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Relationship, humility, justice

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In the wake of the Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell* decision, it looked like LGBTQ people and their allies were winning whatever culture war might be at hand. At the Gay Christian Network Conference in 2016, the Reverend Allyson Robinson, who is white and the first openly transgender person ordained as a Baptist, gave a keynote address, speaking from that position of seeming victory. She ended by entreating her audience to bring humility to public disagreements, saying:

We LGBT people know what it's like to have others read "Love your enemies," "Do good to those who hate you," "Bless those who curse you," and to try and put it into practice, and to get it all wrong. Here, as the Culture War draws to a close, is our chance to get it right. It begins, I think, with [...] loving the people with whom we disagree, not as our enemies, but as human beings whom God loves and for whom Christ died. And I'm compelled by texts like Paul's letter to the Romans. Let love be genuine, he tells these Christians in Chapter 12. [...] And lest we imagine that he's only talking about the people who think like us or who agree with us or who are nice to us he says, "Bless those who persecute you," repeating the words of Jesus: "Bless

them and do not curse them.” [...] I believe that if we can live together in this way, if we can live out this humbleness, this mercifulness toward our enemies, if we can devote ourselves to a justice that includes freedom of conscience for everyone, and a harmony that does not demand homogeneity, then we ourselves will be blessed. [...] It won't be easy. [...] But we *must* try. And it *must* begin with us.

For Pastor Robinson, Christianity demands humility in the face of disagreement and love for those who persecute you. For others, democracy is what demands humility. At a 2017 conference on Humility and Civic Life, [Michael Lynch and colleagues](#) framed the discussion by asking, how we might “remain loyal to personally held beliefs while being open to the possibility of being wrong?” But in the face of injustice, can humility be a virtue at all?

We base our response on our study of the movement among conservative Christians, mostly in the United States, to open up conversation with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) members¹ and in many cases, to affirm same-sex marriage, gender transitions, and LGBTI identities. We agree that humility includes acknowledgement that one could be wrong. Our research helps us to build on that of philosophers like [Dennis Whitcomb and colleagues](#), [Valerie Tiberius and John D. Walker](#), and [Krista K. Thomason](#) by calling us to recognize that humility in the context of civic life is a social emotion. It is rooted in concern to foster and preserve *relationship*, as [Martin Buber](#) defined the term, meaning openness to vulnerable connection with another that allows one to hear, learn, and change. Understanding humility as rooted in relationship with others makes clear why humility cannot coexist with injustice.

Since February 2014, we have conducted approximately 485 hours of participant observation and 113 qualitative interviews in four overlapping groups: the [Gay Christian Network](#), the [Reformation Project](#), the Marin Foundation, and the [Center for Inclusivity](#).

LGBTI conservative Christians come to these groups having experienced conventional conservative assertions such as “You have turned your back on God,” “You have given yourself over to sin,” or “You haven't tried hard enough to change” as profoundly untrue (in the healthiest scenarios anyway), toxically shaming, and arrogant. Avowals of humility such as “I could be wrong” indicate safety and act as a balm to those wearied by constantly hearing these remarks. They know the harm that comes when people actively cultivate a disposition of shame in others. Following scholars such as [Helen Lewis](#), [Cheshire Calhoun](#), [Thomas Scheff](#), and [David Velleman](#), we define the feeling of shame as the fear of a break in the social bond. *Shaming* another person has the effect of saying “I can do without our bond if you don't fix yourself.” Throughout the movement, participants work to model Christian love and humility the way they know it should be lived, the way they were taught it, the way they wish it had been shown to them all along.

