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Centering the Right: Mapping the Queer Discourse of the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family

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**Centering the Right:
Mapping the Queer Discourse of
the Family Research Council and
Focus on the Family**



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Susan Trollinger, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Religious Right organizations like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council have been known for their vitriolic discourse when it comes to the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) community. The ways in which they have discussed queer rights have characterized the LGB community as especially sinful and a threat to American society. Specifically targeting Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, this paper looks at rhetorical strategies they have used when discussing gay rights. The paper identifies a significant shift in their discursive practices such that recently the LGB community is portrayed in a more sympathetic light, though still as problematic. The purpose of this paper is to map the rhetorical moves that Focus on the Family has employed over the years in order to better understand the Religious Right's rhetorical strategies regarding the LGB community.

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The Religious Right's political influence in the United States has a long history. What began in the late 1910's as a religious revival of the central tenets of Protestantism progressively transformed by the mid 1920's into a social movement that enjoyed considerable political and social clout. In the beginning of the twentieth century, conservative Christiansⁱ recognized threats to the moral fabric of America. By the end of the First World War, conservative Christians attributed Germany's sudden downfall to its "acceptance of higher criticism, theological liberalism, and Darwinian evolutionism".ⁱⁱ Higher criticism is a form of literary criticism that was applied to the interpretation of Scripture. According to higher criticism, if one wants to understand the meaning of any biblical text, one must situate it within its historical context. To conservative Christians, the idea that the Bible is a historical text whose meaning has something to do with historical contingency was anathema to conservative Christian theology which says that the Bible is inerrant—that is, that it is the literal Word of God without error. Theological liberalism, which accepted the notion that there could be multiple interpretations of the Bible, was also seen as a threat to the idea of Biblical inerrancy. If the Bible could be interpreted in a variety of ways, how could it also be said to be inerrant? Moreover, how could conservative Christians claim that they were the mouthpiece of God's message? Darwinian evolutionism was the new scientific development asserting that the human race is a direct descendant from primates, rather than created by God. The idea that humanity evolved over time instead of being created *suis generis* also threatened the principle of Biblical inerrancy since Genesis clearly told a story of creation that was at odds with evolution. Heading into the 1920's, conservative Christian groups were convinced that Germany fell so dramatically at the end of WWI from its position as a world power because its people had been persuaded by these three ideas. In order to avoid a similar fate, conservative Christians argued, the United States had to reject these ideas and believe instead in an inerrant Bible.ⁱⁱⁱ

To this end, the World's Christian Fundamentals Association formed shortly after WWI, and with the philosophical enemy of modernism clearly defined, they began a focused campaign

to rid the US educational system of Darwinism and secularist thought. They had some early legislative successes including bans on teaching Darwinian evolution in public schools in certain Southern states. However in 1925, the Scopes Trial, a state Supreme Court trial of a Tennessee school teacher who taught evolution, transformed the public image of the budding conservative Christian movement. John Scopes was a schoolteacher who teamed up with the American Civil Liberties Union to challenge a law passed in Tennessee that made it illegal to teach Darwinian evolutionism. William Jennings Bryan was the lawyer who argued on behalf of the law that banned the teaching of evolution. When he was, oddly enough, cross-examined by Clarence Darrow, the lawyer who argued the case for the public school teacher, he was made to look like something of an idiot who held to highly unscientific and ridiculous ideas. Thus, Bryan and conservative Christians more generally were portrayed in the media as “rural hicks who were woefully ignorant of modern science and ridiculously out of touch with modern urban culture”.^{iv} Though Bryan won the case, the depictions of the conservative Christian movement leveled a heavy blow to any future political progress. With their public image tarnished, conservative Christians turned from national lobbying groups, like the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association, Northern Baptists, and Northern Presbyterians, to local grassroots Christian community based groups, focusing on building up a strong base by recruiting new members to their churches.^v

At the beginning of the Cold War, conservative Christian groups emerged again into the public sphere with a new enemy to rally against: Communism. Conservative Christian groups shifted their focus from their smaller, local churches to political offices and lobbying groups. Although they succeeded at getting several Congressional representatives elected, they stretched themselves rather thin across the country. In addition, an important fracture within the movement came in the 1950’s when conservative Christian preacher Billy Graham advocated for cooperation with more mainstream conservative Christian groups. This move was an attempt to expand conservative Christian influence to a larger constituency. This move created new

boundaries that divided three conservative Christian groups: neo-evangelicals (a larger, more mainstream group), fundamentalists (a smaller but more extreme faction)^{vi}, and dominionists^{vii} (a group who sought to gain political influence and redefine American society to better fit with their Biblical interpretation). After the fracture, the three groups faded from national attention once again and returned to the business of grass roots organizing.

Conservative Christians returned to the American public's attention in the 1970's with the emergence of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the sexual revolution. Conservative Christians advocated conservative social morality and warned against the fall of American civilization. In order to protect America from what was perceived to be the pending end of civilization, several organizations formed in the late 1970's to combat the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and the queer rights movement. These conservative Christian organizations included Focus on the Family (1977), American Family Association (1977), Moral Majority (1979), Family Research Council (1983), and the Christian Coalition (1989).^{viii} While the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition are two of the most noteworthy organizations, Focus on the Family (FoF), American Family Association (AFA), and Family Research Council (FRC) are still active lobbying groups with considerable political clout in domestic policy making.

