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Overcoming Shame, Practicing Love: LGBT Evangelicals' Strategies for Social Justice

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This research has been generously supported by a Joseph H. Fichter Research Grant from the Association for the Sociology of Religion, and Marquette University's Regular Research Grant and Helen Way Klingler Sabbatical Award. In addition, this research was made possible through the support of a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton Religion Trust, or any other supporters. I am also grateful to Orit Avishai and J. Patrick Hornbeck for graciously hosting my visit to Fordham University, with support from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

This article was co-authored with Theresa Tobin, and was originally presented as a lecture at Fordham University as part of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Series on Religion and Sexuality, New York, NY, 7 March 2016.

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The Self, Motivation & Virtue Project is a 3-year, interdisciplinary research initiative on the moral self. It is funded by generous support from the Templeton Religion Trust, the University of Oklahoma, the Spencer Foundation, and Marquette University.

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**Overcoming Shame, Practicing Love:
LGBT Evangelicals' Strategies for Social Justice¹**

Dawne Moon, Marquette University

E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Series on Religion and Sexuality

Fordham University

March 2016

I'm going to talk about research I've been doing with Theresa Tobin, studying the growing movement among conservative Christians to reconcile with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender—LGBT—people. I'll focus today on LGBT conservative Christians themselves, the emotion culture they articulate, and how they are working for social change in ways that differ slightly from LGBT identity politics as we tend to think of it. Note that when I say "Christians," unless I specify otherwise I mean conservative Protestants, mostly evangelical or fundamentalist though there are some Catholic and mainline Protestants in this movement as well. Dr. Tobin and I argue that in challenging their churches' conventional stance, actors in this movement create space for LGBT Christians to overcome the toxicity of what we call *sacramental shame*—treating shame as a sacrament—and to thrive. In doing so, they and their straight conservative Christian allies foster an ethic of loving engagement and solidarity, distinct from "culture wars" era LGBT identity politics and its dominant emotions of pride and anger.

I'm a sociologist and Dr. Tobin is a philosopher, and we have been investigating diverse organizations and individuals engaged in the process of reconciliation between conservative Christians and LGBT people. I began exploring this movement online in

¹ This research has been generously supported by a Joseph H. Fichter Research Grant from the Association for the Sociology of Religion, and Marquette University's Regular Research Grant and Helen Way Klingler Sabbatical Award. In addition, this research was made possible through the support of a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton Religion Trust, or any other supporters. I am also grateful to Orit Avishai and J. Patrick Hornbeck for graciously hosting my visit to Fordham University, with support from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

the spring of 2013, examining blogs and relevant news articles. Since February 2014, I have conducted approximately 250 hours of participant-observation and 53 intensive, semi-structured interviews with people associated with a variety of organizations in this movement. These include: the Marin Foundation, an organization that worked to foster reconciliation and civil discussion between conservative heterosexual/cisgender (meaning not transgender) Christians and the LGBT community and to apologize to the LGBT community on behalf of themselves and the Church for the harm they have caused; the Center for Inclusivity, an affirming organization founded by two evangelical Christians to create as they call it, “a place of peace at the intersection of faith and sexuality, The Reformation Project, a national organization founded by gay evangelical Matthew Vines to equip conservative Christians to lead their churches to affirm LGBT identities, same-sex marriage, and alternative gender expressions, and the Gay Christian Network, the oldest of these groups, an organization that fosters online chats, local meetups, and an annual national conference to support LGBTQ Christians whether they support same-sex marriage (what they call Side A) or believe that Christian marriage is reserved for a man and a woman (what they call Side B). Because the subject position of the researcher matters, I’ll say that I was raised Christian but left the church right around the same time that I came out as bisexual in high school, though I now tend to identify as queer, and this is how I present myself to people in the field. Theresa is a heterosexual ally and a Catholic, who brings to this project an expertise on Christian ethics and spiritual violence.

The lines between sexual orientation and gender expression have been blurry throughout history, as homosexuality was long treated, and in some quarters is still treated, as gender variance in itself. A lot of conservative Christian thought on what we

call “LGBT issues” really refers only to people with what conservatives call “same-sex attractions,” but is applied to trans people anyway because they also challenge the conventional conservative dichotomy of male and female as complementary opposites. In this movement there are trans evangelical Christians speaking out for themselves, and lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who support them, but sometimes, the term “LGBT” kind of glosses over the experiences of trans—and bisexual—people, so please ask for clarification where necessary, and feel free to share any insights you might have. I’ll use the term “LGBT”, with all its vagueness, because it is the term people use, but please keep in mind that the term itself does a lot of erasing that I want to uncover in the book and would be happy to talk more about at the end.