LGBTI people in this movement cultivate humility, but they are not alone; humility also allows heterosexual, cisgender people to understand Scripture and God's will in a new light and join this movement. For instance, when the eventual founder of the Reformation Project, Matthew Vines, first told his father, Monte, that he was gay and wanted to know if he could pursue a same-sex relationship and still be Christian, Monte's desire to preserve their relationship made him not want to be the one who denied his son that path. Describing his approach a few years later, he clearly showed the connection between wanting to maintain relationship and being willing to admit that he could be wrong. He said:

I had invested so much of myself into creating a good relationship with Matthew, and I was hoping to enjoy this good relationship for the rest of my life, and I was afraid that if I failed to affirm him in his desire for a same-sex relationship, that could undermine our good relationship. I needed to be able to speak from a position of authority, meaning that I knew what I was talking about, and I knew that I really didn't. I thought if we studied the Bible together, he would see in God's own words that this is not what God approves of and he was going to have to deal with that himself. And to my great surprise, I found myself changing my understanding about this, as we went through the Bible passages. *[Edited for brevity]*

Monte remarked that before, he had found the whole question distasteful; he preferred not to think about it. His interpretation was now shaped not by disgust, but by a relationship of respect and love. Straight, cisgender people come to this movement from a place of humility in relationship with LGBTI ministry members, children, siblings, hiking buddies, and neighbors. Their desire to preserve those relationships cultivates the vulnerability necessary to learn from these others, even about deeply-held truths about God's order and their privileged place in it.

Many participants consider themselves conservative and see their affirmation of LGBTI identities, same-sex marriage, and alternative gender expressions as fully consistent with "a high view of Scripture." Religious conservatism is not the same as political conservatism. Because of their own experiences of injustice, it is impossible, for many, to feel that they are following in the footsteps of Jesus if they are ignoring the experiences of those who are oppressed in ways they are not. Many see it as showing love for God and neighbor, as being like Jesus, to side with the marginalized against those who would cast them out. (See [Wendy VanderWal Gritter's book](#) as an example.)

At the same conference where Pastor Allyson spoke, the Reverend Broderick Greer, who is black and gay, gave the [opening keynote address](#), where he linked the oppression of people of color to the oppression of LGBT people, saying:

For decades, many of us in this room have been told that our experience of God, our interpretations of Scripture, our experience of the church is invalid. We have been told that any pain we've endured or suffering we've survived has just been "a part of God's plan."

I stand here today to say "Enough."

"Enough" to every manifestation of white supremacy, heterosexism, homophobia, sexism, and trans antagonism.

"Enough" to every person who defends the calculated, systemic assault of law enforcement against black people and other vulnerable populations.

"Enough" to every pastor, theologian, theobrogian, political leader, and self-appointed expert who would relegate us to an "issue" rather than stare us in the eyes as dignified human beings.

Taking the standpoint of the oppressed and marginalized, Greer demanded the respect due to human beings. His words comforted and empowered those who were constantly told, even in supposedly "safe space," that they *still* had to be patient and kind with those who did them harm and those who showed no concern when others mistreated or ignored them.

Such remarks might sound unhumble to white people unaccustomed to any commentary about racism, striking the deep, often unacknowledged nerve of white shame. They may sound unhumble to heterosexual/cisgender people accustomed to dismissing those who are not. Being told that you are failing to treat someone as fully human can feel like being shamed, like they are saying *you are* expendable if you do not fix *yourself*. To those accustomed to power in a given situation, who have never systematically been stigmatized and shamed, it can feel degrading when someone holds a mirror up to their relational failings.

What sounds unhumble to those whose relational failings are exposed is a healthy assertion of worthiness by those who have experienced their humanity constantly called into question. People who have never been systematically shamed and stigmatized often take healthy pride for granted, reserving the word “pride” for arrogance or its other vicious forms. But humility includes having a realistic assessment of one’s *strengths* and worthiness as well as one’s limitations. That same realistic assessment also partially constitutes the virtuous kind of pride, the kind that is often denied to those denied power and personhood. It is the pride of knowing that one is no more or less human than anyone else. Expressing doubt over our own personhood is not humility; it is self-abnegation.

There is no humility in assuming a posture of “I could be wrong” when talking about whether someone is fully human; humility begins from openness to the other. Expressing doubt over someone else’s personhood is arrogant. Appropriate humility allows us to acknowledge others’ personhood by showing that our relationship matters, and to embrace the vulnerability that enables us to say, “I could be wrong.” Shaming people with whom we disagree, as if they are already too far gone for us to engage, can be necessary for survival. But it shuts down dialogue, and it is too easy to do when we do not really need to.