What defines conservative Christian groups from conservative Christians or other Christian groups are two central tenets: Biblical inerrancy and an unwillingness to cooperate with mainstream Christian groups.^{ix} To be a conservative Christian group is to view the Bible as literally true and without error. With that understanding, the literal truths of the Bible can be applied to all areas of life. This Biblical inerrancy regulates the message that can be spread, limiting it to one voice, one interpretation thus eliminating theological liberalism, or multiple interpretations of the Bible. The second characteristic of refusing to cooperate with mainstream Christian groups is important because of its exclusion of outside parties. Only one voice is deemed acceptable when speaking about the Bible, and it is the conservative Christian one that

understands the Bible to be a literal message from God. Conservative Christians alone are the true Bible-believers and keepers of the Truth from the Bible. They alone know God's Word. All those who disagree are wrong and must be kept outside the fold.

Over the years, conservative Christian groups have remained relatively steadfast in their claims regarding the truth of the Bible and its implications for social and political life. Indeed, in recent years, the debate surrounding the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) rights has brought conservative Christian groups back into the political spotlight. Groups like FRC, FoF, and AFA have taken center stage in helping to shape public opinion among conservative Christians and even more broadly. Starting in the 1970's, the rhetoric used by conservative Christian groups depended on a series of metaphors that were directly associated with the queer community, creating something Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe refer to as "chains of equivalence".^x A chain of equivalence occurs when a series of words, phrases, or metaphors are strongly associated with the identity of a group and are then used to construct and reinforce a series of binary oppositions that define that identity. These metaphors represented the queer community as militant, diseased, and a threat to American civilization. While the metaphors have varied in application across conservative Christian groups, the central message remained constant: the queer community is a threat to America.

Groups like the Christian Coalition and Family Research Council (FRC) have been at the forefront efforts to depict the queer community as militant. In 1998, President Clinton issued an executive order that prohibited discrimination against Federal employees on the basis of sexual orientation. Bob Knight, then president of the FRC, issued a statement soon after as a part of an ad campaign against Clinton saying, the executive order was "the Normandy landing in the larger cultural wars".^{xi} By using battle-laden rhetoric, the FRC likened the queer community to an invading army. The image that followed this metaphor was that of a militant queer army who threatened to destroy American society. Whereas the existence and basic message of the press release are undisputed, the actual text of the original press release written by Bob Knight is

unavailable. It simply cannot be located in databases or via the Internet. Thus, no further rhetorical analysis is possible.

The queer community has also been coded with the language of disease. What this means is that the queer community was connected to metaphors of illness, a plague, and, most notably, HIV/AIDS. While the language of disease constructed the queer community as a health risk, it also implied that the community was in need of a cure. The cure could take many forms, but the one that seemed to be most pervasive in these 1970's to mid 1990's representations was a call for a cleansing or purging of the queer community from society. The least violent version of this idea of cleansing homosexuality took the form of "reparative" therapy. Several Religious Right organizations, including the FRC, the American Family Association, and Focus on the Family, regarded homosexuality as a mental health issue until the early 2000's.^{xii} Conservative Christian groups attested to the power of psychotherapy and reintroducing gender roles, teaching men how to work on cars and women how to do general housework.^{xiii} Further, the emergence of the ex-gay movement in the early 1990's gave additional credence to the idea that one could be cured of homosexuality by abstaining from behaviors that triggered same-sex attractions. Not surprisingly, the analogy made here was with alcoholism and drug addiction. The idea was to borrow therapy techniques from substance abuse programs and apply them to curing men and women of homosexuality. In the 90's, John and Anne Paulk made headlines claiming to have been healed of their homosexuality. In a statement to *Newsweek*, John Paulk, a self-proclaimed "ex-gay," (who is he?) said, "To say that we've arrived at this place of total heterosexuality—that we're totally healed—is misleading".^{xiv} Despite reservations even from ex-gay church members, conservative Christians continue to argue on behalf this kind of reparative therapy.

What arose from these metaphors of the queer community as both diseased and militant was a fundamental binary that opposed a constructed queer identity to an American, Christian identity. The conservative Christian rhetoric of the 1950's to mid 1990's created a queer identity around a gay, diseased, militant, male. Notably, lesbians were not represented in this early

discourse, because their sexuality was not viewed as threatening to American masculinity. The Christian identity took on a singular image as well: a heterosexual, pure, battle-ready, male. Much like the queer identity, women were not seen as important members within the conservative Christian movement, which led to their presence being overlooked in the construction of the conservative Christian identity. With the binary set, the metaphors used to define the singular images of each category were then broadened. The gay, militant, diseased male stood as a representation of the entire queer community. The pure, heterosexual, battle-ready, American male was an extension of all conservative Christians. These broad associations are what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as “chains of equivalence”.^{xv} With the binary and chains of equivalence constructed, conservative Christians pushed the queer community *beyond* the limits of the social, as Laclau and Mouffe put it.^{xvi} With the queer community set beyond the definition of what it meant to be American, conservative Christians were able to demonize queers, justify legislative action against queers, and further persecute queer individuals. And they did so largely with American public opinion supporting them.

