**Humility as a Key to Mediating Wholeness in a Broken World**

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**The challenge of pride**

We live in a fractured culture. Sitcoms have normalized and celebrated the art of the “zinger,” turning derogatory remarks into comedy; the age of the Internet has heightened the sharpness of disagreement by escalating polarization and actively celebrating further dehumanization of the faceless. Families within the church rupture at comparable rates to those outside of it, and churches offer no sanctuary from harsh debates regarding political and public health issues. It seems that the church is doing little to heal the divides among us, and at times manufactures more turmoil than it resolves.

A common theme running through all of these alienating approaches to conflict is pride—the exaltation of self at the cost of others. Pride is a sin that is “especially offensive to God…pride feels no need, and so it closes the heart against Christ.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Pride alienates us from God and from others, and in a time when love is growing cold, the people of God must make no accommodations for it.

Humility must characterize the end-time church’s response to conflict and turmoil. Humility, rightly understood, is not just one admirable quality among many. This paper will argue that *humility defines the boundaries of the kingdom of God, and determines whether His church becomes a missional community capable of bridging the evangelistic divides of racial, cultural, and theological diversity.*

**The power of humility**

Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda answered the question, “Does humility depend on the other virtues, or do the virtues depend upon humility?” by stating unequivocally that humility is the foundation of all other virtues because it defines us as servants of our Master.[[2]](#footnote-2) Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, went even farther, stating, “Humility is associated with spiritual perfection.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

What is humility? It is often defined using words such as altruism, other-orientation, modesty, or the absence of pride or entitlement.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, for the purpose of this paper, humility will be defined as *how self-sacrificing love relates to power.* Pride—a defining characteristic of the kingdom of darkness—uses power for self-exaltation. In contrast, humility sees power as both an opportunity and a responsibility to serve (and love) God and others.

How can we peer inside our hearts to discern whether they are filled with pride or humility? One primary key is our response to conflict. The canyons of diversity reveal where we most need to build bridges of humility.[[5]](#footnote-5) Regarding resolving conflicts within the church, Ellen White wrote, “If pride and selfishness were laid aside, five minutes would remove most difficulties.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Conflict catalyzes a heart response of either self-exaltation or self-sacrifice; relational brokenness or unity deepens accordingly. Humility prevents the pursuit of power or superiority from destroying relational unity. Seen through the eyes of humility, conflict becomes an opportunity, and even a rich invitation, to deepen unity and hone understanding. When the members of God’s church prioritize connection instead of domination, we reflect Jesus’ approach to power.

During his earthly life, how did Jesus relate to power? He “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men… He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This passage refers to the kenotic principle of self-emptying—Jesus did not give up his divinity, but took up life as a human being modeling perfect submission to God the Father. The New Living Translation expresses it as, “he gave up his divine privileges.” To put it another way, “he also accepted the nature of a servant as part of His humanity.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In doing so, Jesus embodied humility. He demonstrated to the universe how God’s self-sacrificing love relates to power—by using it to lift up others instead of himself.

Jesus’ life demonstrated his Father’s self-sacrificial approach to power.

Unselfishness, the principle of God’s kingdom, is the principle that Satan hates; its very existence he denies. From the beginning of the great controversy he has endeavored to prove God’s principles of action to be selfish. To disprove Satan’s claim is the work of Christ and of all who bear His name.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Here we see the vital importance of the followers of Jesus studying and imitating his approach to power. “Every drop of power you and I hold is shared power, given to us by the One who holds it all. It is not ours. It is his. He has shared what is rightfully his with us.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In choosing whether to relate to power selfishly or sacrificially, we help disprove Satan’s false claims about God’s loving character.

