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Introduction

THE MEMORIAL service was about to start, but I was struggling to pull myself away from the boxes in Virginia's garage.

On a hot and humid Saturday in June 2022, at an old wooden lake house in northern New Jersey, a few dozen people had gathered to honor the life of Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. We ate lasagna and drank wine, watched bald eagles from a pontoon boat, got our hands dirty as we browsed the boxes scattered across the garage. All the while, I asked questions and soaked up stories. As a historian who had interviewed and written about the deceased, I was invited to share a few words at the service. Everyone congregating under the big blue tent by the lake had known Virginia better than I had, and yet everyone there seemed to care what I had to say. The legacy of their beloved friend, several people told me, was in my hands.

Perhaps that is one reason why I stayed in the garage longer than I should have. Handling old papers felt easier than holding someone's legacy. But the other reason, the one that took hold of me, came from my fellow browser Kris: "There's something here with your name on it, William."

This is a history of something that a lot of people assume did not exist.

Even trickier, it is a history of something that a lot of people say *cannot* exist. To them, the title of this book is no mere novelty: it is an

affront. Many evangelicals today are offended by the implication that gay activism had a place within their movement. Meanwhile, many LGBTQ people are offended by the implication that some evangelicals might have been something other than absolute enemies.

Even those who are not offended may still be suspicious. I have often seen it in their faces when I have mentioned my research for this book—whether they would call themselves religious or secular, whether they move within or well beyond scholarly circles. Their questions and comments confirmed what their faces already told me. Many assumed that the subjects of this book were celibate. They were not. Many assumed that they were not connected to any well-known evangelical institutions. They were. Many assumed that “these . . . um . . . evangelical GAY activists, you said?” could not possibly have made a significant impact on evangelicalism, could not possibly have posed any perceivable threat to evangelical leaders. They did.

My rather simple response to offended evangelicals (including more than a few scholars) is that their own predecessors testify against them: numerous antigay evangelical leaders in the late 1970s anxiously attacked these people who, according to antigay evangelicals today, do not and cannot exist.

Take Kenneth Gangel, for example. Born in a New Jersey slum in 1935, not long after his father had immigrated from Austria and his mother from Switzerland, Kenn would say that he was saved by evangelicalism in more ways than one. After his abusive father left town when Kenn was ten years old, his mother could not provide for him, and so she sent him to Stony Brook School on Long Island. The boarding school’s headmaster, Frank E. Gaebelein, would soon become a titan of evangelicalism. Thanks to Gaebelein’s mentorship, Gangel would go on to study at, teach for, and preside over multiple evangelical schools, including Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago and Dallas Theological Seminary. In his spare time, Gangel authored dozens of books and Bible studies for evangelical presses. In 1977, while working as the president of Miami Christian College, he made room in his schedule to write a book called *The Gospel and the Gay*.

At the time, just beyond Gangel's campus in Miami, Anita Bryant was spearheading the Save Our Children campaign. A winner of the Miss Oklahoma beauty pageant, singer with two dozen albums to her name, and author of a half dozen books with an evangelical press, Bryant became one of the most (in)famous people in the nation when, in early 1977, she rallied opposition to Miami's new gay rights ordinance and sparked similar antigay initiatives outside of Florida. Given Gangel's religious affiliation and local context, one might assume that *The Gospel and the Gay* was motivated by and mirrored the Save Our Children campaign. But this was not so. While Gangel generally supported Bryant's cause, his own concerns about "the gay" were of a different kind. His book did not focus on gay teachers, as Save Our Children did, nor did it pay all that much attention to the queer liberation movement at large. Instead, Gangel aimed his animus at *Christian* leaders, including and especially a man named Dr. Ralph Blair. According to Gangel, Blair was "more dangerous to the whole matter of the gay problem in Western culture today than the drag queens who march through the streets of San Francisco." What made this man so dangerous? In part, he was one of "the so-called 'gay evangelicals.'"¹

Gangel was not alone. *The Gospel and the Gay* was one of eight books about homosexuality published by major evangelical presses in 1978 (compared to four such books in 1977 and zero in 1976). All eight of these books named and combatted the efforts of at least one of the evangelical gay activists featured in this book.² Moreover, a few of those eight books expressed more concern with gay activism in their authors' own churches than with gay activism in the wider society.³ Though small in number, then, these activists had an outsized impact—so much so that some journalists and scholars of religion in the late 1970s wondered how "the so-called 'gay evangelicals'" might shape the future of evangelicalism.