However, in the last decade, conservative Christian groups like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council have changed the metaphors associated with the queer community. Instead of being diseased, militant, and/or a threat to American society, FoF and the FRC now portray the LGB community as a group of sinners capable of entering the kingdom of heaven. The FRC and Focus on the Family have begun calling this new strategy “bold love”.^{xvii} Bold love, as defined by FoF, is “service without compromise”.^{xviii} The service given to queer individuals is to love them despite their sin and to attempt to save them despite their hesitation. That said, bold love does not endorse supporting the LGB lifestyle. Bold love calls upon conservative Christians to respect the dignity of others while seeking to convert them without compromising conservative Christian beliefs.

Another shift in the Religious Right’s rhetoric takes the form of acknowledging different groups within the queer community. In other words, the FRC and FoF no longer seem to be

painting the entire queer community with one brush. Pushed by its public policy subsidiary CitizenLink, Focus on the Family now identifies three different groups within the LGB identity: “moderate, militant, and repentant”.^{xix} According to FoF, “moderate homosexuals” are just like heterosexual Christians in that they are interested in keeping society safe and have an honest desire to learn more about the salvation of God. “Repentant homosexuals” are men and women who want to find a way out of the LGB lifestyle. They want to find God’s salvation, but they are afraid of approaching Christians for fear of being rejected or further marginalized by them.^{xx} These two groups seem to be the target audience of this new rhetoric of conversion through “bold love”.

The third group, which FoF calls “militant homosexuals”, are constructed as a continuation of the previous category from the 1950’s to 1990’s conservative Christian discourse about queers. The militant homosexual is described as trying to “normalize homosexuality,” through marches, protests, or lobbying efforts.^{xxi} Militant queer individuals are constructed as hopeless or too far gone to be saved by God’s Word. Conservative Christian groups, outside of and including FoF and FRC, share this attitude. According to this new conservative Christian rhetoric, militant queers attempt to be the loudest, but they are not representative of the queer community at large.^{xxii}

Conservative Christian groups have also changed the way in which they have constructed their own identity. Instead of a pure, battle-ready male, Focus on the Family and FRC have changed their rhetoric to say that even earnest Christians sin. More important, Christian sins are just like the sins of their queer counterparts. They, too, struggle with sin just as much as the next person. Whether the sin is failing to obey their elders, lying, cheating, or homosexuality, Christian and queer individuals are imperfect before God. This rhetorical move away from a pure Christian man seems to show a softening of the conservative Christian identity.

A common theme arises from the seemingly new discursive practices of Religious Right organizations like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council. These conservative

Christian groups are blurring the lines of the binary they constructed. The sinner and sanctified are now in the same area, both tainted by the effects of a perceived innate human weakness. The congregation does not seem to be held nearly as high as once was, with pastors and prominent Religious Right leaders asking conservative Christian to take a hard look at themselves before casting the first stone.

Further, there is a marked change in approaching the queer community. Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council are no longer advocating for the arms-length method, asking for a quarantine of diseased queer individuals. Instead, the idea of “bold love” or compassionate conservatism seems to be the new rhetoric of interacting with the queer community at large. Treating the queer community as a group of sinners rather than as an infected, untouchable category forces Christ-like evangelism and mandates a kind of compassionate interaction.

Given evidence for a dramatic rhetorical shift from vitriol to compassion that seems to be emerging from conservative Christian groups, questions arise. Are we actually seeing a rhetorical shift within the conservative Christian movement? If so, what is the significance of it? Does the shift represent a restructuring of the Religious Right’s discourse on sexuality and the fundamental binary? If there is a restructuring, what is the new structure created by the Religious Right look like? Or, does this shift indicate something else?

One possible cause for the shift in opinion is reflected in a 2010 General Social Survey from the National Opinion Research Center. Comparing a survey done in 1988 which had sixty-seven percent of not-born again conservative Christian opposed to same-sex marriage, the recent 2010 survey shows the same group now only in thirty percent oppose the issue. Conservative Christians between 18 and 35 years old are now only 12% opposed to same-sex marriage. Thirty-eight percent of conservative Christians over 36 years old are opposed to the issue as well. A drop in opposition is also reflected in born-again conservative Christians (Christians that have experienced a revelation from God and have dedicated themselves to Christ), though less drastic.

In 1988, eighty-five percent were opposed to the issue, compared to the 2010 survey showing fifty-nine percent.

A generational split seems to be evident amongst conservative Christians as well. Forty-four percent overall of young conservative Christians, between ages 18-35, are opposed to same-sex marriage. However, sixty-three percent of Christians older than 36 are opposed to same-sex marriage. Perhaps, most important, though, is a general sense of uncertainty about whether or not homosexuality is actually immoral seems to be growing among young conservative Christians whether born-again or not. More young conservative Christians are unsure why older conservative Christians continue to ostracize the queer community. This hesitation on the part of the younger generation could reflect a shift towards greater acceptance of the queer community in the future.^{xxiii}

Another possible cause for the shift in the queer discourse is found in Focus on the Family's financial records. As pointed out by Jaweed Kaleem of the *HuffingtonPost*, who writes, "the shift may also be part of a broader strategy to appeal to more donors".^{xxiv} IRS tax forms from 2009-2012, Focus on the Family consistently lost donor support. By the end of the 2008 financial year, FoF had \$145 million dollars in revenue.^{xxv} In 2009, it dropped to \$130 million.^{xxvi} In 2012, FoF reported only \$90 million, a 62% loss of revenue since 2008.^{xxvii} The number of employees that Focus on the Family has also dropped significantly. In 2009, there were 1,1318 employees within the Focus on the Family, and in 2012, they reported only 746 employees, a 56% loss of workers since 2009.^{xxviii}^{xxix}

Perhaps the most likely cause for the shift in rhetoric by Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council is the change in leadership. James Dobson found Focus on the Family in 1977 and maintained leadership until 2003 when the Board of Directors decided to choose someone else. The new president of Focus on the Family is Jim Daly. Daly has said conservative Christians need to prepare themselves to lose the battle against queer rights and same-sex marriage, citing younger conservative Christians as opposing the issue less than their parents.^{xxx}

Daly advocates for engaging society through compassion and promoting Christian values, rather than using harsh, polarizing speech to get the point across.