How did Jesus’ earthly life refute Satan’s allegation that God was selfish? From the manger to the cross, Christ’s entire life was characterized by humility. He was born amid the stench of animal droppings. The mother and father who welcomed him had been prepared for his arrival by intense false accusation and public humiliation. His childhood was characterized by poverty and menial labor. His public ministry only increased the intensity of the scorn he faced. The most powerful human ever to walk the face of the earth, he was despised and rejected by his power-thirsty nation. The few, fickle followers who embraced him did so largely because they clung to the belief he would give them earthly power. And though he embodied all the power of the universe, he refused to encourage their self-exalting dreams because he knew “power without humility intensifies spiritual weakness.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Contrast this with *The Desire of Ages’* description of Lucifer’s thirst for power:

The strife for the highest place was the outworking of that same spirit which was the beginning of the great controversy in the worlds above, and which had brought Christ from heaven to die… Lucifer had said, “I will be like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:12, 14); and the desire for self-exaltation had brought strife into the heavenly courts, and had banished a multitude of the hosts of God. Had Lucifer really desired to be like the Most High, he would never have deserted his appointed place in heaven; for *the spirit of the Most High is manifested in unselfish ministry. Lucifer desired God's power, but not His character. He sought for himself the highest place, and every being who is actuated by his spirit will do the same*.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Satan accused God of running the universe as a dictatorship—selfishly monopolizing the highest place, [[13]](#footnote-13) while concealing his self-exaltation under a façade of self-sacrificing love. This accusation ultimately convinced Eve[[14]](#footnote-14) and many of the angels.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Leading up to the crucifixion, Satan assured the universe that Jesus was merely concealing his thirst for self-exaltation. He asserted confidently that when sufficiently tempted, Jesus would use his own power to exalt himself. When Jesus breathed his last breath—willingly humiliated to the very depths of what humanity could bear—he proved the universe’s safety from exploitation of power from the throneHe a.

The disciples never comprehended Jesus’ demonstration of how self-sacrificing love relates to power during his public ministry. Faithful products of the Judaism of their time, they all joined Jesus at least partly as a quest for power. The twelve eagerly interpreted their ordination as a promise of exaltation to the highest places in his new kingdom. Throughout his public ministry, they continually urged Jesus to use his power to destroy the Romans, dominate the Jewish leaders, and crush the Gentiles. On his final journey to Jerusalem, they were still eagerly discussing their favorite topic—who would occupy the highest positions in the new kingdom. They walked far behind Jesus in an apparent endeavor to prevent him from hearing their words, because they knew he despised this obsession.[[16]](#footnote-16) Their consuming self-exaltation prevented them from grasping the true nature of Jesus’ kingdom, where “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Even when Jesus took up the basin and the towel, the disciples were ashamed but not humbled. Pride fractured their relationships, preventing unity despite Jesus’ earnest prayer “that they all may be one.”[[18]](#footnote-18) They could not unite, and thus Jesus could not unleash on them the power of the Spirit, because they lacked humility. “It has always been the very seeking of power that disqualifies us for the power He [God] wants to give.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

To say that the cross shattered the disciples’ dreams of power is an understatement. But the death of their ambitions was the birthplace of the new kingdom in their hearts. Finally, it dawned on them that they had been ordained to lead in a kingdom that was not of this world—one promising they would be “despised and rejected by men”[[20]](#footnote-20) as their master had been. They realized following Jesus would lead to the opposite of the earthly power they craved.

In the seven weeks after the cross, the Spirit of God led the disciples through a bitter, joyful realization of the true nature of the kingdom. As they surrendered pride, their strife for supremacy melted away. In its place, the relational wholeness and unity that Jesus had prayed for in John 17 finally became a vibrant reality. Few of the details of that sacred process are recorded, but in Acts 1, the disciples were finally united in “one accord.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Gone were the harsh and petty disputes over personal position and national greatness. In the place of pride, humility bore its natural, rich fruit. Broken relationships were replaced by relational wholeness and healing, as Acts 1 paved the way for Acts 2.

Acts continues recording the cascade of relational healing and evangelistic growth that resulted when leaders learned to practice humility—*how self-sacrificing love relates to power.* And the results are deeply relevant to our similar struggle for unity amid relational brokenness as a church today.

