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Humility: Rooted in Relationship, Reaching for Justice

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Running head: Humility and Justice in the Evangelical LGBTQI Movement

Abstract

Scholars who study humility tend to think of it in highly individualized terms, such as an absence of vanity or an accurate self-assessment. Individuating definitions can lead to such jarring concepts as the “humble white supremacist” (Roberts and Wood 2007). Qualitative sociological research in the (predominantly North American) evangelical movement to accept and affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) identities, same-sex marriage, and sex/gender transition reveals that humility is not simply the awareness that “I could be wrong.” That awareness is rooted in what we have found to be humility’s defining element, concern to foster relationship. These findings prompt us to define humility as a fundamentally social disposition, as concern to protect the kinds of intimate connection with others that can

transform the self. Recognizing the social nature of humility reveals why humility is incompatible with injustice.

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Humility: Rooted in Relationship, Reaching for Justice

After the US Supreme Court passed down its 2015 *Obergefell* decision legalizing same-sex marriage, it looked like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) people and their allies were winning whatever culture war might be at hand.¹ 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, spoke in her keynote from that position of seeming strength, calling on her audience to bring humility to public disagreements. She said:

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

¹ LGBTQI is an abbreviation for groups of people (including Queer and Intersex people) whose situations differ, and thus, we do not use one consistent string of letters. For instance, intersex people, who are born with bodies that do not conform to cultural assumptions of binary sex, are not always treated as LGBTQ people are. However, given that they are often subject to nonconsensual surgeries to make their bodies capable of "heterosexual" intercourse (Preves 2002, Davis 2015), they are sometimes included in LGBTQI organizing. Not all sentences refer every identity category abbreviated in the string of letters.

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.

For Pastor Robinson, Christianity demands humility in the face of disagreement and love for those who persecute you. Others see democracy as what demands such humility. Lynch and colleagues (2017) ask how to “remain loyal to personally held beliefs while being open to the possibility of being wrong” (see also Garcia 2006, Hazlett 2015). In communities where political convictions express loyalty to one’s faith, questions about justice can express or threaten people’s deepest sense of who they are and what life is about. And in a country where public debates over sexuality and gender expression are shaped by the Religious Right’s interpretations of conservative Protestant morality (Fetner 2008, Dowland 2015), the LGBTQI and allied conservative Protestant movement’s approaches to these questions hold significance far beyond their own religious circles.² Indeed, this conservative Christian movement reveals ethical principles that apply to anyone who is concerned for equality and justice.

We have developed our understanding of humility in a qualitative study examining the movement among evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, mostly in the United States, to open up conversation with LGBTQI members and in many cases, to affirm same-sex marriage, gender transitions, and LGBTQI identities. While some conservative Christians leave their faith communities upon claiming an LGBTQI identity, seeking more affirming communities or

² This discussion focuses on the relational aspects of humility and justice rather than the social power aspects. There is evidence that those with privilege tend to see the oppressed as human equals once they start to gain social power (Todd 2006)—it was only as the predominantly white, middle-class LGBT movement started to gain concrete rights that these movements started gaining traction, while recent concrete reversals in civil rights bear some relation to the difficulties white people have in absorbing the message that Black Lives Matter (Omi and Winant 1994).

jettisoning religion altogether (Wilcox 2003, 2009), others have deep ties to conservative religious communities, methods of interpretation, principles, and culture that preclude simply exiting (Lee 2012, Vines 2014). This movement in its current form began in the 1990s, and by the early 2010s, organizations proliferated, carving out new programs to foster supportive relationships and advocacy to change conservative church teachings and policies.

Participants in this movement vary in theology and religious practice as much as the rest of conservative Protestantism—from charismatic to rationalist and evangelical to fundamentalist. Many, but not all, challenge the complementarian insistence that God’s main intent for creation is expressed in the creation of two binary opposite sexes that complete each other in heterosexual marriage (Mohler 2014; see Brownson 2013, Vines 2014, Moon & Tobin 2018), a view that has shaped American politics for decades (Dowland 2015, Fetner 2008). By challenging that orthodoxy, this movement overlaps significantly, but not completely, with progressive evangelicals who “adopt a centered-set instead of a bounded-set approach to theology and politics,” “hop[ing] to model the practice of Jesus who associated with all members of society in order to enable the body of Christ to learn from all perspectives, particularly those who are most socially marginalized” (Liberating Evangelicalism, n.d.). Indeed, while there were many routes into this movement, many particularly heterosexual/cisgender participants had come to approach Christianity as not building fences to keep people out, but “digging wells, to draw people in,” in the words of one respondent. They thus challenged their faith communities to prioritize relationships over convictions, deepening their understanding of Jesus’ claim that the greatest commandment was to love God and neighbor (Mt. 22:37-39).

Participants in this movement agreed that humility includes acknowledgement that one could be wrong. Furthermore, they demonstrated that that acknowledgement is rooted in concern to foster and preserve relationship, as Buber (1970 [1923]) defined the term, meaning

openness to intimate, vulnerable connection with another that allows one to hear, learn from, and change because of it. We show our basis for that claim, and then we provide evidence to demonstrate that humility, as concern to protect relationship, fosters social justice, while failures of humility and relationship help legitimate injustice.

