and in the community of the poor, to be discussed in a classroom or a book. Did Althaus-Reid not use her body to enter her classroom? Do poor people not read books or think about ideas or go to school? In the next sentence, Tonstad says she shouldn’t “reduce” Althaus-Reid to “an object of analysis.” What can this mean except that thinking about people, ideas, and things is inherently reductive?

Althaus-Reid’s ideas do not emerge from Tonstad’s summary possessing the explosive, unsettling power that Tonstad attributes to them. She quotes a number of not particularly revealing apothegms (“Is theology the art of putting your hands under the skirts of God?”) and assertions (theology should undo “a heterosexual construction of reality,” as though there were one single such construction, as though heterosexuality was not also multiple and self-contradictory). She poses what she regards as provocative questions that emerge from Althaus-Reid’s books. For example: What if we wrote theology while not wearing any undies? This question inspired me to wonder whether Augustine or Paul wore underwear in our modern

sense of the term—a question that's simply not very interesting.

Tonstad, echoing Althaus-Reid, also asks whether Karl Barth would have been a better theologian if he'd written more about how boring his marriage was. But we know what would have happened if Karl Barth had done this: he'd be Paul Tillich, and he'd basically be forgotten. The trope of marriage as inherently dull is itself dull. Getting married is an insane step into the unknown; most of the depressing behaviors we associate with it—passionless adulteries, avoidant silences, nitpicking, becoming workaholics or foodies or swingers or too invested in your dog—are taken up precisely in order to escape from the knowledge that one has done a beautiful, irrational thing.

Tonstad is a clear enough writer and an imaginative enough thinker that being irritated by her is a fruitful experience, one that forces the reader to re-describe the things that she describes inadequately. The partition theory of gender could never do this. And that is why this book matters even for those who may reject a good deal of it.