Whatever the financial or other motivations, Focus on the Family and Family Research Council have clearly changed their opinions towards the queer community. The new rhetoric advocates for tolerance, accepting the queer individuals as sinners just like the rest of the Christian population, but still, they want to see queer individuals reorient themselves to a healthy heterosexual life.^{xxx1} As indicated above, this new rhetoric operates under the sign of “bold love”. According to “bold love,” Christians are called to respect queer people, acknowledge their human dignity, but be vocal about supporting for conservative Christian family values and heterosexual relationships as the true plan of God.^{xxxii} At face value, the new rhetorical approach of “bold love” seems to be in direct opposition to the earlier conservative Christian discourse, which viewed the queer community as damned and unable to be saved to a now more tolerant and loving speech.

By adopting the rhetoric of “bold love,” conservative Christian groups are forced to rework the binary that was constructed during the old rhetoric of disease and militant homosexuals. The old rhetoric positioned a good Christian, therefore American, identity against a deviant queer identity. The Christian identity’s chain of equivalence contained phrases like Biblical inerrancy, heterosexual and monogamous marriage, Bible-believing, and God’s chosen people. The queer identity’s chain of equivalence was constructed in opposition to that with phrases like militant, diseased, pedophile, and a threat to the moral fabric of America. However, “bold love” advocates for the inclusion of moderate and repentant homosexuals. These two groups can be converted, brought into the fold of conservative Christian congregations. “Bold love” bridges the binary, bringing homosexuals into the true Christian identity, depending on their reorienting to heterosexuality. This change in the binary is significant because to say that a proper, true Christian could be queer shows a marked change in the queer discourse of the Religious Right.

Though the message has not necessarily changed, the shift from battle rhetoric to bold love by Focus on the Family and Family Research Council cannot be overlooked. This softer, more compassionate side is telling of a new move by these conservative Christian organizations to reach out directly to the queer community. Conservative Christian congregations are painted as something of a community full of sinners, each struggling with their own personal demons.^{xxxiii} The queer community becomes nothing special in comparison to the other members of conservative Christian organizations. The sin of homosexuality is no more, no less than any other. It is likened to drinking or lying and held in the same regard. This move away from demonizing the queer community is indicative of a language of conversion, seeking to embrace and heal the queer individual rather than damn outright.

The consequences of this shift are hard to map out. The simultaneous inclusion of moderate and repentant homosexuals and exclusive pushing militant homosexuals beyond the limits of the social are two seemingly contradictory moves in the larger queer discourse. This change, though, is not reflective of the whole conservative Christian movement, and the change in rhetoric of “bold love” is not shown in other conservative Christian organizations.

However, upon closer examination, it looks as though the two rhetorics are not as different as they may appear. Although a shift in the chains of equivalence has certainly occurred, the current rhetoric regarding queers among conservative Christian organizations like Focus on the Family and Family Research Council continues to reiterate certain old arguments. Much of the old rhetoric remains in use, though it has been somewhat modified by the notion of “bold love”. The queer community is not spoken of as diseased anymore; instead, queer individuals are constructed as misguided, damaged heterosexuals in need of help from conservative Christians. No longer militant, a majority of the queer community is moderate in their views, or even repentant and seeking the salvation that conservative Christians can offer. That said, the queer community continues to be positioned as a threat to the moral fabric of American society.

Continuing to construct the queer community as a threat but in need of help, the new rhetoric seeks to reach out to the queer community and convert them.

The new rhetoric emphasizes conversion and suggests that the way forward is to include some queer individuals and then reorient them to heterosexuality. Within the new rhetoric, queer individuals that enter into the conservative Christian fold, though, continue to be labeled as queer. As seen in the “ex-gay” movement, a queer individual never truly loses their queer identity among conservative Christians. That label sticks even in spite of conversion. This ex-queer labeling continues to set the queer members apart even within the conservative Christian community. Never fully Christian but never fully rid of their queer identity, the conversion narrative seems to stop there, not able to speak to the apparent creation of a third category: queer and Christian. The idea that a queer could also be a Christian is problematic for the Christian identity. Even though in conservative Christian theology queer Christians would not attain God’s salvation like their heterosexual counterparts, this third category still troubles the true, pure Christian binary.

Conservative Christian organizations have created a third category that draws upon the chains of equivalences from both the Christian and queer identity. This third category, queer *and* Christian, is evident within the “ex-gay” movement. Ex-gay Christians are the embodiment of the queer coding. Ex-gays express their constant struggle with the addiction of same-sex desires (language of disease). They talk about how radically involved they were in the queer community, and how their involvement forced them to push an aggressive gay-agenda they did not believe (the militant queer community). And finally, ex-gay conservative Christians describe their return to Christ, allowing them to realize just how close they were to damnation (language of conversion). By promoting ex-gay Christians, conservative Christian organizations are able to create a seemingly accepting space for queer individuals to enter into the fold. However, by converting some queer individuals, conservative Christians are confronted with the question of

why certain queer individuals are worthy of God's salvation, while others in the queer community are still excluded.