Who were these evangelical gay activists? *Born Again Queer* concentrates on four individuals: Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), a largely LGBTQ denomination with nearly 150 congregations in the United States and three dozen congregations in other countries by the early 1980s; Dr. Ralph Blair, founder of a religious organization engaged in

gay advocacy called Evangelicals Concerned, with several hundred members spanning the United States; and Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, leaders in the evangelical feminist movement and coauthors of the groundbreaking book *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? Another Christian View* (1978).

Together, these four individuals shepherded an evangelical gay activist network. Their shared task was to persuade Christians in the United States that gay and lesbian Christians should be welcomed as equal members of their churches, which entailed endorsing their partnerships and allowing them to pursue ordained ministry. Throughout the book, I refer to this view as “gay-affirming” and to the views of its opponents as “antigay.”⁴ Evangelical gay activists did not offer an unconditional affirmation of gay sexuality, however. They preferred to argue that homosexuality was morally neutral—that is, like heterosexuality, it could be practiced in virtuous or sinful ways. Like other evangelicals, they elevated lifelong, monogamous unions as the proper context for sexual activity, whatever the genders involved.

All four of these individuals claimed the label “evangelical,” and all four spent ample time in congregations and other communities that claimed that label. All four had in common an evangelical (and more specifically Fundamentalist) college education.⁵ All but one had partnered extensively with major evangelical institutions: writing books for evangelical presses and articles for evangelical periodicals, leading a chapter of a nationwide evangelical campus ministry, working on an evangelical Bible translation project, speaking at the Evangelical Theological Society. Because of these experiences, members of this evangelical gay activist network made characteristically evangelical appeals to “the Gospel,” the Bible, sexual ethics, gender norms, and more.

All four individuals were white, and all except Letha Scanzoni identified as gay or lesbian. All four grew up either poor or middle class. Troy Perry grew up in the Florida panhandle and settled in Los Angeles. Ralph Blair grew up in Ohio’s Rust Belt and settled in New York City. Letha Scanzoni grew up in rural Pennsylvania and settled in Bloomington, Indiana. Virginia Mollenkott grew up in Philadelphia

and settled in New Jersey. The four of them exchanged letters, visited each other's homes, collaborated on various projects, endorsed each other's writings, served on each other's boards, and delivered speeches at each other's events. More recently, two of them spoke at another's funeral.⁶

As these evangelical gay activists were making inroads, prominent antigay evangelicals labored to deny and distort the considerable resemblances they shared with them. In time, those denials and distortions not only buried the history of evangelical gay activism but rendered the term itself, "evangelical gay activism," illegible. This book recovers that history and analyzes the construction of that illegibility. In the process, *Born Again Queer* demonstrates that evangelical positions on homosexuality in the 1970s and 1980s were contested and shifting, such that evangelicalism's antigay majority was much less dominant and much more vulnerable than both academic and popular accounts have acknowledged.

That antigay majority became especially vulnerable as evangelical gay activism peaked in the late 1970s. At the very same time, however, broader developments began to fuel the decline of this activist network's efforts. Organizations associated with the Christian Right contributed to a much-discussed antigay turn within evangelicalism and throughout the nation. Less discussed is the rise of the ex-gay movement, which emerged in the late 1970s and enjoyed the embrace of many evangelical leaders by the early 1980s (and many more by the 1990s). When touting the ex-gay movement's purported successes, evangelicals could safely ignore or else easily dismiss the arguments of evangelical gay activists. In addition, the AIDS epidemic began decimating gay communities in the early 1980s, and some evangelical gay activists had little time for anything other than responding to the decimation. Moreover, as evangelical leaders publicly associated AIDS with the sinfulness of homosexuality, evangelical communities became even less receptive to the pleas of evangelical gay activists. Lastly, tensions and divisions among the leaders of evangelical gay activism also fueled the decline. Given these factors, hindsight suggests that their cause stood little chance of thriving beyond the 1970s. And yet,

the modest victories they won, and the fears they aroused, have much to teach us.