From February 2014 through October 2017 we conducted approximately 485 hours of participant observation in four overlapping groups, and conducted 72 interviews with participants, averaging 110 minutes.³ We attended two annual national conferences of the Gay Christian Network (GCN, now Q Christian Fellowship), which was founded in 2001 to connect gay, and later LGBTQI (conservative) Christians to each other for support. GCN worked to foster civility in disagreement, supporting LGBTQ and allied Christians both on what they call Side A, those who believe that same-sex marriage can be consistent with Christian teaching, and Side B, those who advocate celibacy for lesbians and gay men. We attended four national conferences of The Reformation Project (TRP), which was founded in 2012 with the explicit agenda of advocating for conservative Protestant churches to affirm LGBT identities and same-sex marriage. They train people to use personal stories and rational arguments based in evangelical scriptural scholarship, and take an explicitly intersectional, anti-racist approach. For about two and one-half years we participated in biweekly public discussions and other events sponsored by two overlapping organizations. The discussions were first hosted by the Marin Foundation, a Chicago-based organization that advocates dialogue and respect between conservative Christians and “the LGBT community.” In Spring 2015 this group stopped meeting under the auspices of TMF and was hosted by a new organization, the Center for Inclusivity (CFI). While

³ Alicia T. Crosby assisted by conducting 41 additional interviews with LGBTQ, Christian people of color bringing our total to 113.

TMF took a position of “intentional neutrality” with regard to the question of whether or not same-sex sex were sinful, CFI took an explicitly affirming position regarding LGBTQI and Native American Two-Spirit people and a broad approach to intersectional justice, thematizing racism, sexism, able-ism, cissexism⁴, and religious bigotry in addition to sexuality.

Humility is Rooted in Relationship

Scholars who think about humility often conceive of it in highly individualistic terms. Philosophers often construe it as an emotion or disposition of self-assessment. In these accounts, humility means taking the appropriate stance or attitude toward one’s own limitations, flaws, or standing in some domain, an admission that “I could be wrong.” Some consider humility to be low self-assessment (Driver 2001, Taylor 1985), while others think of it as accurate self-assessment (Snow 1995). Neither of these accounts capture the “I might be wrong” attitude that humility facilitates because merely having a sense of one’s limitations—whether an accurate or low sense—does not entail that one would admit to them or be motivated to mitigate them.

Whitcomb and colleagues (2015) offer a more robust self-assessment account of humility that captures this “I could be wrong” stance by making “ownership” of one’s limitations central to humility. Ownership signals that someone is not only aware of her limitations but that she takes responsibility for them in ways that influence her behavior and attitudes. One owns their limitations when they have accurate (neither inflated nor self-abasing) beliefs about them, admits them when the context calls for it, is motivated to correct them or mitigate their influence, and feels regret or dismay rather than, for instance, rage or hostility about them. This

⁴ *Cisgender* refers to people whose gender identities agree with the sex assignment they received at birth; *cissexism* refers to the assumption that cisgender people are the ideal or only kind of people who exist.

definition stresses that humility resides at the mean between arrogance and self-abnegation. Furthermore, these authors mention, among seventeen corollaries, a handful of elements that imply that humility reflects a concern for relationship, including a lack of defensiveness, openness to information from others, and an impulse to take responsibility for personal limitations.

We agree that humility involves “owning” one’s own limitations, which may include admitting that one might be wrong, but our study suggests that in moral and political life humility is more than this. When we think of humility as acknowledgement of one’s own fallibility as a seeker of truth, we frame humility in relation to conviction about reality. But human beings are social creatures in societies structured by inequality, where knowledge about others is not simply a matter of conviction, but a matter of justice. When the privileged insist that their own position is more “objective” than others’, they work to make invisible those social relations that privilege their own positions relative to others’ and contribute to justifying social relations that concentrate symbolic power in certain standpoints (Bourdieu 1989, Collins 1990, Crenshaw 1989, Harding 1992, Morrison 1992, Smith 1989). When our assessments of the world are rooted in our own privileged subject positions, we fail to see how what appears to be objective truth from our own standpoint is actually partial. In this case, strong conviction is anchored by a refusal to learn from people in different social locations.

Beyond establishing that all standpoints are partial, standpoint theory and existential philosophy also reveal that not all convictions about social reality have equal standing as truth. One of the functions of social privilege is to obscure itself to those who hold it, as they rarely glimpse experiences of oppression. In contrast, those who lack privilege cannot navigate the world without at least partially internalizing the perspective of those who dominate it (Beauvoir

([1952] 1989, Collins 1990, Fanon 1967, McIntosh 1989). Convictions about other people require particular awareness of one's limitations, and openness to learning from others.

The particularity of situations like those of LGBTQI conservative Christians makes clear that humility is not simply an individual trait, but a disposition rooted in concern to protect relationship, giving deeper meaning to our understanding of human beings as social creatures. We observe that humility includes a concern to prioritize and/or preserve relationship with others, in Buber's (1970 [1923]) sense of the term. Buber distinguishes the I of the *I-thou* intimate *relationship* from the I of the *I-it* objective *experience*. He characterizes most interactions as *I-it* experiences; in an *I-it* experience, the I, an "ego," regards the other person as an object, not necessarily consciously: someone to give me directions, to help me with something, to prove something about me to myself, to confirm my understanding or my authority to interpret reality. The I of the *I-you* (in German, the familiar *Du*) intimate relationship is a different I—a "person"—open to being changed by the other. For Buber, *relating* is a way of connecting to another that may transform the self. Whitcomb and colleagues (2015) stress that accepting information from others about the limitations of my perspective demonstrates humility, that accepting that information is a way of acknowledging that those others, and their assessments of me, matter. In light of Buber, that openness to growing and changing in light of others' feedback preserves relationship.