The language of conversion hinges upon a promise: to give the individual a better, more sure life than the one they had before. Speaking of conservative Christian conversion tactics, Chris Hedges writes, "Conversion is a form of sexual warfare, a form of seduction and finally a form of sexual conquest".^{xxxiv} According to Hedges, converting an individual is done to exert power over someone who is otherwise untouchable. It is not about bringing another person closer to God's salvation. The act of converting then stands as an expression of influence by conservative Christian organizations. To bring in communities otherwise ostracized gives conservative Christian groups a reason to boast, a reason to say that their church, their faith can encompass even the most unlikely of believers. However, the process of conversion is a tenuous one that requires the participation of the entire congregation.

Outlining the process of conversion, Chris Hedges lays out the way in which conservative Christians make moves to bring in new members. Conversion begins by soliciting the individual, isolating them and drawing upon their fears. Each evangelist provides a scripted solution to all the doubt and fear that is in a potential new member's life. While attending a seminar teaching conservative Christians how exactly to convert new members, Hedges remarks, "The most susceptible people, we are told in the seminar, are those in crisis: people in the midst of a divorce; those who have lost a job or are grieving for the death of a close friend or relative; those suffering addictions they cannot control, illness, or the trauma of emotional or physical abuse".^{xxxv} By preying upon these vulnerabilities, the evangelist provides the miracle answer to the problem. However, the answer is becoming a member of the congregation, contingent upon a complete turning away from the individual's past life. By isolating the new member from friends and family, the individual is forced, and expected, to rely entirely upon the social network of the congregation. The individual is then bombarded with false friendship, tentative promises, and an entire group of people ready to listen to their problems. This form of "love-bombing," as Hedges

puts it, results in a belief that the congregation is the only social network needed. It is an effective technique that paints the conservative Christian church as an attractive prospect.^{xxxvi}

While the language of conversion is nothing new, and every religious institution uses it to some extent, the standard conversion among conservative Christians is particularly unsettling due to the way in which the whole notion of homosexuality as a disease re-emerges. In the new “more compassionate” rhetoric, homosexuality is portrayed by Focus on the Family and Family Research Council as a result of sexual or physical abuse. With psychoanalytical reasoning, gay men, which is the only queer community discussed, seek to replace the masculinity that they lost by becoming the object of desire.^{xxxvii} After identifying the root of homosexuality, reparative therapy can take hold, treating homosexuality as an addiction and coding the attractions as compulsions or cravings.^{xxxviii} Reconstructing homosexuality as something an individual stumbled into, conservative Christian groups seek to discredit queer activists by arguing that anyone can be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Further, conservative Christian organizations market themselves as the only people with all the answers when it comes to unraveling sexual orientation. By coding homosexuality as the result of personal “crisis” as Hedges puts it, the individual being converted is more likely to feel the sense of despair that motivates conversion.

The construction within the new rhetoric of homosexuality as an addiction continues the old rhetoric of homosexuality as a disease. Religious Right groups like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council have positioned themselves as the moderators of what is right and wrong. They, alone, know what is best, what is true or not. The use of psychoanalytical reasoning to explain queer relationships attempts to lend credence to their overall position on homosexuality: that it is a disease. Homosexuality, in the conservative Christian rhetoric, requires a cure. By saying that homosexuality is a byproduct of sexual abuse and treating it as an addiction, conservative Christian groups let in the back door what they had eschewed out the front—namely, the idea that homosexuals are not proper Christians and that some sins are worse

than others. This continuation of the old rhetoric of disease contests the rhetoric of compassion, and there seems to be no move to reconcile the two.

Despite competing rhetorics, the new rhetoric codes homosexuality as a disease in need of a cure. Conservative Christian organizations provide the answer, arriving just in time to save the person from an otherwise problematic life. Hedges calls this setup the “culture of despair”.^{xxxix} Conservative Christian groups become the only way out of a life that they have decreed as full of suffering and disappointments. By submitting to the authority of conservative Christian leaders, the individual has an experience according to which they feel that overwhelming sense of anxiety (that they have been *told* by conservative Christians that they have) disappear. With a support system, a Bible full of answers to all of life’s questions, and an ongoing fear of falling in to sin, “moderate” to “repentant” homosexuals can become willing members of a group that would seek to change them into heterosexuals through rigorous pseudo-therapeutic programs like Love Won Out ministries and recently disbanded Exodus International.