But I want to talk about something different here today. First I’ll talk about LGBT emotion culture as it has developed since 1969. Next I’ll talk about what we’re calling *sacramental shame* and how it’s overcome by claiming LGBT identities. Third, I’ll talk about how conservative Christians who claim an LGBT identity are creating change not with the language of pride, but with love, grace, and forgiveness, and finally, I will show that even though a strategy based on love and forgiveness sounds anti-political and sentimentalizing, it actually has potentially transformative implications for secular politics. In doing so, I’ll talk a little about what this research tells us about love as a relational emotion. First, we need to talk about LGBT emotion culture.

LGBT Emotion Culture

And to do this, we need to understand that even though emotions such as love and shame often feel like they come from within ourselves, emotions are actually very much shaped by society. In one sense, we have socially-provided emotion scripts for different situations, or how we believe people *should feel* in any given situation.

At a deeper level, our languages and cultures teach us how to identify the particular combinations of physical feelings or affects that our group or groups define as particular emotions, and these vary across different societies. So, for instance, Christian thinkers often use ancient Greek words to distinguish among different kinds of love — *agape*, *philia*, *eros*, *storge* — that we don't have words for in English, or if you speak two languages you know that some emotions don't have words for them in every language.

It's not only the case that different societies have different emotion scripts, but different subcultures within a society may also develop their own emotion scripts. In a study of lesbian and gay direct action politics at the height of the AIDS crisis, Deborah Gould talks about a specific lesbian and gay emotion culture that emerged with gay liberation after the 1969 Stonewall Riots; it encouraged lesbians and gay men to eschew the shame cultivated within them by a homophobic culture.² She argues that “lesbian and gay institutions and leaders promote, produce, even require a dominant narrative of pride,” or in other words, they gave us a script of pride that we could, or even *have to*, internalize and use to frame our lives and situations.³ For Gould, lesbians and gay men actually live in a constant state of emotional *ambivalence* about heterosexual society, a constant mix of *shame* for being stigmatized and excluded, *anger* at a society that treats people that way, and *pride* about the honesty and integrity it takes to face that stigma and be lesbian or gay, bi, trans, queer, etc.

What Gould describes is, in fact, not simply “gay and lesbian” emotion culture, but a particular emotion culture of secular identity politics. But the emotions called for

² Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³ Deborah B. Gould, “Rock the Boat, Don't Rock the Boat, Baby: Ambivalence and the Emergence of Militant AIDS Activism.” Pp. 135-157 in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. by Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 138).

and mobilized by identity politics do not always read as “Christian” to evangelicals — pride and anger, after all, are two of the seven deadly sins.⁴ LGBT conservative Christians begin with a *conservative Christian* way of engaging the world and set of emotion scripts. Articulating their own experiences is thus a process of developing a *new* emotion culture, an *LGBT Christian* one. If LGBT evangelicals were to take an oppositional stance the way secular activists have, many would feel that they were not living in the example set by Jesus. So rather than pride and anger, they are far more likely to speak in terms of love.

Speaking, and endeavoring to act, in terms of love does not mean that LGBT Christians fully reject the language of identity politics that Gould talks about. Consistently the language of “identity” helps LGBT Christians to overcome shame and to stop focusing inward, to be able to move on with life, and this is true whether or not they believe same-sex *sex* can ever be a good thing within Christian teaching. LGBT identity politics is often portrayed in conservative Christian thought as the work of dangerous and fiendish *outsiders*, demanding admission to where they don’t belong, like the sinful men of Sodom banging on Lot’s door, as in this depiction:

⁴ Gluttony, Laziness, Envy, Anger, Lust, Greed, Pride.



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LGBT Christians work to be heard and respected *as Christians, insiders* who are holding the church accountable to be more “Christlike” and more adherent to Scripture, as Christians routinely do for each other.

Sacramental Shame

As in the case Gould studied, LGBT conservative Christians have to contend with shame about their difference from the mainstream. Indeed, this shame may be even more powerful when instilled within the church, where it seems to take the status almost of a *sacrament*, by which I mean a transformative practice that is dispensed by the church, necessary for salvation,⁶ and a tangible sign of God’s presence in a person’s life. Some Protestants, including the very large Baptist denomination, do not recognize sacraments at all, and others do not think sacraments are necessary for salvation, so it is ironic that they would have one for LGBT people without even realizing it. It is even

⁵ Jack Chick, *Doom Town: The Story of Sodom*, Chino, CA: Chick Publications, 1991.