Failure to take this concern for relationship seriously as a constituent of humility leads to counterintuitive possibilities such as "the humble white supremacist" (Roberts & Wood 2007). In this account, someone can be humble while working to advance a white supremacist worldview, for example, so long as they own their limitations in this pursuit and are not driven by self-importance within the movement. When we define humility as including concern for relationship, we see what is amiss with a definition that allows for humble white supremacy; we

see the essential arrogance of a white supremacist's allegiance to the narrative of white supremacy as rooted in the failure to relate to those who challenge the supremacy of white people, the failure to be open to learning about and from others' humanity.

Spezio and Roberts (in press) draw a similar conclusion about humility and its link to relationship from their study of humility as practiced in the l'Arche community. What they call *interactive humility* is humility in the realm of human interactions. They draw from theories of humility that depart from self-assessment accounts by emphasizing the relational aspects of humility, including especially the idea that humility involves openness to the other, whether the other is an idea, an experience, or another person (Davis et al. 2011, Zagzebski 1996). They note, however, that "opening oneself to a person...is considerably different than opening oneself to an idea of that person." And the "core difference seems to be that of interaction." Interactive humility is the kind of humility that can occur "in the direct or anticipated or implicit interaction of persons within a specified context" (7).

Interactive humility is the trait that disposes us to approach another with openness without trying to control the other, and makes us vulnerable to learning from and being touched and changed by the other. As Spezio and Roberts further specify, the openness to the other in interactive humility means "the inclusion of the other as valued together (inseparably) with the self" (11). In this view, humility is essentially a kind of other-orientation that involves perceiving the other as a moral equal, another person, and that embraces vulnerability to the other. Yet interactive humility is not just recognizing the intrinsic value of the other; it means openness to "*reshaping the sense of one's own self so as to include both self and other in a new value dynamics*" (Spezio and Roberts in press). This form of humility de-centers concern for the self, including defending my beliefs and convictions. Interactive humility doesn't make people reject or disloyal to their beliefs or automatically accept what others say; rather, it places attention on

openness to the other so that one's hold on their narrative is softened or recedes into the background. This form of humility can certainly lead to self-knowledge about and assessment of one's limitations and deficiencies and can lead people to reconsider their convictions; it also points toward vulnerability to the other as a primary source of this self-knowledge and source of moral transformation.

Interactive humility is akin to what our study reveals *humility* to be. Our study emphasizes, however, that valuing *the relationship* is what is central to humility. Humility is not merely all about the self or all about the other; it is a stance one takes toward relationship between self and other. It motivates a person to prioritize relationship—self-other connection—which fosters one's willingness to reshape their own sense of self, to be open to self-transformation as a result of that relationship. In this way, humility can disrupt conviction in the pursuit of justice. People often frame humility in moral and political disagreement in terms of conviction and the willingness to admit the possibility of being wrong, even about deeply held convictions. In our view, this willingness to question conviction is a symptom or fruit of humility, not its constitutive core.

Understanding humility as prioritizing *I-you* connection, the relationship between self and other, helps us understand: (1) why humility is incompatible with dehumanizing discourses that sustain oppressive social relations, and (2) why humility may not always necessitate a posture of "I might be wrong." In what follows we develop the account of humility as relational to show humility to be not morally neutral but a substantive moral trait, a moral virtue. This virtue guides a person to prioritize relationship when confronted with disagreement, even about deeply held convictions or worldviews, and as a result enables them to alter convictions that support oppressive social relations. We also show how humility—as a realistic assessment of

one's gifts and limitations—demands that people do not concede the possibility of being wrong about their own worthiness of relationship.

Humility as Comforter

Avowals that “I could be wrong” form a recurrent theme within our fieldwork, particularly among people working to foster reconciliation between heterosexual/cisgender conservative Christians and LGBTQI people and their allies. Such avowals of humility provide a sense of safety and comfort to those worn down by Christian family, friends, and pastors repeatedly saying things like “You have turned your back on God,” “You have given yourself over to sin,” “Your spirit is perverted,” “You haven’t tried hard enough to get right with God.” As we discuss elsewhere (Moon and Tobin 2018), LGBTQI conservative Christians experience such shaming remarks as profoundly untrue, in the healthiest scenarios anyway; when they internalize them, such views can prove toxic to the point of physical destruction (leading in various cases to suicide attempts, eating disorders, addictions, self-mutilation, or stress-related somatic illnesses including heart failure, uncontrollable asthma attacks, and in one case we know of, an autoimmune disorder—see Strudwick 2014). Such assertions can only be described as arrogant, especially when they are uttered with absolute certainty that the speaker knows perfectly what God thinks about everyone who violates their own deeply-held assumptions about God’s gendered order.

We must distinguish humility, which yields a healthy sense of one’s strengths and limitations (Snow 1995, Whitcomb et al. 2015) from shame, as the two are often erroneously equated—particularly in this context. Following Lewis (1971), Scheff (1990), and others, we define *shame* as the fear of a break in the social bond that follows from feeling exposed as defective (Calhoun 2004, Velleman 2001). LGBTQI conservative Christians are often shamed by friends, family, and pastors, and following our definition, *shaming* another person has the effect

(even if unintentional) of saying “I can do without our bond if you don’t fix yourself.”

