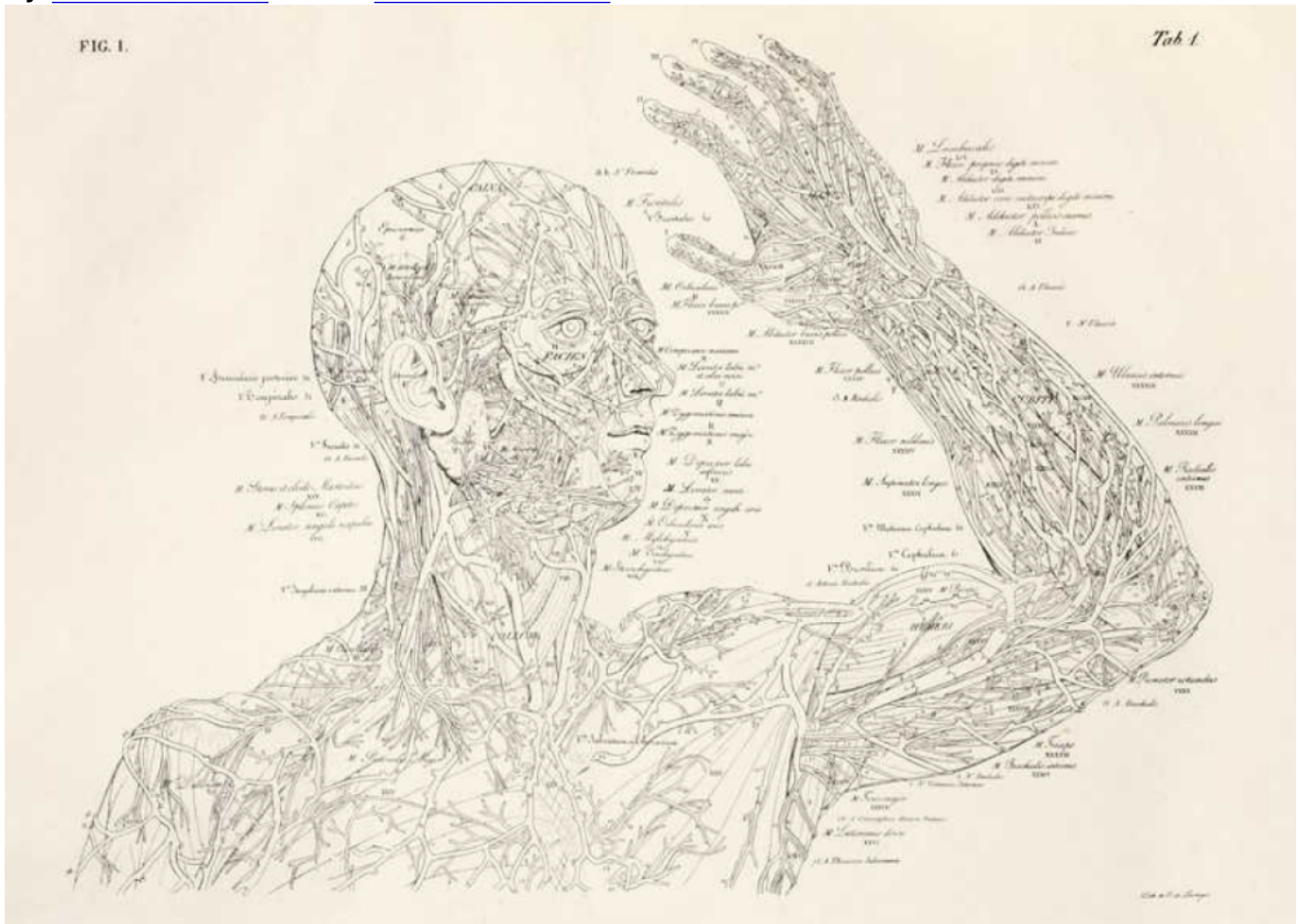


Who decides what my body means?