This history calls for substantial shifts in how we think about religion, sexuality, and politics in the United States. To introduce those shifts, let us divide the book's subtitle into three parts: "evangelical," "gay activism," and "the making of antigay Christianity."

I join a growing number of historians who have taken a critical turn away from belief-based models for defining evangelicalism. The archetype for these belief-based models is British historian David Bebbington's list of four defining qualities: conversionism (the belief that humans must be urged "to turn away from their sins in repentance and to Christ in faith"), activism ("the expression of the gospel in effort"), biblicism ("a particular regard for the Bible"), and crucicentrism ("a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross").⁷ Each item in the so-called Bebbington Quadrilateral is problematically vague, but the vagueness itself has been profitable for evangelical scholars. Terms like "biblicism" and "conversion" are not analytical categories for measurable phenomena, but theological devices that advance the agendas of evangelicals as they distance themselves from their less respectable siblings. In some cases, the agenda advanced is historical as well as theological. The use of belief-based models often fabricates historical continuity and flattens distinctions between, for example, "evangelicals" in the twenty-first century and "evangelicals" of eighteenth-century revivals or revolutions.⁸ In the hands of white evangelical historians, racial distinctions and histories of racism have been alarmingly susceptible to such flattening, which has fostered widespread neglect of the persistent power of whiteness within American evangelicalism.⁹ For these and other reasons discussed throughout *Born Again Queer*, I maintain that belief-based models are inadequate for the work of narrating histories of evangelicalism. This is especially so when it comes to the history of evangelical gay activism: belief-based models cannot convincingly explain why the subjects of this book, who fit snugly into each corner of

the Bebbington Quadrilateral, failed to be accepted within a movement supposedly defined by those corners.

Parts I and III will develop my own approach to the terms “evangelical” and “evangelicalism” in greater detail, but several points can be made at this initial juncture. Given the chronological and geographic range of *Born Again Queer*, my understanding of evangelicalism is historically grounded in the “neo-evangelical” movement, which rebranded the theological, social, and political commitments of early twentieth-century Fundamentalism. Neo-evangelicalism was launched in the mid-twentieth century through numerous self-proclaimed “evangelical” institutions that cultivated “evangelical” as a market and a brand.¹⁰ Besides bodies like the National Association of Evangelicals, these institutions included evangelistic organizations like the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Campus Crusade for Christ, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship; publishing firms like Zondervan, William B. Eerdmans, and Fleming H. Revell; schools like Fuller Theological Seminary, Moody Bible Institute, and Wheaton College; and periodicals like *Christianity Today*, *Decision*, and *Eternity*.

From the 1970s onward, newer institutions bearing the “evangelical” label began to rival the reach of these older institutions. These new players strengthened the hold of sociopolitical conservatism within their movement, overpowering a more progressive contingent and eventually solidifying the American public’s association of evangelicalism with the Republican Party. Christian Right organizations that formed in the late 1970s were crucial to this process (Robert Grant’s *Christian Voice*, Beverly LaHaye’s *Concerned Women for America*, Jerry Falwell Sr.’s *Moral Majority*, Ed McAteer’s *Religious Roundtable*). The lobby groups and media empires of James Dobson and Pat Robertson would later become among the most powerful of these newer evangelical institutions. For my purposes, those who participated in this sprawling movement by consuming the products of these institutions and using their discourses were “evangelical,” whether or not they self-identified as such. In short, to study American evangelicalism in this period is to study the history of the leaders and followers of these diffuse institutions. To *understand* American evangelicalism is

to analyze their rhetorical worlds and the contestations therein. The rest of the book will elaborate on this approach.