Paradoxically, more “loving” homonegative responses, like “I love you but I hate your sin,” can prove even more toxic, as a person’s loved ones, those whose job is to love them and teach them how to love, impugn their very capacity to love. And because such a pronouncement, said in a loving way, does not feel like love at all, it can seem to prove itself true. It says to LGBTQ people, “Your capacity to love is broken, you can’t trust your own ability to love,” and tells trans people, “Your capacity to know yourself is broken.” It tells all of them, “...and if you don’t feel how much I love you by telling you this, that just proves that there’s something very wrong with you” (Moon and Tobin 2018). The invulnerability to new information is the same, but in the latter case the speaker’s attack on the relationship is disguised as love and compassion. The fact that they often feel affection and care for the LGBTQ person they’re trying to change (i.e. treating as an object) does little to mitigate the effect of that person feeling unloved, unheard, and unworthy of relationship.

Christians from religiously conservative backgrounds who happen to be LGBTQI, and their cisgender/heterosexual allies, work to cultivate humility as part of their Christian habitus (Gerber 2011). Throughout the movement, leaders, newcomers, and everyone in between express an appreciation for humility. Speakers work to model Christian love the way they know it should be lived, the way they wish they had been shown it all along. This Christian love “does not boast” and “is not proud” (I Corinthians 13:4, NIV) but “walk[s] humbly with... God” (Micah 6:8), understanding the Bible to be the infallible word of God, as conservative Christians maintain, but seeing no human being as its infallible interpreter.

For example, in the Spring of 2014, the large Christian mission organization World Vision USA declared that they would comply with a Washington state law that prohibited discrimination against people in same-sex marriages, and quickly reversed that decision in the

face of huge outcry and thousands of pulled donations. The Marin Foundation's subsequent discussion focused on participants' responses to the controversy. 32-year-old Gabe,⁵ a white, gay, cisgender, conservative Christian man remarked, "What I'm not hearing in this (from those who oppose same-sex marriage) is 'I could be wrong.'" The conversation turned to people's experiences within their churches and Christian organizations, including the almost military insistence that being "SERIOUS about the Gospel" (as one participant saw printed on a banner at a Christian conference) yielded the one and only answer, that tolerating other viewpoints could lead to "mortal peril" for oneself and everyone one touched. In participants' experiences, bounded theology equated authentic faith with certainty and intolerance; it prioritized conviction and certainty over love for them and relationship with them.

Five months later, another discussion turned to the relationship between faith and fear. Stephen, a 49-year-old regular participant and self-proclaimed "gay, Jewish atheist," started talking about the fears that he saw conservatives as having and conceded that "liberals too, they have their own slippery slope arguments. I have to be open to the possibility that homosexuality is wrong." When it was her turn to speak, the ethnographer apologized and said, "I'm surprised to hear you say that you're open to the possibility that homosexuality is wrong, because you're a professed atheist, and gay! I'm not religious and I'm queer, and I've thought about it a lot, and really, nothing could convince me that I'm wrong." She meant to say that nothing could convince her that homosexuality was wrong, but after the meeting, as people chatted and got their coats on, Gabe approached Stephen to tell him he loved him and appreciated that he said he could be wrong (leading the ethnographer to feel rather unlovable). Stephen asked the fieldworker if he made her doubt her non-belief, and she said it wasn't the non-belief in God

⁵ Personal names of non-public figures are pseudonyms.

that she didn't feel she could be wrong about—she could be entirely wrong about that!—it was the idea the omniscient and all-loving creator of the universe could think that gay sex was any worse than straight sex. Gabe hugged her later and talked to her about something else, so she got the sense that at least he didn't think she was as unlovable as she felt. In effect, his kindness showed that even having committed such a breach, she hadn't destroyed their relationship; he could still practice the Christian grace and forgiveness he wished others would show him.

Participating in these discussions demands humility—a shift in attitudinal priority from concern to protect beliefs to concern to foster openness to others, to prioritize relationship—as the researcher's breach made clear. For some heterosexual/cisgender participants, a step towards affirmation calls on the humility to see that their own sin is no better than that of “the homosexuals,” for instance, when a pastor declares that he will no longer ridicule homosexuals from the pulpit or that LGBT people will now be allowed to serve the church or become full members instead of being banned. The humility and courage these steps take are admirable; they foster thriving and temper the vices of pride (Roberts and Wood 2007).

But maintaining the view that same-sex sex or gender transition is always sinful reflects a certainty that cisgender/heterosexual people know better; that they are closer to God, less fallen than LGBTQI people. Statements like “we are welcoming but not affirming,” or “we love you but hate your sin” impose a hierarchy, that putatively cisgender heterosexuals are in a position to judge, even if they call it something else. Such statements inflate the speakers' moral and epistemic standing, implying that they are in a position to know the moral truth and to judge others whom they deem transgress it. Letting go of that certainty is difficult, because it means letting go of an entire worldview built on a particular gendering of God's created order and one's own privileged place in it. It requires relinquishing attachment to protecting beliefs, a narrative, in order to prioritize relational love.

Concern to maintain relationship with LGBTQI members motivates some church members to do some of the hard work of examining their double standards. For example: Jamal, a celibate African-American cisgender gay man, had a voluntary leadership position in his multiracial but predominantly white church, a church that strove to be “welcoming but not affirming” to LGBT people. One day, he was summoned to speak to church leaders who were concerned that someone had reported seeing him out on a “date,” asking him to reaffirm his commitment to celibacy. In his telling, he revealed concern to preserve his relationship with the church with patience and kindness, saying he asked:

What does that mean, exactly, “a date?” Am I allowed to leave the house and have a nice time, with another person? Does it have to be in a group? And do you have these conversations with all the unmarried heterosexuals in the church? They’re not supposed to be having sex either; are they allowed to “date?”

The leaders took his questions seriously and rethought their double standard, working to nurture their relationship with Jamal in the process.