⁶ Baptists do not believe that even baptism or communion are necessary for salvation, and thus tend to refer to these practices as “ordinances;” Catholics do not believe that a sacrament must be necessary for salvation—priestly orders and marriage are sacraments.

more ironic that that “sacrament” would be a toxic form of shame, that destroys the very people it is meant to build up. A lot of what Dr. Tobin and I have been working on has been to articulate the harm that the conservative church does, usually unintentionally, to its LGBT members by saying that if they don’t constantly display shame, they’ll be turning their backs on God.

The thing is, many cisgender/straight conservative Christians look at non-heterosexual orientation or alternative gender expression through the lens of sin, so they see them as analogous to embezzling, or check kiting, or porn viewing, or alcoholism, or whatever it is that they themselves find sinful, but *tempting*. They know that they have to pray and seek the guidance of God, scripture, and other Christians in order to overcome their own temptations. And they know that when they experience shame, repent, and seek accountability, they and the people around them thrive.

They see homosexuality as analogous to sin as they experience it. This is why recognition of rights for LGBT people can appear to be “special rights” to many conservatives; they see LGBT people as asking for a special dispensation to sin. In this worldview, “gay identity” indicates a choice to identify with one’s sin, and to ally with a movement that their leaders have demonized for decades. In this view, saying “I’m gay” is a performative act of rebellion that creates distance from God just by being uttered by identifying oneself with one’s sin, like identifying as a career criminal.⁷

But the thing is, sexual orientation does not work in the same way as stealing, or a disposition to wrath. If I am tempted to embezzle, or have a congenital disposition to alcoholism, and I resist the temptation to do things that harm myself and others, I and the people around me flourish. When LGBT people resist their sexual orientation or

⁷ John L. Austin. *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

gender expression, they do not flourish. In fact, they experience quite the opposite. The proof that the sin analogy is incorrect is the harm that comes to LGBT people when they treat their sexual orientation or mode of gender expression as sin.

Imagine we are members of a conservative church. If I insist that you constantly show that you reject your feelings of attraction and are trying to change them, I am saying, over and over, that your human capacity to feel love and seek connection to others is so deranged—that you have to fix yourself before you can relate to other people or to God. This shame demands that you change something that you can't change, so it becomes a cycle of torment. We have heard from respondents whose churches subjected them to constant degradation and even violence; including someone who was held virtually captive in a church building for years, far from his friends, family, school, and work, and subject to a pattern of fasting two days per week, sleeping on the altar, conducting building maintenance, and praying constantly for deliverance. Others report being dragged to the front of the church week after week and prayed over at length to try to remove the demon of homosexuality or transgenerness. LGBT Christians talk about contemplating or attempting suicide, developing eating disorders, addictions, and serious physical illnesses that required hospitalization, due to the stress of constantly fearing that their own capacity to relate to others would lead them down a path of evil.

Over and over, respondents have spoken and others have written about feeling unfit to love anyone, lest their sinful way of loving harm those they loved. They spoke of churches welcoming them to come partake of support groups and worship (and to give money), but barring them from serving God, the church, and other people—the things that Christians are supposed to do with their lives. 30-year-old Jimmy spoke of

enrolling in a 10-week ex-gay residential program; at the end of his time, his gayness wasn't cured, but while others signed up again and again, Jimmy decided he needed to stop focusing on himself, and work on serving other people in the world. He remarked:

and feeling like if there is anything to this whole Christianity thing, it shouldn't be churning out individuals that hate themselves[, whose] communities [...] are exporting them to this program because they didn't know what in the world to do with them.

If virtues are dispositions that foster human thriving and vices impede that thriving, the despair, isolation, hopelessness, and physical distress that LGBT conservative Christians describe should make it clear that treating being LGBT as sin bears the fruits not of virtue, but of vice.

Overcoming Sacramental Shame

The thing that helps LGBT Christians to overcome sacramental shame is accepting that there is such a thing as sexual orientation or gender variance, and claiming an LGBT identity. In contrast to the view of LGBT identity as an act of rebellion, LGBT conservative Christians and their allies insist that it is simply an honest description—that identifying as gay or trans no more challenges one's Christian identity than identifying as a mother, a heterosexual, or a baseball fan. It allows them to stop focusing inward and feeling like there's something fundamentally wrong with them all the time. I heard a great story from a woman I'll call Becca, who recently came out as a lesbian. She was in grad school at a conservative Christian university, and had a friend that she developed a powerful crush on. One night they were talking on a park bench, and her friend asked her her intentions, which got her all flustered and nervous, and

eventually her friend said, “It doesn’t upset me, that this is happening between two women.” They stayed up all night, and the next day she had to go to a baby shower, one of those rituals of femininity that alienates even a lot of heterosexual women. She recalled:

I felt – I’ve never felt welcome in the company of baby shower women. [...] I just never fit the girly kinda cute type, and I was just dreading it, and I said, “Well, I’ll make vegan muffins.” And of course, they came out burned, you know? Of course. Like, everything else was just perfect – ’cause they were all married and had kids– you know, it was like... But that day – I had went to sleep at 5:00 and had to wake up at 7:00 to make these muffins, which I burned, but I didn't care! And that was an amazing thing to feel like – going in, I was dreading this chore, but it was like I was riding on fumes – and good fumes – to the shower like, “I don't care. I feel cared for and loved, and I don't care that I don't fit these stereotypical feelings,” and – so I was buoyed in a lotta ways.