The next Reformation is about interpretation, but not of a book.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue



Drawing by Paolo Mascagni, annotations by François Carlo Antommarchi, c. 1826.

They say it's best to avoid conversations about religion, sex, and politics. Social media seems to heighten the wisdom of this council. Foolishly or not, I tend not to heed it. But recently I have found myself in strange territory. Not simply angry or frustrated, but lost—as though we were all looking out the same window yet describing different worlds. Again and again, conversations on these subjects conjure Babel. We want to see and to know God, but it all ends in chaos and

confusion.

Amid regular news reports about police shootings of unarmed black men and women, or pastors being defrocked for performing a same-sex wedding, or questions about diversity in higher education (or anywhere, really)—other people's pain or anger or understanding seems a distant, hazy idea. We get stuck in a conversation that spins around the same two or three phrases, and everyone begins to wonder how the other can't see, can't understand. Are we even speaking the same language?

They're not. We're not.

This lack of understanding is in the air; it's the atmosphere of our current moment. Our so-called dialogues have well-worn steps now, like the melody of a Top 40 song that you know before the third beat.

Black lives matter!

But don't all lives matter? I really don't think we ought to focus on our differences.

Everyone in the room shifts nervously, and soon enough the conversation begins to spin. Historical references to legacies of systemic violence. Contrary evidence about someone's black neighbor they have known for years.

Can't you see that it isn't about individual choices?

I don't understand why you are getting so angry.

I am not a racist!

And the words spin past each other even faster. Maybe other people jump in, or maybe the room clears until dessert.

It's not natural, goes another well-worn conversation. Adam and Eve are the first marriage.

But gender isn't just XX or XY.

Each person points to scripture or historical precedents or theological justifications.

No, I don't hate gay people, God just intended something very specific.

But can't you see that "natural" is a category that has more to do with what people have said in the past than something divinely ordered?

And the melody plays again. We know how it goes.

How did we get here—ostensibly speaking the same language, yet failing to hear one another? Our present moment shares some family resemblance to another moment of profound cultural and political upheaval: the Protestant Reformation.

The splintering of European Christianity might not be the most hopeful reference point. But the Reformation is instructive for a church struggling to gain its bearings in a radically shifting social, religious, and cultural moment. The analogy is not simply about shifts in culture or political power or technology. We share something deeper with 16th-century Europe: a crisis of truth.

For some, the contemporary crisis is that truth seems to be ebbing away, that there is no center anymore. For others, the crisis is the discovery or bold assertion of a truth—that our lives matter—and the recognition that this truth seems sadly contrary to the truths of what “made America great.” At the heart of these two very different understandings lies the same problem: the fragmenting of shared meaning about who we are and what the world is. As we try to imagine a way forward, this problem seems to exacerbate difference and make dialogue impossible.

We all have access to the Bible—as well as to interpretations of it, both scholarly and popular, that reinforce what we believe about the world. There is no longer a singular authority to help us parse what scripture has to say about women's ordination, same-sex marriage, race, ecology, abortion, or disability. Each tribe can levy sophisticated tools of interpretation and analysis to ground its understanding of what it means to be Christian in this moment. Knowledge has become radically individualized, tribal; it excavates deep gorges between neighbors.

But at the heart of our divide lies a reformation deeper than questions about how we interpret a particular book. It's about who or what can interpret our bodies. Bridging the language gap in our conversations with one another is not about finding a common reading of the Bible, because the Bible isn't the text that's being read, not really. Why is the divorced man still a pastor while the ordained woman waits for a call? Why is the abuser not shunned and shamed but LGBTQ people are? These questions are about bodies—what they're for, what they mean, and who gets to decide.

It's a divide between Vulgate and vernacular. Some read our bodies as the church once read the Latin translation of the Bible: as stable, part of an inherently natural order determined by God. The visible differences of our bodies correlate to a natural purpose, an inherent truth conveyed to me by a priest, who functions as a translator for what my body means in the world.

But what if we are vernacular? What happens when we discover the possibilities of what our bodies mean—when we discover a community of people who interpret our bodies in new ways, who see the image of God in new ways?