Within the rhetoric of “bold love,” conservative Christian groups continue to code themselves as good Americans. They construct themselves as the real descendants of America’s founding fathers.^{xi} Within conservative Christian discourse, the Constitution has become (like the Bible) inerrant. For conservative Christians, the Constitution is a Christian document, created for the sole purpose of founding a Christian nation. By positioning the Constitution close to the Bible, conservative Christians see themselves as being earnest, true Americans. They represent the epitome of what it means to be a real, American and stand as a model for other groups. Conservative Christians live out the most perfect form of God’s plan for them by entering into heterosexual relationships, committing themselves to each other, and producing more children for the conservative Christian movement. Also, as real Americans, they are ready to fight and defend the central institutions, like marriage, and beliefs that they see as guiding America towards prosperity.^{xli}

When we take seriously the way in which the new rhetoric of compassion constructs queers as in need of conversion to conservative Christian values and, especially, to a heterosexual life, we can see that much of the old rhetoric remains. Within the logic of this discourse of conversion and cure, conservative Christians are once again constructed as the real Americans, the queer community is constructed as an insurgent group. Specifically in reference to the third category of the queer community, the “militant” homosexuals, the chains of equivalence within the new rhetoric remain consistent with the old rhetoric.^{xliii} As before, this category of queers are constructed as though they want access to children, either to indoctrinate them or molest them.^{xliiii} They want to dismantle the institution of marriage in order to bring down American infrastructure.^{xliiv} Militant queers want to receive special treatment under the law and look to take advantage of the American health care system.^{xliv} And finally, they organize themselves as radicals determined to bring about the end of civilization for their own selfish gain.^{xlvi} Despite “bold love” these images of militant homosexuals continue to be associated with the queer community. Conservative Christian leaders maintain their position opposite the queer community in order to bolster their own identity as God’s chosen people. Though tempered by the discourse of compassion, conservative Christian rhetoric still constructs the queer community as the aggressors, attacking the religious, God-fearing American without any provocation.

With the binary constructed and Laclau and Mouffe’s chains of equivalence created, the only thing for conservative Christian leaders to do is stir the proverbial pot. Conservative Christian leaders seek “a fiscal, social or political crisis, a moment of upheaval in the form of an economic meltdown or another terrorist strike on American soil, to move to reconfigure the political system”.^{xlvii} By preaching the apocalypse, conservative Christian organizations position themselves as the immovable, immutable center. With a consistent message in the form of Biblical inerrancy, they shut out dissenting voices and create an atmosphere of utter acceptance. Then, when it appears as though society is in chaos, the conservative Christians speak loudest saying that they have, all along, had the answer to the world’s latest problem. This feedback

system of creating despair and then providing a solution keeps conservative Christian followers in a constant state of terror. Followers are required always to be on guard, always to be ready for the next disaster.

In the new rhetorical discourse, the next disaster is the possible legalization of same-sex marriage. In a nuanced shift, conservative Christian groups have used same-sex marriage as a stand-in for the queer community, utilizing rhetoric similar to the old discourse. What this means is that when conservative Christians say that the queer community is diseased and a threat to society, conservative Christian groups apply these phrases to same-sex marriage. Here, the queer discourse of conservative Christians creates a second chain of equivalence. On one side, there is heterosexual marriage, which is coded with terms like “holy”, “complimentary”, “the staple of civilization”, and “in the children’s best interest”.^{xlvi} The same-sex marriage category of the binary is defined with terms like “harbinger of the end of society”, “dangerous to children”, “diseased”, “abusive”, and “a threat to religious liberty”. Within these chains of equivalence, conservative Christian groups can continue to be critical of the queer community while using the rhetoric of “bold love.”

The Family Research Council is an active voice in this new rhetorical move, saying that they advocate *for* the children and society rather than *against* same-sex marriage. Looking at the Family Research Council’s policy statements, the new rhetorical discourse uses same-sex marriage as a way of continuing the old rhetoric. The language of disease returns to describe the effects that same-sex marriage would have on society. For example, the Family Research Council says that legalizing same-sex marriage would be harmful to American citizens because it would force them to pay for the health benefits of queer federal employees’ same-sex partners. Mobilizing the notion that queers are damaged within the new rhetoric, the FRC says that since the queer community is at higher risk for “physical disease, mental illness, and substance abuse” American taxpayers will be forced to carry the burden.^{xlix} In addition, the FRC continues the use of the old rhetoric by saying that same-sex marriage is a threat to the future of American society.

With undertones of the familiar battle rhetoric, the FRC posits that no past society has ever legalized same-sex marriage and continued to “survive”.¹ Further, same-sex marriage is constructed, using the slippery slope fallacy, as a mechanism in which polygamy, adult-child marriages, incestuous marriages, and bestiality will be legalized.^{li} The association of same-sex marriage with these other terms further codes queer relationships as deviant and dangerous to society as a whole. By recoding old arguments within the newer construction of queers as damaged human beings in need of a cure, conservative Christian groups are able still to advocate for bringing the queer individual into the conservative Christian fold, assuming they reorient themselves to heterosexuality, but at the same time, conservative Christian groups are able to code queer relationships as diseased, a threat to society, and as likely to bring forth the end of civilization.

With same-sex marriage used as rhetorical device for reiterating (though in slightly different terms) the old rhetoric, Religious Right groups have made a clear decision to make an important and strategic rhetorical shift. This shift will be interesting to watch as it plays out in the future. Will these strategies work? Will they attract younger conservative Christians who do not have enthusiasm (like older generations have) about excluding the queer community?

Even more importantly, what does it mean that this shift has *occurred*? This rhetorical shift seems to go against the idea of Biblical inerrancy, which assumes that there is one message and one voice. If conservative Christian organizations like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council claim to be the mouthpiece of God’s message, then how will they explain the shift in rhetoric from exclusion to controlled inclusion? Does this mean that God’s previous message of the queer community being damned and an abomination was actually wrong? Or, did these conservative Christian groups get God’s message wrong? If the answer to either of those two questions is yes, then conservative Christians have to explain how it is that they can maintain the position that the Bible is inerrant or that they are able to get the Bible right.