The term “gay activism,” like the term “evangelical,” is laden with assumptions and challenges that indicate its history of contestation. While I occasionally use “LGBTQ” and “queer” in the book, I generally do not use these terms in reference to the religious activism that is the book’s subject. In part, I am trying to minimize anachronism. More importantly, though, the historical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the work of this evangelical gay activist network during these years was almost exclusively concerned with people who identified as gay or lesbian—and, like gay activism in other contexts, their work often prioritized gay men.¹¹ It is true that there were bisexual, trans, and other queer members of the MCC in the 1970s, but neither they themselves nor their unique concerns were well represented in the denomination’s evangelical gay activism. It is also true that Virginia Mollenkott would identify as trans (expressing comfort with she/her, he/him, and they/them pronouns) two decades after publishing *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*, but this does not undo the antitrans rhetoric in Scanzoni and Mollenkott’s book. The politics of respectability that characterized evangelical gay activism in this period renders a term like “evangelical queer activism” inappropriate for this study. I use “evangelical gay activism” because I do not want to make this activist network sound more inclusive or progressive than it was.

Of course, the term “evangelical gay activism” is likely to intrigue because it pairs something often considered to be progressive (gay activism) with something often considered to be conservative (evangelical). In fact, we could zoom out further and say something similar about any study that pairs queerness, however defined, with religion. This brings us to a key intervention of *Born Again Queer*. Scholars and others have long erected and treated as self-evident a binary between secular liberalism in favor of sexual freedom and religious conservatism in favor of sexual oppression.¹² Fortunately, scholars of religion and sexuality are troubling that binary, demonstrating that the sexual experiences of religious subjects have been just as diverse and complex as the sexual experiences of nonreligious subjects. That said, scholars have effectively

erected another binary, also treated as self-evident, between religion deemed “liberal” that supports LGBTQ causes and religion deemed “conservative” that opposes LGBTQ causes. This amounts either to a religious version of the previous binary or to a mild amendment of it, whereby certain religious subjects are merely added to the side of an otherwise secular liberalism. While the historical record justifies a generalized link between religion deemed “conservative” and anti-LGBTQ positions, that link is neither universal nor inherent: it is constructed, and the construction has necessarily involved the distortion and erasure of subjects who do not fit—like the evangelical gay activists in this history. Parts II and V are especially focused on this intervention, but I build the case throughout the book.

Last, regarding “the making of antigay Christianity,” clarification is in order. I do not purport to describe a creation out of nothing—as if there was no antigay sentiment within evangelicalism before the rise of evangelical gay activism. There was plenty, at least in part because of the history of evangelical patriarchy. There was also plenty of antigay sentiment outside of evangelical circles; at the time, most American Christians viewed all same-sex relationships as immoral. I do not, then, imagine a time before which homophobia was absent from evangelical communities. Rather, this book identifies a time when evangelical homophobia was in the process of becoming enormously more powerful than it had ever been: becoming a litmus test for the legitimacy of one’s Christian faith. By the turn of the century, as more and more Americans came to regard evangelicalism as synonymous with Christianity, evangelicals’ antigay sentiments were also becoming synonymous with Christianity.¹³ But evangelicals were not always so fixated on homosexuality, not always insistent that disagreement over these issues demanded schism, not always committed to the notion that anything other than an antigay position necessarily constituted “a false religion that is opposed to biblical revelation.”¹⁴ That fixation, that insistence, and that commitment all had to be *made*, and the historical processes of making them were marked by contingency, just like other instances of religious change.

The history of evangelical gay activism reveals this reality—that is, reveals the contested, variable, and vulnerable character of evangelical

positions on homosexuality during this period. In other words, to tell the history of evangelical gay activism is to historicize evangelical homophobia. It is to undermine the myth that evangelicalism's antigay stances are a timeless monolith. It is to replace that myth with a genealogy in the vein of Michel Foucault: "an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within."¹⁵ To say it another way, evangelical homophobia must always be born again. Each birth is at least a little different, and the labor is always messier and more strenuous than the parents will admit, and so we might say that evangelical homophobia is born again queer. The title of this book has two referents, then. First, it refers to the main subjects of this history, who identified as "born again" (like other evangelicals in this period) but whose gay activism set them apart from most others who claimed the identity. Second, the title refers to the complexity in the history of evangelicalism's antigay positions and the need to better historicize those positions.

Why has the myth of the timelessness of evangelicalism's antigay positions held strong for so long, even within academic circles? What accounts for the tendency to under-historicize evangelical homophobia? One reason is that evangelical leaders who held antigay views (a few of whom were also renowned scholars of evangelicalism) did an excellent job of promoting the idea that Christianity is intrinsically antigay, meanwhile avoiding the history of Christian gay activism, evangelical and otherwise. But there is also a methodological reason, relevant to scholars of many stripes.