Before that night, she had been afraid that her crush would rebuff her, say that she wanted too much, that she *was* too much—that’s shame. But after that night, she could just be happy for her straight friend with the baby and all the people who had made the cutsie things, because she wasn’t experiencing the whole heterosexual ritual wearing this cloak of shame; the shower ladies were just different from her, not a reminder of her constant failure.

Often, accepting LGBT identities means recognizing that that’s how God made them. Over and over at these events, people repeat the message like that shared by a

speaker at the Reformation Project conference in November: “Time to say Jesus loves me just the way I am. Jesus loves you just the way you are.... We all need to tell the truth. We need to tell the gay community that Jesus loves them exactly as they are.”

Once a person can honestly state their reality, they can get on with their relationships with other people and with God. Rather than defining themselves as unacceptable to other people and abhorrent to God, they can see themselves as worthy to try to be like Jesus, serving others in love, grace, and forgiveness.

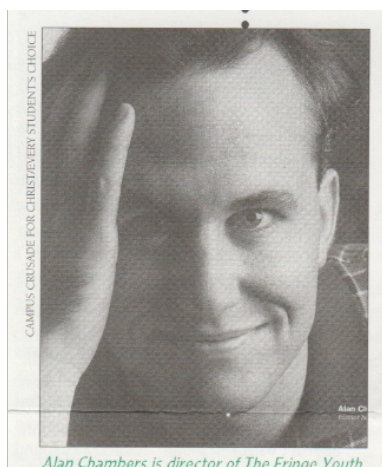
Love, Not Pride

In secular or liberal religious LGBT circles, we might call that pride. However, in a conservative Christian context, pride is a sin. One night in my fieldwork at the Marin Foundation, we discussed the question: “If you could take a pill to stop being LGBT, would you?” After the meeting, a heterosexual ally said to me privately, “I just wanted someone to say, ‘It’s called the Pride parade for a reason! I’m proud of who I am!’” [reconstructed in field notes] but while no LGBT people present in the room would have taken the pill, no one invoked pride as their reason not to. In a search of my field notes from 15 months at the Marin Foundation, that is the only reference to pride that is not simply using the name of the Pride Parade—and it was actually a comment on no one invoking pride.

Where there is an absence of pride language, there is a great deal of **love** expressed in this movement. When Side A Christians (who believe God blesses same-sex marriages) and Side B Christians (who believe sex is reserved for a man and a woman in marriage, and so are generally celibate) are invited to present their views as opposing, or to distance themselves from other LGBT people, they tend to respond with only love and respect. For instance, when the Marin Foundation hosted a two-part

speaker series, with Side A and Side B represented, each speaker mentioned their love and respect for the other. The Side B speaker said of the Side A speaker, “I love and respect him, we love and encourage one another. For too long, this topic has divided people, wherever they fall in it; it causes people angst and despair. Both of our views are born out of genuine conviction and love for the Lord and desire to follow him, and I believe God knows that.” [reconstructed in field notes, 7/21/2014]

Similarly, in January 2012, the head of the Gay Christian Network, Justin Lee, invited to his group’s annual conference the president of Exodus. Exodus began in the mid-1970s, and by the 2000s it was an enormous umbrella organization for ministries that offered to help same-sex attracted Christians not to be gay anymore. Alan Chambers had been Exodus’s poster child in the 1990s and was named its president in the early 2000s.



Update, Exodus International North America, October 2000

In front of a hotel ballroom packed with LGBT Christians, many of whom had been traumatized by their experiences in ex-gay ministries — Lee and three former Exodus leaders — who had all renounced the ex-gay movement — criticized Exodus for

over two hours, holding Chambers accountable for deceiving people into thinking they could cure same-sex attractions, for traumatizing young people unwillingly sent to its ministries, for leading churches to ostracize LGBT members, for spreading the lie that homosexuality is caused by bad parenting, and for demanding lies from gay Christians by insisting that they not call themselves “gay.” Lee prefaced the discussion by saying:

I believe in seeing people’s humanity, I believe even in the midst of strong disagreement, I want to say, you are my brother, you are my sister in Christ, and I want to understand you even if I disagree with you, because God loves you and I love you too, even if I disagree with you.⁸

Throughout this highly controversial panel, the audience heard statements like, “I say this in love...” which, sometimes prompted outbursts of laughter, but it kept Lee, Chambers, the other panelists, and the audience mindful of what they were trying to accomplish. Eighteen months later, Chambers closed down the entire, enormous organization and has been quoted as saying that that his friendship with Lee put him on that path. Since then, other conservative leaders have looked at the end of Exodus as a reason to give up the notion that homosexuality can be cured.