Of course, all this would be made easier if there were no trace of the old rhetoric. If the old rhetoric were erased, then it would be difficult to hold these conservative Christian groups accountable for a shift in their rhetoric. Especially given the Internet, one would expect that it would be easy to find many instances of the old rhetoric. But, as it turns out, this is not true. In fact, it is very difficult to find evidence of the old rhetoric anywhere on the Internet. Conservative Christian groups like Focus on the Family and Family Research Council have done a very good job at erasing the old rhetoric from the Internet. Documents dating back before 2006 that relate to either FoF or FRC have been essentially removed from the Internet.^{lii} Whatever the ostensible reason for removing the content (a change in servers or domain names, updating the website, or lost to corrupt data), it is clear that they purposefully removed these documents from the Internet.

That these groups purged these documents from the Internet, given that they hold to the principle of Biblical inerrancy, is not surprising. According to this tenet, there is only ever one message, true and divined from the Christian Scripture. Multiple interpretations are not allowed, not even seen as possible because God does not seek to confuse. The idea of Biblical inerrancy is more of a statement about who God is and about identifying characteristics of God. Further, Biblical inerrancy demands absolute obedience, complete submission to the single interpretation. One message for the whole audience eliminates the possibility for alternatives; further, it makes it more difficult to escape the rhetoric when unflinching loyalty to the conservative Christian leader is not only expected, but also required to see God's salvation. Within the closed loop that these organizations create, there is only one message being spoken, though there are sometimes competing voices.

Importantly, this is not the first time that the Religious Right has purposefully deleted evidence of an old rhetoric that contests a new one. During the civil rights movement of the 1960's, conservative Christian groups were outspoken about their opposition to racial equality. Later in the 1970s, when it did not make strategic sense to make such arguments against racial equality, groups like the Moral Majority (led by Jerry Falwell) scrubbed their former rhetoric.

They recalled all statements, sermons, or publications that ran the risk of exposing their stance against racial equality.^{liii} By effectively erasing any trace of earlier racist speech, Falwell was able to argue that Conservative Christian Christianity was always faithful ally to the civil rights movement rather than an outspoken enemy. Even if some organizations, though, have erased evidence of the old rhetoric from the Internet, there are still conservative Christian organizations that stand as competing voices for groups like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council.

Though certain Religious Right groups have largely succeeded in erasing all traces of their organization's previous statements that now are at odds with the new rhetoric, they have not succeeded in securing one message. That is due to several other Religious Right groups that have continued to use the old rhetoric. Conservative Christian organizations like American Family Association, Americans for the Truth About Homosexuality, and The 700 Club (led by Pat Robertson) have not joined Focus on the Family and FRC's strategic rhetorical shift. Articles, podcasts, interviews, and press releases still abide by the old discourse. According to their rhetoric, the queer community is still a threat to society, pedophiles, diseased, and militant, rather than dressing them up to be wayward sinners.^{liv} All this is to say that there are competing rhetorics about the queer community among conservative Christian organizations. Among those groups that continue to use the old rhetoric, the queer community is seen as diseased perverts who seek nothing more than to break down the very institutions that keep America running. In contrast, according to those groups that have adopted the new rhetoric, queers are seen as sinners who turned away from God after a trauma or by a kind of thinking according to which living a homosexual lifestyle was the only way forward for them. Though the chains of equivalence are maintained, the inconsistent portrayal of the queer community leaves conservative Christian organizations looking confused. These two rhetorics are in competition with one another. It remains to be seen which one will become dominant among conservative Christians.

This confusion of how to talk about the LGB community, though, is evident in a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center. Rather than just asking whether or not the individual opposes same-sex marriage, the Pew survey asked whether or not same-sex marriage was inevitable. White conservative Christians responded with 70% saying yes, it is inevitable.^{lv} With this in mind, it seems as though the conservative Christian community could be shifting into a type of discourse similar to that of the post-civil rights era. By initiating the purge of any and all documents relating to the old discourse, Focus on the Family and Family Research Council have perhaps issued a statement to the other organizations saying that this new mode of coding homosexuals as sinners will need to be the new strategy. While FoF and FRC represent a minority at the moment, it would not be surprising to see another shift like this take place within groups like American Family Association and Americans for Truth that for now hold on to the old rhetoric. In any case, the queer-related discursive practices of conservative Christian remain problematic due to their continued construction of a binary pitting the queer community against the one, true version of Christian Americans.

With competing voices, the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of the queer community, and the rhetoric of “bold love,” there is more than enough evidence to show a definitive shift in the queer discourse of the Religious Right. What remains to be seen, though, is the impact that this move will have on the larger conservative Christian community. By having competing voices, conservative Christian groups could have a harder time asserting their truth and their Biblically inspired vision of humanity without opening themselves up to questioning. Welcoming some members of the queer community could contest the idea that the Bible is inerrant and could raise questions about why some can be included in God’s salvation while others are excluded. Moreover, “bold love” promotes compassion and tolerance, which may in the end validate sexual orientations that are seen to be in direct opposition with heterosexuality. With so many effects possible from the new rhetoric of the Religious Right, one thing is for sure.

More work will need to be done in the future to chart the implications of turning from damnation to compassion, complete exclusion to moderated inclusion, and opposition to tolerance.