I call it "hermeneutical determinism": attributing the actions of religious subjects to the interpretive principles and approaches that those subjects purport to apply when reading their scriptures.¹⁶ In the case of Christians deemed "evangelical," many scholars have framed their subjects' actions as a straightforward consequence of their approach to biblical authority, their hermeneutic of biblical literalism, and/or their belief in biblical inerrancy. For the purposes of this book, I am specifically concerned with how scholars, journalists, and other commentators have attempted to explain the antigay and antifeminist stances of evangelicals, though the concept of hermeneutical determinism can be

useful in other contexts as well. These explanations usually look something like this: “Evangelicals oppose feminism because they are biblical literalists, and the Bible, when read literally, teaches that women are to be subordinate to men.” Or “evangelicals oppose homosexuality because they have a high view of biblical authority, and since some biblical texts call homosexuality a sin, evangelicals base their position on those texts, rather than on more modern understandings of sexuality.”

First, a little ground-clearing. Many scholars who write about evangelicalism, even if only in passing, have brought an insufficiently critical lens to their subjects’ use of terms like “biblical authority,” “biblical literalism,” and “biblical inerrancy.” Religious texts themselves are never merely sources of authority; they are sites for contestation between religious actors who offer competing interpretations of texts and who themselves wield authority—their own authority—in the name of those texts.¹⁷ Put bluntly, biblical authority does not exist in the abstract; it always manifests as particular people making particular claims over and against other people’s claims. On the other hand, we could say that biblical authority *only* exists in the abstract, if by biblical authority we mean a singular entity that can be isolated from other things we call “sources of authority,” like “science” or “experience.” That is, you cannot engage a biblical text without bringing your brain and background to bear on that text, and thus you cannot appeal to biblical authority without simultaneously and inextricably appealing to your brain and background (though you can certainly pretend that you are not doing so). Thus, those who say that they are “defending biblical authority,” regardless of what they believe, are rhetorically defending their own and their community’s authority to dictate interpretations of certain biblical texts, motivated by at least one concrete concern—for example, preaching women or queer Christians—beyond the abstract notion of biblical authority. Too often, scholars have failed to acknowledge this, instead repeating the rhetoric of biblical authority used by their subjects and treating it not just as historical data, but as an analytical insight.¹⁸

Likewise, those who say that they arrived at their interpretations through a “literal” or “plain” reading of the Bible may very well believe that they did so, but the rest of us should acknowledge that all reading

is contextually informed, and different contexts yield different “plain” readings. Moreover, as *Born Again Queer* will emphasize, appeals to a literal or plain reading constitute yet another rhetorical tactic in support of one’s interpretation. The same is true of “biblical inerrancy.” The term has meant different things for different evangelicals, but it empowers them all to proclaim that *their interpretations* are inerrant. Terms like “inerrancy,” “literalism,” and “biblical authority” do not refer to stable beliefs about biblical texts or to coherent methods of reading them. They refer to rhetorical tools, and these tools are far more versatile than most evangelicals will admit.

With this in mind, let us return to hermeneutical determinism and the attempt to explain evangelicals’ antigay and antifeminist stances as a product of their “high view of biblical authority” or their principles of “biblical literalism” or “biblical inerrancy.” First, these historical explanations risk replicating some of the problematic assumptions prevalent among evangelicals—as if there really is a single, literal reading of biblical texts on which anyone who affirms biblical authority or inerrancy will automatically agree. These explanations also risk obscuring the breadth and depth of hermeneutical contestations among evangelicals who profess the same beliefs about the Bible, as revealed in the histories of evangelical gay activism, evangelical feminism, and many other intra-evangelical debates. Finally, hermeneutical determinism risks confusing rhetorical strategies with underlying motives. When we take evangelical discourse at face value and say something like “evangelicals oppose homosexuality because they believe the Bible clearly teaches that it is a sin,” and then leave it at that, we fail to consider whether that belief itself might be motivated by a variously informed antipathy to queer sexuality. I will expand on these arguments throughout the book.