The end of Exodus was a victory for the LGBT movement. LGBT activists had been criticizing this organization and its harms for decades, but it was conservative Christians who broke through, speaking not of pride, but of love.

The language of love clearly distinguishes LGBT Christian efforts to create change from the language of the culture wars. The language of love — and I have no

⁸ Justin Lee, Jeremy Marks, Wendy Grimes, John Smid, and Alan Chambers. Panel discussion with Alan Chambers, Gay Christian Network annual meeting, Orlando FL, 13 January 2012, 8:12ff. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXgA7_QRvhg Accessed 3/11/15.

reason to think that it is only found among Christians—insists that even those who advocate banishing LGBT church- and family-members, even those who say that LGBT children should be made homeless, even those who have caused untold harm to LGBT people, are not part of a “them” to be defeated, but part of “us.” None of us is perfect, and we all need to be challenged lovingly to do better. This is individual-level social action affecting a huge institutional structure, not just of Exodus, but also the vast number of conservative churches that sent people to its ministries, many of whom have had to rethink their approach to LGBT members.

Instead of the simultaneous shame and pride Gould describes, LGBT conservative Christians today live in a tension between spiritually violating shame and the ability to see themselves as Christlike in loving others, even their enemies. By showing love and holding other conservative Christians accountable to be as loving and humble as they believe Jesus was, participants are growing this movement largely because they are leading conservative Christians to change their minds about homosexuality. And they’re not stopping there.

Creating a More Just Society

A view of social change as coming from love and forgiveness could easily sound like a sentimental anti-politics, like saying, “Why can’t we all just get along?” I am actually seeing a more radical potential here. To understand how, it helps to use a tool I developed a few years ago for thinking about other social movements and stigmatized groups. First, let’s be clear about what I mean by *identity politics*. Identity politics has been defined by Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier as “as strategy for transforming the world by transforming people’s consciousness, continually defining boundaries, and

politicizing daily life.”⁹ I find it helpful to think of these three elements as answers to questions. *Consciousness* answers the questions of who we are, *boundaries* answer the question of how we distinguish ourselves from others, and *politics* answers the question of how we can make the world better. Within any stigmatized and disadvantaged social group, people can answer these questions differently, and I find it helpful to think about these differences using a chart.¹⁰

Figure 1: Alternative Models of Collective Selfhood

| | | CONSCIOUSNESS/VIEW OF SELF | |
|---|--|---|---|
| | | FIXED SELF | FLUID SELF |
| BOUNDARIES | DIFFERENCES Us/Them | Reified Identity Politics <i>Embattled Self</i> | Evangelism <i>Redeemed Self</i> |
| | SIMILARITIES Shared Humanity | Humanistic Dialogue <i>Relating Self</i> | Critical Solidarity <i>Political Self</i> |
| POLITICS: | | | |
| Light cells represent a primary focus on societal/structural change | | | |
| Dark cells represent a primary focus on individual change | | | |

⁹ Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, “Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization” pp. 104–29 in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1992).

¹⁰ Dawne Moon, “Who Am I and Who Are We? Conflicting Narratives of Collective Selfhood in Stigmatized Groups.” *American Journal of Sociology* 117 (5), 1345.

The left and right sides of the chart reflect a difference in terms of consciousness, or how the group answers the question of who “we” are in a specific way, meaning, do they view the self as essentially fixed, or fluid and changeable? The top and bottom of the chart differ with regard to how the group views others, in terms of absolute difference, or similarity. And along the diagonals, we have different ways of understanding politics, with the black cells seeing political change seen as happening one person at a time, and the white cells focusing primarily on social structural and institutional factors. Now, this table is just a tool. The point here is not to say that there are only four kinds of identity politics, but just to help us to identify narratives and their implications, and to see slippages, ambiguity, and motion.