Relationship as Transformative

When heterosexual/cisgender people acknowledge their personal limitations out of concern to protect relationship, at the very least, they may come to advocate more humane civic laws. Using data from the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey, Bean and Martinez (2014) found that fully 59% of evangelicals supported same-sex civil union rights, the majority of whom (35% of the total) saw same-sex sexual relations as only wrong sometimes or not wrong at all. Other surveys (Jones et al 2014, Pew Research Center 2013) find that similar changes are driven by

younger evangelicals, though Treas (2002) and Anderson & Fetner (2008) show that some change has happened within cohorts as well, indicating that some people change their minds.⁶

Our study focuses on those who have come to understand Scripture and God's will in a new light, have come to reshape their understanding of what it means to be Christian, and are working to change their churches' teachings and policies. For instance, Kyle, a white, heterosexual, LGBT-affirming, antiracist organizer in his late 30s, used to work for a large campus ministry whose official position on homosexuality was that those who "struggled with same sex attractions" must either be celibate or opt for a "mixed-orientation marriage" to someone of the other sex. At the same time, he worked for the ministry's racial justice program, which cultivated a posture of interactional humility. He recalled:

And so, as [students started coming to me with questions about their sexuality] I was starting to apply a lot of cross-cultural learning skills that I'd be teaching students – spending more time listening, naming my own assumptions so that I could put them on hold while hearing other perspectives and then reevaluating, like, "Where is truth in this? What is good? How do I learn from people who are not like myself?" But it was just finding that [the organization's insistence on mixed-orientation marriage or celibacy] was really hard to uphold in terms of a lot of the conversations I was having, where people who were seeking same-sex relationships were still bearing fruit in their ministry. [...] It's been apparent in Scripture that you'll know the movement of the Spirit by the fruit that is borne, and that when people continue to [...] lead people to Christ and do stuff like that, that's evident that they're bearing good fruit in their lives. And it's been my experience that people who are engaging in sinful activities have a hard time doing that; that times in my life where I've been, you know, let's say engaging in sexual sin, that my ministry fruits have been non-existent. So that's where – those were the circumstances that were really challenging a traditional understanding of Scripture on same-sex relationships.

⁶ Recent research shows these figures only hold with regard to monogamous gays and lesbians, and that bi+, trans, and polyamorous people are still stereotyped as immature, and untrustworthy (Cragun and Sumerau 2015, 2017).

The relational tools of humility led Kyle to change his mind. Prioritizing relationship generated an openness to other people, which in turn generated an openness to being wrong, to see when his own “sexual sin” led his ministry to fruitlessness. Listening to and learning from those he differed from helped him to see the good fruit (Matthew 7:17-18) borne out by non-celibate gay Christians, and to change his understanding of the meaning of being LGBT in Christian teaching.

Similarly, when the founder of The Reformation Project, Matthew Vines, first told his father, Monte, that he was gay and wanted to pursue a same-sex marriage and keep his faith, Monte’s response was anchored in his desire to preserve their good relationship. He suggested they study the Bible together, fully expecting that his son would see for himself that it was not possible. Describing his approach a few years later on a panel of parents of LGBT people at a TRP conference, he reflected humility: “But even though I was confident that [...] God held a non-affirming view of this, I also knew that I had never really studied this issue.” He clearly showed the connection between wanting to maintain relationship and being willing to admit that he could be wrong:

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 and a same-sex life, 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. Not that I had any question that my position was right, of course it was right. [Laughter]

So I committed to Matthew that I would undertake a study with him. We would study the Bible together, and in part I did that because *I didn’t want to be the one telling him that this choice that he was making was wrong*. And I thought [...] he would see that from the Bible itself, in God’s own words, that this is not what God approves of. [...] And to my great surprise, [...] I found myself changing my understanding about this [...] as we went through the Bible passages. (*Emphasis added.*)

As their study unfolded, it was humility, Monte’s concern to protect relationship, that allowed him to see Scripture in a new light, and to preserve his relationships with his son and with God.

Consistent with understanding humility as concern about self and other in connection, neither Kyle nor Monte threw their view aside to hop aboard with the persons they loved; they needed to work out how to approach the questions in a moral posture of relationship.

It is not simply “knowing one” but having real *relationship*—the kind of intimate connection built on openness to learning from another—that inspires people like Monte Vines and Kyle to change their minds (Moon 2012b). In relationship with LGBTQI people, they realize that they’ve been wrong, and they work to repair the break in relationship their church’s conventional beliefs have caused and to prevent it from happening again. Over and over in our research, people stressed that “stories matter,” that a gay church member who shares their witness for what Jesus has done in their life will do more to change minds than any speech or 300-page book on scripture (though those have their place too). As in Moon’s (2012a) research on American Jews’ conflicts over Middle East politics, sharing stories and building relationships constantly figure into people’s testimonies about what made the difference. Conversely, the tremendous pain so many of our respondents have endured has arisen when loved ones would sooner sacrifice their relationship than their certainty about their interpretations of scripture and their understanding of God’s order.

In this movement, conservative Christian theologians, pastors, and even the leaders of formerly “ex-gay” ministries are changing their minds (Achtemeyer 2014, Campolo 2015, Dias 2015a, 2015b, Gritter 2014, Gushee 2015, Rodgers 2009). These changes are facilitated by scriptural scholarship, but more importantly, they happen in the context of relationships—with a sister, a son, a young child in the church one pastors, a close friend. An Arab-American megachurch leader we call Pastor Edward spoke of his horror, realizing that a colleague he thought of as his close friend was terrified to tell him about her romantic relationship with another woman. He remarked:

I'm the executive pastor so I have pretty much authority to hire and fire at will if I want to, and she told me [she was gay] on my couch at my house as a friend, with my wife and her girlfriend (who we were also friends with), through tears, basically terrified that my next thing was "You're fired, you can't sing tomorrow," and that just wrecked me. [...] When one of your best friends who is like, like as close to the inner circle, whatever that means, as you can be, is still afraid [...] we couldn't go another day with that.