Our new reformation moment is saying fervently that our bodies matter.

The exasperation my neighbor displays when he says, "African American or black or whatever he wants to be called," is the disorientation of a man struggling to adapt to the shifting signs of people asserting their right to name themselves. When this exasperation encounters a movie with mostly dark faces, or two women kissing at the park, or a woman wearing a hijab, it becomes fear and exclusion. And the question of who gets to say what a body is for is not simply a language game; it has consequences. The "bathroom bills" in North Carolina and elsewhere, like earlier legislative attempts to define marriage as between a man and a woman, show how the interpretation of bodies becomes manifest in the kind of community we imagine, the kind of life we hope to share.

The question of our bodied lives together—and whose bodies matter—is not new. But the protests of the past five years, about everything from police brutality to LGBTQ rights, indicate that the question never leaves us. We are confronted with so many differences and so many refusals, in seemingly endless succession. Our bodies do work in the world. They are a book, a language.

And language is more than words and grammar. It is interpretation, the reading of signs. These signs can be words or visual cues, shapes or gestures. Language is that moment when enough people share a reading of how we see and what we say and how we should envision our lives together.

In the digital age, language is radically democratized. Everyone can speak; everyone can interpret. This makes shared meaning difficult to find, as people interpret signs in starkly disparate ways. Social media is often compared to the printing press: it enables people to create and disseminate ideas, to build audiences and followers and schools of thought. This creates an opportunity for new communities to form

that resist the “vulgated” reading of our bodies.

During the Protestant Reformation, the vernacular allowed people to name the incongruities they saw in their lives, as well as to discover new ways of describing God and becoming community. It allowed Christians to see scripture as multiple—and that multiplicity was tied to how communities were shaped, how they lived, and what they looked like. For the reformers, being able to read the Bible in one’s own language opened up possibilities of reimagining one’s faith, community, and relationship to the world.

In our moment, the issue is no longer the illusion of a common text. The vernacular poses a different question: How can there even be a common reading of a text without first attending to the different bodies that do the reading? Neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male nor female—Paul’s words indicate the possibility that our bodies can be read in new ways, that they can begin to carry new meanings into the world.

The reading of bodies is what I have in mind when I say that race is a social construction: I mean not that race isn’t real, but that for centuries bodies like mine have been read as dangerous, unwhole, deviant, and unqualified. To say that gender is a spectrum is to acknowledge the very different ways bodies and their gender have been understood over time and in different cultures.

In the face of increasingly vehement calls for diversity in places of power, Donald Trump’s presidential campaign rang like a resounding no. “Make America Great Again” evokes cohesion, certainty, and stability. But the slogan also captures what commentator Van Jones referred to on election night as a “whitelash” against Barack Obama’s presidency and against the people—black, brown, Asian, and white—crying out for inclusion and equality in American society.

“Make America Great Again” presents an idyllic image of white-defined normalcy—without any call to a particular set of doctrines or beliefs. In the church, if we are to move beyond either/or politics and toward a genuine communal life, we need to realize that the question of interpretation is not just a matter of which texts we read or take as authoritative. What’s at stake is the question of what our community looks like, of who is capable of reflecting Christ.

This question of images points to another, haunting parallel between the Reformation and our current moment. While Luther’s approach to icons tended

toward qualified tolerance, other reformers didn't share this attitude. Calvin decried "unseemly representations"; he and others stripped their churches of color and adornments. Andreas Karlstadt and others ransacked churches, destroying paintings and statues, sometimes even defecating on them or placing them in unholy positions to emphasize their idolatry.

The iconoclasm of the Reformation reveals that the social and political upheaval was never limited to disagreements about scripture or doctrine. People understood that their images reflected who they believed themselves to be, what they believed about themselves in the world. The erasure of images in their worship life was a resistance to something deeper: it was a struggle to contain the sensible world in their midst, to press sight and taste and touch into the container of a word. This iconoclasm turned scripture into a treasure chest meant to hold all the meaning of our lives—rather than being a window through which we can see the world and ourselves anew, again and again.