Notes

- ⁱ For the purpose of clarity, I will use “conservative Christian” as a stand in for fundamentalist and evangelical. Though the two words are synonymous in theology, historically fundamentalist and evangelical organizations are different. Conservative Christians will serve to be a catch-all term for this paper.
- ⁱⁱ Trollinger, William V. Jr. “Protestantism and Fundamentalism” *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*. Ed: Alister McGrath and Darren Marks. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 344-56. Print.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Hedges, Chris. “Faith.” *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. New York: Free, 2006. 1-36. Print.
- ^{viii} Trollinger, William V. Jr. “Protestantism and Fundamentalism.”
- ^{ix} Hedges, Chris. “Faith.”
- ^x Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. “Beyond the Positivity of the Social: Antagonisms and Hegemony.” *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985. 93-145. Print.
- ^{xi} The People for the American Way. “Anti-Gay Politics and the Religious Right.” *People for the American Way*. People for the American Way, 1998. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- ^{xii} The American Psychological Association stopped referring to homosexuality as a mental illness in 1975.
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} Ibid.
- ^{xv} Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. “Beyond Positivity of the Social: Antagonisms and Hegemony.”
- ^{xvi} Ibid.
- ^{xvii} Dallas, Joe. “How Should We Respond?” *CitiLink*. Focus on the Family, 25 May 2012. Web. 23 Nov 2013.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} Ibid.
- ^{xx} Ibid.
- ^{xxi} Ibid.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} Grant, Tod, and Sarah Pulliam Bailey. “How Conservative Christians Have Shifted in Public Opinion on Same-Sex Marriage.” *Christianity Today*. Christianity Today, 11 May 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2014.
- ^{xxiv} Kaleem, Jaweed. “Jim Daly Aims to Broaden Focus on the Family Beyond Anti-Gay Marriage, Anti-Abortion Record.” *The Huffington Post*. The Huffington Post, 16 Oct 2012. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.
- ^{xxv} United States. Internal Revenue Service. Department of Treasury. 2009 990 Form- *Focus on the Family*. By Focus on the Family. Focus on the Family, n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid.
- ^{xxvii} United States. Internal Revenue Service. Department of Treasury. 2012 990 Form- *Focus on the Family*. By Focus on the Family. Focus on the Family, n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.
- ^{xxviii} 2009 990 Form-Focus on the Family.
- ^{xxix} 2012 990 Form-Focus on the Family.
- ^{xxx} Kaleem, Jaweed. “Jim Daly Aims to Broaden Focus on the Family Beyond Anti-Gay Marriage, Anti-Abortion Record.”
- ^{xxxi} Dallas, Joe. “How Should We Respond?”
- ^{xxxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxxiii} Ibid.
- ^{xxxiv} Hedges, Chris. “Conversion.” *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. New York: Free, 2006. 51-72. Print.
- ^{xxxv} Ibid.
- ^{xxxvi} Ibid.
- ^{xxxvii} Johnston, Jeff. “Childhood Sexual Abuse and Male Homosexuality.” *CitizenLink*. Focus on the Family, 17 June 2010. Web. 6 Nov. 2013.

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- xxxviii Johnston, Jeff. "Understanding Male Homosexuality--God's Power to Change Lives, Part 2." *CitizenLink*. Focus on the Family, 15 Oct. 2010. Web. 30 Oct. 2013.
- xxxix Hedges, Chris. "The Culture of Despair." *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. New York: Free, 2006. 51-72. Print.
- xl Hedges, Chris. "Faith."
- xli Ibid.
- xlii Dallas, Joe. "How Should We Respond?"
- xliii Sprigg, Peter. "Top Ten Myths About Homosexuality." *Family Research Council*. Family Research Council, 2010. Web. 30 Oct. 2010.
- xliv Dobson, James.
- xlvi Ibid.
- xlvii Hedges, Chris. "Faith."
- xlviii Schwarzwalder, Robert. "Complementarity in Marriage: What It Is and Why It Matters." *Family Research Council*. Family Research Council, Oct. 2013. Web. 4 Apr. 2014.
- xlix Sprigg, Peter. "The Top Ten Harms of Same-Sex 'Marriage.'" Brochure. *Family Research Council*. Family Research Council, 2011. Web. 6 Apr. 2014.
- ¹ Dailey, Dr. Timothy J. "The Slippery Slope of Same-Sex Marriage." Brochure. *Family Research Council*. Family Research Council, 2004. Web. 6 Apr. 2014.
- li Sprigg, Peter. "The Top Ten Harms of Same-Sex Marriage."
- lii Documents that have been cited in this paper dating before 2006 were found using the WayBack Machine archive search engine. This website is part of a non-profit internet archive that seeks to store cultural information found on the web. There were some documents and parts of the Focus on the Family or Family Research Council websites that were unable to be reached, showing a robots.txt error message. The WayBack Machine says that this error message is a result of either the WayBack Machine being asked to not archive that information or being actively blocked by the website creators.
- liii Hedges, Chris. "Faith."
- liv LaBarbera, Peter. "Fourteen Years Ago Today, Jesse Dirkhising Was Brutally Sodomized and Died at Hands of Homosexual Predators." *Americans for Truth About Homosexuality*. Americans for Truth About Homosexuality. 26 Sept 2013. Web 21 Mar. 2014.
- lv "In Gay Marriage Debate, Both Supporters and Opponents See Legal Recognition as 'Inevitable'" *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press RSS*. Pew Research Center, 6 June 2013. Web. 31 Mar. 2014.