No amount of scholarly argument about scripture changes the way believers understand the questions around gender and sexuality without an intimate connection, a relationship that is worth saving. As Monte Vines said:

As a straight man, this whole issue was something that was distasteful to me, to really even think about. And I had never been forced to think about it, and so I had managed to avoid it my entire life.

Relationship transforms the meaning of words like "gay" from "distasteful," "rebels," "monsters," or "the afflicted"—to "loving," "son," "friend," "person like me." Humility expresses each person's desire to preserve relationship, and cultivates the vulnerability necessary to learn from another and reshape one's own sense of self in the process.

Humility's Pull toward Social Justice

Many people who have been part of this movement for some time find that they retain aspects of conservative Protestantism—their personal relationship with Jesus, their methods for interpreting Scripture, their understanding of the value of chastity, their theological understandings of substitutionary atonement, perhaps their appreciation for an upbeat worship experience with a minimum of 18th century organ music. They insist that accepting same-sex marriage and gender transitions doesn't turn them into those strange Others, "liberal Christians," whose services often don't feel like church to them, and whose teachings sometimes don't feel like Christianity to them.

Throughout this movement, organizers have to grapple with a tension. On the one hand, LGBTQI conservative Christians and their families need spaces where they can bring their questions, where they can breathe and go on living, confident once again that God loves them (or their kids). Some are comfortable staying there, fostering conversation to increase opportunities for relationship.

For others, however, grappling with Scripture and the injustice of how their church has treated LGBTQI people makes it hard to tolerate others' oppression, and showed them that LGBTQI justice can't be separated from gender justice, racial justice, economic and immigration justice and a full appreciation for human differences in ability, age, and religion. Having been shamed to the point of feeling incapable of any human relationship, having been driven to the brink of suicide by the feeling that their inability to change could only mean that God hated them, or having sobbed uncontrollably on the side of a road for half an hour in the face of friends' well-meaning "failures of Christian love," as one participant recounted—such experiences can make it hard for some to be unmoved by the stories of other ways of being oppressed. Thinking through the injustices stemming from others' failures to relate makes clear to them that they, too, must prioritize relationships, being open to learning from those who lack their privileges.

Especially for those who have experienced others' arrogance and self-righteousness as failures of Christian love, it is impossible to feel that one is following in the footsteps of Jesus while ignoring the experiences of those who are oppressed in ways they're not. Many see pursuing social justice as showing love for God and neighbor, as being like Jesus by siding with the marginalized against those who would cast them out, and they see it as their job as Christians to share that "good news" with their fellow Christians. Wendy VanderWal Gritter

(2014) runs what used to be an ex-gay ministry in Ontario, which now affirms LGBT identities, and her change of heart emerged from her relationships with others. She remarks:

I've grown weary of triumphalistic warriors for truth—who know and believe all the 'right' things but exude pride, self-centeredness, and a devaluing of anyone who disagrees with them. I would rather engage someone who might have some spotty theology but who oozes humility, kindness, generosity and true and deep love for their enemies. And while this may sound a little too hippy-drippy, this isn't just about warm fuzzy feelings—this is about walking in the way of Jesus" (2014, 13-14).

For Gritter, walking in the way of Jesus means being humble and open to learning from other people; it demands relationship.

Explaining his own rationale in January 2016, GCN director Justin Lee, a white, cisgender, gay man, gave an impassioned Sunday morning talk, drawing from the parable of the Good Samaritan⁷ to address the "Two Dirty Words" conservative Christians often eschew: *social justice*. He said:

It's easy for us who have been hurt or marginalized to read the parable of the Good Samaritan and think about ourselves in the position of the man on the side of the road. We've been hurt. We've been beaten. We've been marginalized and people are passing us by and they don't seem to care. But [... a]ccording to Jesus, the question isn't, "Who is my neighbor," but, "To whom will I be a neighbor? To whom will I be a friend? To whom will I be family?" See, we are called to be allies to the marginalized and the hurting in our world. Not just allies, but neighbors. Not just neighbors, but friends, as Jesus was a friend of even the sinners—and aren't we all the sinners? Not just friends, but family. Brothers and sisters. Not just family, but to love them as we love ourselves. It doesn't get any more intimate than that. And that's empathy, isn't it? To love someone as you love yourself. To see the world through their eyes and have that much love for them. That takes a lot of intimacy[....]

[W]e must not be so focused on our own marginalization that we fail to care for others. [...] I believe social justice in whatever—whatever terminology

⁷ According to Luke 10, Jesus was asked what it meant to love one's neighbor and replied with a parable, saying that a man was robbed, stripped, beaten, and left half dead in the road. A priest and a Levite, both respected religious leaders, walked by, but a Samaritan—an outsider—showed love for his "neighbor" by treating his wounds, taking him to an inn, paying for several days stay and care, and going back to check on him later.

we want to use to talk about it—is something we’ve got to talk about, because this is a Christian concept. It’s Biblical.

Participants know from painful experience that dehumanizing someone reveals and requires a failure of humility, that it is not really a loving relationship if I am closed off to learning from another about the social injustices they endure, injustices from which I might benefit. They come to see Christ-like humility as demanding solidarity in struggles for social justice.