All four of these squares represent different versions of identity politics. In the upper left quadrant, *Reified Identity Politics* with its narrative of embattlement, is the version that people associate most often with identity politics, with a clear boundary between us and them: “you’re inside the tent or you’re outside the tent.” When you hear someone saying that so-and-so isn’t really queer, isn’t really a feminist, isn’t really black, that boundary policing is something I associate with a rigid (though usually not very clear) boundary between insiders and outsiders, and a fixed, sometimes essentialist definition of who “we” are. Often, the rigid boundary between a fixed “us” and “them” is seen as crucial to defend “us” from “their” encroachment or invasion or brainwashing, which is why I call the narrative of identity that comes out of this sort of politics *Embattled Selfhood*. When people define themselves by their oppression, that’s embattled selfhood. This analysis is sometimes accurate and necessary. There are often very good reasons to see your group as embattled; there *was* a Nazi holocaust and other attempts and successes at genocide, there *was* slavery, black people *are* being killed on the street

and in their homes with impunity, AIDS *was* ignored by the government and treated as a joke for 6 or 7 years and thousands of deaths and is still ravaging poor communities of color, people *are* scapegoating trans women and girls to enforce pointless and stigmatizing bathroom restrictions — but sometimes, this narrative can turn people within a movement against each other.

Next to it, we have another model that posits a clear boundary between “us” and “them,” which I call *Evangelism*. This can get tricky, because now we are talking about evangelical Christians who do not fit into this cell—and I’m sure everyone here has heard evangelical or other Christians using that first language of embattlement, for instance—but basically, the definition of “evangelism” (as opposed to Evangelicalism) for this purpose is to recognize a clear distinction between “us” and “them,” insiders and outsiders, combined with an understanding of the self as fluid and changeable so that you can be converted to become an insider. Secular movements can be evangelical in this sense of the term; I’ve encountered socialists who see themselves as having seen the light, and wanting others to see the light as well, to stop supporting the evils of capitalism and embrace their particular analysis, for instance. Sometimes evangelical Christians *do* occupy this understanding of boundaries, consciousness, and politics. Any view of the church as a stronghold, protecting the good insiders, those who have converted, from the evil outsiders who haven’t been converted, would fit into this view. The homonegative treatment of LGBT Christians fits into this category.

At the bottom of this table, we see views that focus more on commonalities with the other rather than differences. On the left, we have a view that sees social change as coming about when people generate mutual understanding, or what I call *Humanistic Dialogue*. In the movement we’re talking about, people will advise LGBT Christians to

stay in their non-affirming churches if they can handle it, to “Build relationship with them and let them see your love for the Lord. That will change their minds more than anything.”¹¹ Personal relationships do actually change people’s minds sometimes. From this perspective, we are who we are, and fostering authentic relationships, where people feel connected to each other across boundaries, will help to create change, one person at a time. This would be where a politics based on love and forgiveness might most readily seem to fit.

But actually, some of the people and views we’ve encountered fit on the bottom right, in Critical Solidarity, a term I got from Marc Ellis.¹² The narrative here also stresses human connection and similarities, but it does not distance itself from social-structural analysis and large-scale efforts to change political systems and culture. In this perspective, something in me may need to grow or change if I am truly to work for justice and equality—some of the Christians we have been observing might say, “something in me may need to grow or change if I am to truly follow in the footsteps of Jesus.” Rev. Allyson Robinson, a white trans activist and Baptist pastor, spoke at the Gay Christian Network conference this past January, saying:

Many whites here wonder if solidarity with blacks is really our fight. But there is only one fight for justice.... The trajectory of God’s work in the world is justice for all. If you are distracted by your dearly won gains and say you’re done [because the Supreme Court legalized same-sex

¹¹ Reconstructed from notes

¹² Marc H. Ellis, *Beyond Innocence and Redemption Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

marriage], you weren't fighting for justice, you were fighting for yourself.¹³

I'll illustrate what I'm getting at with the example of The Reformation Project. When Matthew Vines was in college, he took a leave of absence to move back home and conduct a six-month bible study with his father on the subject of whether he could pursue same-sex marriage and still be Christian—that's to say, the kind of Christian he was and is, an evangelical Christian with "a high view of Scripture." From that Bible study he produced a YouTube video that went viral, addressing the ways that people have projected contemporary sexual categories and homophobia into their reading of the ancient texts. Due to the popularity of that video, Vines was able to publish a book, *God and the Gay Christian*, which elaborated his arguments.¹⁴ That book was published in 2014, and parts of it fall very much on the axis of Humanistic Dialogue/Evangelism. For instance, the book makes a rigid distinction between promiscuity, which it says is wrong for everyone, and Christian marriage, which he believes should be extended to same-sex couples. At times in the book it seems as though he saw the church as a fortress separating the good from the promiscuous, and was simply trying to show that nonpromiscuous gay people like him should be on the inside of the fortress.