Born Again Queer consists of six parts. Part I demonstrates the variability and instability of evangelical discourse on homosexuality and the Bible from the 1950s to the 1980s.¹⁹ Through a rhetorical analysis of articles in *Christianity Today* and several other sources during this

period, I examine numerous tensions and shifts in the antigay exegesis of evangelicals. Those tensions and shifts enabled the emergence of evangelical gay activism.

Parts II through IV narrate the history of the evangelical gay activist network that formed in the 1970s: part II focuses on Troy Perry and the MCC, part III on Ralph Blair and Evangelicals Concerned, and part IV on Letha Scanzoni, Virginia Mollenkott, and *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* In the chapters of part II, I argue that over the course of the MCC's first fifteen years (1968–1983), its rapid growth, diverse constituency, and experimental ethos allowed evangelical factions and features to flourish within the denomination—however “evangelical” is defined. Though not the most respectable wing of evangelical gay activism, the MCC provided an indispensable platform for this fledgling cause, especially before the AIDS crisis. Through this account of the MCC's early history, part II interrogates both scholarly and popular assumptions about religion and sexuality that hinder our understanding of queer religious people, in particular people who fit our molds of conservatism.

Part III considers the first decade of Evangelicals Concerned (1976–1986) and asks what it can teach us about evangelicalism as a whole. The man behind Evangelicals Concerned, Ralph Blair, epitomized the respectability of evangelical gay activism. In studying the successes and struggles of his efforts, I propose a reconceptualization of “evangelical” not as a stable, uniform theological construction but as a dynamic, perennially contested discursive construction. The case study of Evangelicals Concerned invites us to question the assumptions now baked into discussions of evangelical *identity* and to think more about the processes of evangelical *identification*. In other words, the chapters of part III encourage us to ask not what evangelicals believe but how evangelicals have talked, which evangelicals have succeeded in talking over others, what their discourses have done, and what rhetorical purposes laying claim to the term “evangelical” have served.

Part IV delves into Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott's book *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*, the first major book dedicated to persuading evangelicals to regard homosexuality as a natural phenomenon and to affirm monogamous same-sex unions. *Is the Homosexual My*

Neighbor? represents the pinnacle of evangelical gay activism in this period. Like other evangelical gay activists, Scanzoni and Mollenkott constructed decidedly evangelical appeals by operating within and creatively harnessing evangelical discourse on the Bible and sexual ethics. In early reviews of the book from evangelical periodicals, sympathetic tolerance was just as common a response as was condemnation, and an appreciable number of those periodicals' readers were persuaded by Scanzoni and Mollenkott's message. In an especially intriguing case, *Christianity Today* initially conveyed a position of respectful disagreement that obliquely legitimized the book's evangelical appeal. Soon, however, the magazine changed course. In doing so, the magazine's editors both signaled and contributed to a growing counteroffensive against this growing minority within their ranks.

That counteroffensive is the subject of the book's fifth part, which examines the wide array of rhetorical strategies that antigay evangelicals used to deny, distort, and distract from the resemblances they shared with evangelical gay activists. Much of part V concentrates on antigay evangelical discourse in the late 1970s, when direct responses to evangelical gay activism were at their peak. Along the way, these chapters build toward correcting a widespread misunderstanding about what came to be called "the culture wars." Those wars were never merely about what was happening in "the culture"; they were always also about what was happening *within* religious communities, including within evangelical churches—a reality that the rhetoric of culture warriors conveniently concealed.

Even after evangelicals' antigay attacks swelled in the late 1970s and the prospects of evangelical gay activism subsequently declined, Ralph Blair, Letha Scanzoni, and Virginia Mollenkott thought they had one last hope. In the sixth and final part of *Born Again Queer*, I explore the failed efforts of these three evangelical gay activists to secure allyship from the larger progressive evangelical movement in the 1980s. Over the course of the previous decade, this "evangelical Left" had rattled many of the white men at the helm of evangelical institutions by opposing nationalism and militarism, advocating for structural solutions to poverty and inequality, and promoting certain feminist and antiracist goals.

Given the overlap in political values, theological language, and even leadership between evangelical gay activists and the evangelical Left, allyship seemed viable, if not likely. Nevertheless, many leaders of progressive evangelicalism and evangelical feminism sided with evangelicalism's antigay majority over its gay-affirming minority. Herein lies a broader lesson about evangelicalism—both the branches labeled “conservative” and the branches labeled “progressive.”