But it gets tricky when people directly advocate for their own humanity and that of people like them. At the same GCN conference, on opening night, the Reverend Broderick Greer, who is Black, cisgender, and gay, gave the opening keynote address, where he spoke of the “theological tailspin” he experienced in the wake of George Zimmerman being acquitted after shooting dead an unarmed black teenager and the police “lynching” of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, saying:

[N]o pithy prayer or sound bite could assure me that death-by-police didn’t too await me or the people I love. [...] And I began to wonder, “If theology can be used to oppress, murder, and brutalize women, black people, trans people, queer people, bisexual people, and people with disabilities, then why can’t theology be used to liberate us, dignify us, renew us?”

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. (Greer 2016)

To anyone tempted to view oppression as an academic issue, approaching the question of others' humanity or personhood with openness to the possibility that maybe they are, "but I could be wrong," Greer said, "Look us in the eye [when you say that]." He demanded relationship, the respect due to human beings. In his formulation, oppression is made possible when relationship is foreclosed, when those with power and privilege find their standpoints validated as they treat others' as "biased" or "irrelevant."

Greer's words comforted and empowered those craving liberation, including people of color, women, trans people, and those who combine those qualities—who are constantly told, even in the supposedly "safe space" of the Gay Christian Network—that they *still* have to be patient and kind with those who do them harm and those who show no concern when others harm them. His "Enough!" conveyed, We don't deserve this. We are human beings "whom God loves relentlessly." Insisting on the essential human dignity of Black people and LGBTQI people of all races, Greer asserts humility—a realistic assessment of the gifts and limitations of people whom institutions often define only in terms of stigma and deficit.

Greer's words illuminate the relationship between humility and social justice, and help us to see that an "I could be wrong" admission is not always the same as humility. In his words, a *theobrogian*—others' neologism using the fraternity slang *bro*—indicates someone who does theology "from the perches of power and privilege," from a standpoint invested in preserving the assumption that privilege yields objectivity (Drury 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). A theobrogian might feel quite humble in entertaining with an open mind questions like, "Perhaps God intended for Officer Wilson to shoot Michael Brown to death in the street," "Perhaps same-sex sex would vitiate a Christian's baptism," "Perhaps AIDS is God's punishment for certain sins," or "Perhaps women really do bear the burden of bringing sin into the world." Such questions can only seem humble if we ignore the implication that the speaker's own

privilege in not being shot dead by police was given him by God; that his own baptism could never be revoked by his capacity for intimacy; that his own sins are less AIDS-worthy in God's eyes; that he dwells a little closer to God, truth, and reason than those who fall outside the social category of "men." In a *theobrological* moment, the potential to connect in radical equality with another is overwhelmed by the impenetrable ego that accepts its own privilege as ordained by God and nature. That ego can forego empathy with those Greer described as having experienced "the underside of human experience," instead entertaining the possibility that God might be content with others' presence on that underside. The privileged ego's failure to relate to and have compassion for those who have experienced that underside demonstrates a lack of humility, an excessive investment in an inflated sense of self, or in a word, arrogance.

Institutional domination "armors" (Buber 1965) the egos of the privileged, insulating and protecting them from having to relate empathetically to those on the "undersides" of hierarchies. Institutional domination wards off humility, but humility can dissolve that armor, as Monte Vines's and Kyle's examples show. LGBTQI cases are so illustrative because the knowledge that someone is LGBTQI often comes after a relationship has already been established, so it gives the privileged a choice about what to do with that information—to protect relationship, or to protect their ego's sense of order and its own privileged place within that order.

The Difficulty of Naming Injustice

Some white people at that GCN conference found Greer's words divisive. A white, gay man one of us chatted with between conference sessions contrasted Greer's keynote with that of Allyson Robinson, the white pastor whose words opened this paper, whose own keynote echoed Greer in talking about how crucial it is for every Christian to fight for the human dignity of black people and others. She remarked:

Many whites here wonder if solidarity with blacks is really our fight. [...] But my friends, there is only one fight for justice. (Applause) [...] The lines that we have drawn and the boundaries that we have built between the LGBT movement and the Black Lives Matter movement and the women's movement and the movement to end poverty and the movement to end mass incarceration and the movement to end veterans' homelessness and the movement for indigenous peoples and the sustainability movement—we drew those lines. God did not draw them. To God those lines are meaningless. And in fact, they are an obstacle to the accomplishment of God's just purpose in the world. And if we are to be faithful to carry through to completion this good work that God has begun in us, [...] We must begin to see beyond ourselves, to the trajectory of God's work in this world [...]. If you walk away now, or allow yourself to be distracted by your own dearly won gains [because the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage], then you will not have been fighting for justice after all. You will have been fighting for yourself.

Sharing his own "theological tailspin," Rev. Greer's remarks struck us as far more personal, less strident, and less pointed, but Rev. Robinson's somehow seemed less divisive to some in the audience. Perhaps Greer struck the nerve of white shame about racism. If *shaming* someone else tells them they are expendable, perhaps his talk sounded as if he were saying he was done with *them*. A white person might have felt shamed and discarded by Greer's remarks if they had foreclosed the possibility of relationship, of feeling part of a "we" with him. The encounter was already *I-it* for those interlocutors with some, possibly unconscious, investment in their privileged place in the racial hierarchy, and there was nothing Broderick Greer could do about that (Fanon 1967).