But Vines did not rest there, which I think is partly why his organization is so vibrant. He hired evangelicals with social justice organizing experience—mostly women of color—to help him organize for change. In the last two of three major regional training conferences, they began with a full-day "Academy for Racial Justice," and gave

¹³ Reverend Allyson Robinson, Keynote Address (Untitled), Gay Christian Network Conference, Houston TX, 9 January 2016.

¹⁴ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent, 2014).

the stage to pastors of color and other people of color to speak and preach throughout both conferences, and in the most recent conference made those voices central to the program.

Now, in their conference in Atlanta in June 2015, prominent evangelical ethicist David Gushee likened the work of heterosexual allies to that of the righteous gentiles of the Holocaust, about whom he wrote his first book, saying that they forewent their own privilege to help the marginalized, people like Matthew Vines. On the last day of the conference, introducing afternoon and evening sessions on the intersections of anti-racist and LGBT efforts for justice, Vines remarked, “Dr. Gushee:

mentioned me as someone who represents a marginalized community.

And while that's true, it's true in exactly *one* sense, and that is the fact that I am gay. And I don't need to convince anyone here that gay people have been historically marginalized.... [But] If I had been female, I would not be standing here. If I had been female, probably my initial video never would have gone viral because people are not used to hearing women talk about the bible in a teaching capacity. If I had been any race other than the race that I am, that *probably* wouldn't have happened either.[He went on to name his economic, educational, and cisgender privilege and then said] You know, being gay was hard enough, [laughter], like I just can't even – how many more obstacles are created when you add on additional layers of oppression is really significant and not to be underestimated. [He addressed white people who didn't see why we had to talk about racism so much, saying] People are not saying you didn't work hard. People are just wanting you to realize that there are other people who

[...started] much further behind, and that if you're not being attentive to that, then you are missing out from a Christian standpoint on a lot of what the heart of the Gospel is in terms of inclusion of the marginalized. [He went on to add that] one third of LGBT people are also people of color. And so you really can't advocate for LGBT people if you're only advocating for *white* LGBT people.¹⁵

So Matthew Vines began in a place very personal to him, coming out to his parents and not knowing where he could go from there, but his understanding of his faith did not allow him to stop at benefiting only himself.

For that matter, in recent conferences, Vines has made very clear statements that while promiscuity might in his view fall short of God's ideal, he has no desire to marginalize anyone who has had sex outside of marriage—even if they have had a lot of it. At the conference in June, when Gushee started speaking about the sinfulness of promiscuity, Vines jumped in to point out that the evangelical rhetoric of “purity” tends to impose a double standard against girls and women that reinforces rape culture. In Kansas City last November, he remarked on a conservative pastor having asked him whether he “condemned the promiscuity of some of the gay community,” and responded:

I would say that they've already been *condemned enough*. I do not condemn, it doesn't bring anyone closer to Jesus, it shuts people down, makes them feel ashamed. I do not encourage the Grindr ethic, but I want to meet

¹⁵ Matthew Vines, The Reformation Project Regional Training Conference, Atlanta GA, 13 June 2015.

people where they're at. ... With truly affirming, safe spaces we can release people from toxic shame through the grace and light of Christ.¹⁶

Gay Christians are speaking out on behalf of gay people who behave in ways that we so often see conservative Christians deploring. Even celibate, Side B, gay Christians—who believe that same-sex sex is always sinful—when given a clear opportunity, often refuse to distance themselves from people who have sex with lots of people, or dress scantily in public, or are in same-sex relationships. I think that's because they have felt the injury that comes from an us-versus-them, shaming mentality, and they understand it as not-Christian.

Throughout this movement, people are making connections, realizing that the struggles for justice are linked. Even conservative Christians who embody a lot of privileged positions all at once—white, cisgender, straight men of means—are realizing that they may have to rethink their theology, worship in different ways, rethink the body/spirit dualism, and let go of their privilege, if they are to truly embrace the love they feel that Jesus calls them to—a love that cannot abide with oppression. They are realizing, as Gushee put it, that solidarity means “leaving privilege behind to some extent to stand with an oppressed person or group and share resistance to injustice,” to “voluntarily [cross] over from the side of privilege to the side of unprivileged, to stand with those who suffer.”¹⁷

To many in this movement, Jesus was a role model of how to love others in solidarity—feeding the hungry, siding with the oppressed and marginalized, reserving

¹⁶ Matthew Vines, The Reformation Project Regional Training Conference, Kansas City MO, 7 November 2015.

¹⁷ David Gushee, “From Bystander to Ally: My Journey and Yours,” The Reformation Project Regional Training Conference, Atlanta GA, 11 June 2015.

anger for those who greedily guarded their own power and standards of respectability. This view contrasts with the view of church as a private club of people who are “good enough,” with “bad people” banging on the doors demanding admission like the men of Sodom.