All six of the book's parts engage a range of archival sources: newsletters, pamphlets, speeches, reports, manuscripts, church bulletins, private correspondence. Alongside these sources, parts III and IV introduce documents that are not yet archived at the time of this writing. I thank Ralph Blair and Debra Morrison for their generosity in sharing these materials with me. In addition, parts II, III, IV, and VI draw extensively from oral histories, conducted either through the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network or by me. The distinctly embodied, dialogic method of oral history is uniquely suited to and has been foundational for the field of queer history. Given how heteronormativity has shaped and continues to shape the world of archives, there simply would be no queer history without oral history.²⁰ I have employed this method with a sense of urgency: our sources are dying. Between 2018 and 2024, I recorded oral history interviews with Perry, Blair, Scanzoni, and Mollenkott, along with numerous others who played a role in this history. I shared the main claims of *Born Again Queer* with all four of them. All four of them attested to the history I was telling. And here I must return to where I began.

“There's something here with your name on it, William.”

On that hot and humid Saturday in June 2022, while I was browsing boxes in the garage by that old wooden lake house in New Jersey, my fellow browser Kris handed me an oversized envelope. After a few seconds, I recognized it as the envelope I had mailed to Virginia two years earlier. Inside was a research proposal for the project that would become this book and a draft of my article about Virginia and Letha's book *Is the*

Homosexual My Neighbor? for an academic journal.²¹ I had sent Virginia these two documents several weeks before our three-hour phone interview in May 2020. Virginia died four months later.

As a historian, I strive to practice empathy for each of my subjects, but of course I am drawn to some more than others, and I might as well be forthright: I like Virginia the most. I like Virginia's eloquence, confidence, courage. I like that Virginia worked as a professor but wrote for audiences beyond the academy. I like the similarities in our religious experiences and our queer experiences, both the sweet and the bitter. I too know what it's like to read and write your way into liberation. I too know what it's like to be forbidden from meeting your nieces and nephews.

During our interview in May 2020, I asked Virginia for feedback on my research proposal and journal article. While corroborating the history, Virginia had one criticism: I had not sufficiently emphasized just how swiftly and decisively the evangelical publishing industry had turned on Virginia after *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* was published. "They dropped me like a hot potato," Virginia said. From my perspective, the archival evidence suggests that the process was not quite so swift or decisive. Still, Virginia's sense of having been abandoned in an instant and betrayed by their own kin, nearly fifty years after the fact, stuck with me.

In the months that followed our conversation, I could not help wondering just how closely Virginia had read that research proposal and journal article, could not help wondering if any feedback was withheld. Having spent plenty of time with Virginia's archived papers, I knew just how fervent an annotator this English professor was. Letha included a few examples of Virginia's feisty marginalia in a remembrance of her friend: "Jesus never did this." "Self-hating and unbiblical." "Garbage!"²² As I opened the oversized envelope in that sticky garage, I hoped my work had been spared the wrath of Virginia's pen.

There are markings on thirty-one of the sixty-three pages. Some additional details scribbled in. Words of anger directed at a few of the nicer antigay evangelical leaders. A couple of names circled, suspected of being secretly gay. There were no corrections or criticisms, except the one already shared. In a turn of events I will never forget, Virginia validated this project not only in an interview several months before death,

but in words penned in black and blue ink beside my own, recovered two years later.

As I was flipping through the last few pages, I felt relieved and overwhelmed. I also figured that I had seen all there was to see. The memorial service was starting. Kris and I needed to start walking. Then I reached the last page, and I froze. Just below my last sentence, Virginia wrote one word: *Amen*.

Neither those two documents nor this book were written as a prayer. And yet, the prayers of Virginia and many others in the following history are sacred to me. They prayed that families would stop disowning their queer children. They prayed that the congregations in which queer people had been at home would one day welcome them back. They prayed that more and more queer people would read, write, speak, fight their way into liberation. Moved by those prayers, and daunted by the task of holding the dead, I have written this still-living history with trepidation. My hands are steadied by the black and blue ink that I have touched, by the dust from a hundred boxes that, I would like to think, is still on my fingertips.

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