Like Lee, Robinson spoke in "we" terms to her fellow white people, to explain why Black lives are a Christian concern to anyone not quite clear about that. By explicitly showing white people how and why to put themselves into the struggle for Black lives, she indicated that we were a *we*, that her relationship with us wasn't going anywhere, that we needed to come along. It takes humility to lump yourself in with people with a stake in unacknowledged white supremacy. That humility expresses a desire to preserve relationship, to bring the rest of us along. But it is difficult to convey from the bottom of a hierarchy; trying to extend love to an

oppressor who is invested in keeping you on the underside often turns humility into self-abnegation, particularly when it is required by those in power. Tessman (2005) has shown that conditions of oppression often transform traits usually seen as vices, like rage, into burdened virtues, and qualities usually considered virtues, like patience, into vices. Conditions of dehumanization call for anger, and perhaps even rage, which can be affirming and life-giving to those developing a new awareness of the injustice they've been enduring (Taylor and Whittier 1992, hooks 1995, Gould 2009, Moon 2012a, Wahl 2017). But such anger can seem dismissive and dehumanizing to those accustomed to things as they were.

It's not that Robinson only spoke about others' struggles. She mentioned the extreme rates of fatal violence against trans women of color, but also how degraded she felt early in her own transition when she was stared at, mocked, and spit on, and as strangers moved away from her on the bus—to make that point that she wouldn't wish that feeling on her worst enemy. In fact, she was making the point that she wouldn't wish that feeling on Justice Samuel Alito, citing his dissenting opinion in *Obergefell* that, ironically, expressed his fear that he and other opponents of same-sex marriage would become outcasts. But by reserving her most pointed remarks for our tendency to create divides where there should be none, she gathered people in, sustaining relationship. Greer, even though he spoke from the position of one bleeding in the road, sounded to some like *he*—and not the people threatening to put him there—was causing the break in relationship. As Edwards (2017) shows in her example of a Latino pastor of a mixed-race church, and as Petro (2017) shows in his analysis of the reception of AIDS activists' protests of New York Cardinal John O'Connor's death-dealing response to the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s, there are some things that can't be communicated by those trying to create commonality, by people of color in conversation with white people, by despised minorities in relation to those accustomed to receiving respect and even reverence. Explicitly naming the fact

that they're perpetuating social hierarchies from which they themselves benefit can feel to them like shaming, like the naming itself is what breaks the relationship. To those accustomed to power in a given situation, humility can feel like degradation, and equality feels like loss.

And for those on the undersides of those hierarchies, the dilemma of protecting the feelings of the oppressors in order to maintain the potential for relationship can verge on self-abasement. As Rho, a white, nonbinary person remarked, creating a relatable, welcoming movement for change depends on:

the sacrifice of the most marginalized, who are willing to put up with the [ignorant and oppressive] stuff over and over and over and be gracious and be kind and be patient forever and wear the smile.[...] Especially around the whole non-binary thing; it's so new to so many people. My expectations have to be reasonable, *and* I can only put up with so much. It's that constant push and pull of like... is graciousness a product of internalized oppression? [...] It's all so grey. When do I have a right to be angry? When is the point I get to say, like, "No, I deserve to be treated in a particular way because I'm a human, and I'm sorry it's hard, but I'm not sorry."

Vulnerability to those who deny your humanity becomes self-abnegation, not a realistic assessment of your own gifts and limitations.

Rho's comments help us to see the connections among humility, conviction, and justice. All subject positions are partial, but the standpoint of the oppressed is potentially less partial, more inclusive, than the standpoint of the privileged, at least about issues of social injustice. The standpoint of the privileged requires greater humility in the pursuit of justice; they must be open to the possibility that they don't know everything, question their convictions, but to do requires vulnerability to those who live on the underside of systems of privilege, willingness to learn from them as equals. The privileged must be open to the possibility of growth and change. It is precisely this concern to extend relationship to the oppressed, to have genuine openness to

them, to prioritize relationship with them, that facilitates the questioning of their convictions about social reality and their own place in it.

Humility and Justice in Civil Disagreements

Prominent voices in the LGBTQI conservative Christian movement insist that Christian love can endure uncertainty, but it is absent where there is complacency about injustice. Given Christianity's definition of love as "not arrogant or boastful" (1 Corinthians 13:4-14), seeing humility as rooted in concern to protect relationship makes clear why both love and humility are incompatible with injustice. The conservative Protestant movement for LGBTQI inclusion and acceptance reveals that humility is rooted in concern for relationship, and that when we relate to another, in Buber's sense, the injustices they suffer become injustices we feel the need to undo. In this sense, relationship cannot abide injustice. But what of civil disagreements? What is anyone to do when those disagreements take place on an *I-it* terrain created by the discourses and institutions of power? Readers of Buber often conclude that the solution to any social conflict is "dialogue," but such efforts often only reproduce hierarchies of power, foregoing true relationship (Maoz 2011, Hammack 2011).

Highlighting humility as a Christian virtue puts the burden on Christians in power to prioritize relationship—it reveals that investment in one's privilege or superiority is hubris or arrogance, contrary to Christian love. From a secular ethical perspective, this movement reveals that investment in one's privilege or superiority is also contrary to democratic principles, that democracy, like Christianity, depends on relationship. According to these Christians, the burden is on all Christians interested in civil dialogue to divest from their privilege and to prioritize relationship that may change them in some ways. Similarly, non-Christians invested in civil ethics should question whether it is possible to be humble while tolerating or ignoring the

injustices that others suffer. The onus is on the privileged to prioritize relationship, to cultivate humility, to pursue justice.

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