Love and forgiveness can often be sentimentalized and used to silence the oppressed, but this and other progressive evangelical movements are recognizing a deeply transformative and movement-building power in love and forgiveness. No one in this movement claims to be perfect, but with humility, they are trying to practice the radical social transformation that grows out of an understanding that love isn't love if it isn't relational—it isn't love if it doesn't *feel* like love to the person receiving it.

I'm going to talk just a little bit more about love, and then I'll wrap it up so we can have time for your questions and comments. The early 20th century sociologist and Jewish theologian Martin Buber helps me to make a distinction. In his book *I and Thou*, he distinguished two kinds of interaction; an I-you intimate *relationship* from an I-it objectifying *experience*.¹⁸ I-it experiences are necessary and take up a lot of our lives. Asking your mom where your keys are on your way out the door or asking a teacher for help understanding an assignment may be I-it experiences, and there's nothing wrong with that. We need those. Ideally you also have moments of relationship in your life. In a relationship, Buber says, I am open to being transformed by my connection with you; my ego falls away and I am open to being touched “at the core.” That means that I feel your suffering, and it means I listen to you and learn from you; when you tell me your story, I respect you enough to believe you. Rather than as a clearly bounded ego, I approach you with openness to *you*.

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

Now, if I love ice cream — and I do — I don't have to think about what the ice cream might feel as I devour it. It exists for me. That's a bit extreme for talking about non-abusive parents' love for their kids, but let's think of love as being on a scale from fully objectifying to fully relational. Too often, we treat the people we love as objects, like ice cream. If I love you in that way, that means I've given you a place as an object in my story about myself. I love you, I want to have you, I want to do things with you, I want you to be mine. The story is about me. At its extreme, that can lead to abuses, like stalking or jealous violence, which can often feel like love to the one in power, but feel like terror to the object of their love.

Bringing the discussion back to where we started, many of the parents, pastors, and others who treat nonconforming sexual orientations and gender expressions as sinful do not think they are treating shame as a sacrament and destroying the people they love; they love their children and don't want them to go to hell or to be given over to sin. They know that their job, like that of anyone responsible for raising children, is to teach kids discipline and morality, even if it isn't fun. But if their loved one is suffering and they don't notice, or don't believe them, or dismiss it, that is not *relational* love, it's a one-sided feeling for an object. Their love in that case is often overshadowed by fear, of what will happen if they actually listen to their child and believe them: "Will I have to leave my church? What will my friends think? Will God be mad at me? Will I have to leave my faith?" These are understandable fears, but fears that get in the way of relational love. In the cases we are talking about, LGBT Christians who are not otherwise abused by their parents can feel their shame compounded because their loved ones' efforts to love them don't feel like love, and because people they know love them are telling them their own capacity to love cannot be trusted. Once an LGBT Christian

takes on an LGBT identity—saying “this is who I am,” whether they avow celibacy or not—then they start to see that the problem isn’t coming from within them.

In a place of Critical Solidarity, actors feel the suffering of those who suffer injustice—or if they don’t, they respect them enough to believe them. They accept that something in them may need to change. They understand that compassion doesn’t mean much if it just amounts to individual-level feelings; if I really understand the suffering of those who are systematically oppressed, then my compassion must be channeled into work to create a more just social system. For these Christians, the story of Jesus is the story of a God incarnate who sided with those who were marginalized by the “respectable” members of society, who suffered with those who suffered injustice, who loved others without concern for the consequences to himself.

I’ll end with a final point: this movement might just have something to teach secular progressives, who might need to rethink their own patterns of constantly and destructively shaming each other. I may think I am engaging in system-level politics, but if all I’m doing is shaming people and saying that they *just are bad* in some way— *just are* racist, or sexist, or cissexist, homophobic, or ableist— then I’ve slipped over to the individual level (evangelism), and not in a very helpful or movement-building way. The left might have something to learn from this Christian movement about the power of love, grace, and forgiveness in building a movement for justice, and ending institutional oppression. What would happen if secular progressives, instead of constantly posting and reposting lists of “10 Ways You Suck at Being an Ally” could take a more loving and humble approach to organizing? Do you think they might actually keep people in the movement so it could grow, instead of making them feel like there’s no place for them? Might progressives get a little better at self-critique as well, knowing that doing

so will make the movement for justice stronger? Constantly purging and shaming each other eats away at movements. A posture of embattlement is suited to a war, but it's time for a new metaphor, perhaps a humble, self-critical solidarity, for thinking about how to change our world for the better.

Thank-you.