In an American context, in which churches remain deeply divided by race, our gatherings reflect deeply held convictions about what the beloved community ought to look like. We never seem to settle conflicts over who can be in the pulpit, who can teach, who can be married; the debates just become even more knotted. As LGBTQ Christians struggle to speak their lives and bodies into the church, reformation continues. Like the early church and the first Protestant reformers, they are pressing the question, who is included in this good news? Is it possible that what we thought was true is even wider than we first imagined? Is it possible that we too are the body of Christ?

As our bodies become increasingly vernacular, we are seeing a resurgence of iconoclasts. They don't roam in angry bands, tearing down statues and shredding paintings. But because their Vulgate assumes the stability of our bodies and identities, they obscure or exile these "unseemly representations" from their midst. Their readings have no room for a form of life in which a woman can find intimacy and covenant with another woman, or in which a trans woman is seen as anything but confused about how God made her. It seems these are not bodies or ways of living that can reflect God's image.

My point is not that anything goes or that there are no boundaries. What I am saying is that we cannot even begin to understand what such boundaries might be if we are not speaking the same language—if we do not recognize the historical, social, and

theological pressures that form us and how we read scripture, one another, and ourselves.

This is a continual process. I have undergone it as I've worked to reconcile my theology with the lives of friends and students around me. There was a time when I wanted to walk slower on questions of LGBTQ inclusion, to say, "I love you and I see you, but . . ."

I remember a student saying to me "I see what you have done on questions of racial identity, but I just don't see how you can draw a line between race and sexuality. How can you see race in new ways, but not LGBTQ people?" I gave the theological reasoning that made sense to me at the moment (probably something about particularity and Israel). But the more I thought about her question, the more I realized that I had created a kind of shield around sexuality. Somehow, questions of sexuality were immune from the theological or historical reimaginings that I had been thinking and writing about with regards to race.

As I have read and talked with more people who reflect varied embodiments of gender and sexuality, I have come to realize the beauty and power of the vernacular body. In their readings of themselves and of theology and the Bible I have seen rhythms of faithfulness, rhythms that can be played in different ways and on different instruments. It's becoming increasingly clear to me that these questions can no longer be approached piecemeal, slowly dismantling one exclusion at a time. They are all tied together.

I sit in conversation after conversation with people who are hesitant about Black Lives Matter, or the ordination of women, or LGBTQ inclusion, or diversity in any context—and I realize that we are not speaking the same language because they do not recognize the body as an unfolding text. Unless they see bodies (theirs and ours) in new ways, we will continue to talk in circles.

What kind of communal life will announce the possibility that difference does not have to be silenced and subdued, but can be conjoined in beautiful ways? What kind of "texts" will help us to discover the answer? Is this not the promise of the incarnation—that the Spirit and flesh are not opposed but commingle?

This is our reformation moment, a moment that has already begun but whose sinews are slowly connecting. It is beginning to say more fervently that our bodies matter. It is protesting the confinement and execution of dark people. It is a reformation of

what can look like God's people—a calling to embody communities of difference that, when encountered with new possibilities of faithfulness, respond by reconfiguring their walls and their rooms.

I realize that what I have written here might not be terribly instructive for those seeking practical advice on more fruitful dialogue around race, sexuality, or gender. But I think it is important to start by acknowledging that we won't get there only by quoting scripture, and we can't get there by holding on to visions of worship spaces stripped of color and form. We must begin with bodies, our lives together and apart, before we can even begin. Saying so is its own form of protest, a refusal of the heresy that a seemingly orthodox belief can justify another person's dehumanization.

The op-eds and books, the marches and the new communities—these are our 95 theses. The people filling the streets are words declaring the unfaithfulness of so much that was, and calling us to a new enfleshment of Christ's freedom. At the heart of this reformation is the centrality of our bodied lives. They are a confession of the beauty, possibility, and wonder that might follow if we were to acknowledge what, ultimately, Jesus lived and died and rose again for: our lives together.

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