**How did the “one accord” resulting from humility among the disciples affect the early church’s united, evangelistic success amid tremendous diversity?**

*The humble, Spirit-filled church prioritized missional community over personal comfort and tradition. As a result, despite monumental challenges of theological, racial, and cultural diversity, they achieved astounding evangelistic success in taking the gospel to the then-known world.*

Here are a few examples of how self-sacrificing love’s approach to power transformed situations:

1. Humility enabled church leaders to nondefensively evaluate significant doctrinal disagreements such as circumcision. Rather than appointing committees to battle for supremacy regarding opposing doctrinal interpretations, they focused on common ground and prioritized unity over theological uniformity. They arranged flexible space for those overly bound by tradition (by allowing circumcision), while prioritizing missional accommodation for those outside the traditions (by not requiring circumcision despite intense cultural and theological pressure). By providing theological and cultural space for diversity, they created unity despite a variety of interpretations.
2. Similarly, when harshly accused of prioritizing Jewish widows over Greek widows, the disciples nondefensively sought Greek help.[[22]](#footnote-22) Acts 6 appears to imply evangelistic success as a direct result.[[23]](#footnote-23)
3. Humility was again demonstrated when Peter’s announcement that God had chosen the Gentiles to be saved was not greeted with angry theological argumentation. Instead, “when they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’” [[24]](#footnote-24) Thus began the process of welcoming people formerly considered “dogs”[[25]](#footnote-25) incapable of salvation into fellowship as equal image-bearers of the Most High.
4. Abundant evidence indicates the gradual leveling of the ground within the Christian church, leading them to eventually recognize every image-bearer of God as equally valuable. Paul, arguably the highest-ranking Jewish leader to become a Christian, made the groundbreaking announcement that Jews, Greeks, slaves, and women were equal in rank under Christ.[[26]](#footnote-26) Women rapidly became prominent leaders in the church, even becoming deacons[[27]](#footnote-27) and probably leading churches in their own homes.[[28]](#footnote-28) In Paul’s Romans 16 greetings to church leaders, he listed more women than men.[[29]](#footnote-29) Perhaps most significantly, unlike other lists of household codes in the first-century Roman world,[[30]](#footnote-30) Paul’s Christian household codes addressed not just men, but also slaves, women, and even children.[[31]](#footnote-31)

A humble approach to power turned the apostles’ former hierarchical approach to racial diversity and relational conflict upside down. Instead of lifting themselves up by stepping on others, they took the lowest place, using power to lift up others. This paved the way for the evangelistic revolution that began with the gift of tongues, and continued bridging canyons of diversity with dizzying speed.

Conversely, as the church gradually lost humility, hierarchical power structures re-materialized, largely removing women from ministry and leading to the Dark Ages. Protestantism restored the church’s belief in *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia sola fide,* but neglected to fully restore the third great principle of the priesthood of all believers (thus at least partially nullifying the power of *sola scriptura*). One unfortunate result of this incomplete Reformation process has been Protestantism’s chronic inability to process theological and relational conflict by humbly seeking relational wholeness. Instead, there remains a strong preference for splitting off into hierarchical power structures.[[32]](#footnote-32) “Instead of choosing the better part and embracing the ‘new world of the Christ-crucified gospel,’” evangelical Christians “have chosen to keep doing what humans have always done: building our own tower of hierarchy and power.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Various factors in current evangelicalism are now further escalating an alarmingly polarized approach to conflict that directly substitutes authority for humility. A fresh resurgence of patriarchalism has led to authoritarianism in both the home[[34]](#footnote-34) and the church.[[35]](#footnote-35) Mainstream conservative evangelical culture now trades “a faith that privileges humility and elevates ‘the least of these’ for one that derides gentleness as the province of wusses.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Just as in Jesus’ time, popular culture is cultivating a growing distaste for the worship of the true God, believing it to be linked to a thirst for self-exalting power.

**Amid our present tremendous challenges of theological, racial, and cultural diversity, how could the “one accord” resulting from humility transform our church’s brokenness into wholeness?**

Jesus prayed, not just for the disciples, but “for those who will believe in me through their word; that they all may be one.” He alluded to the evangelistic success that would directly result. “That they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.” [[37]](#footnote-37)

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has made the disciples’ mistake by allowing a prideful response to interpersonal conflict to prevent the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the “What Might Have Been” vision, Ellen White brokenheartedly described what God wanted to do in the church in 1901.[[38]](#footnote-38) A “kingly power”[[39]](#footnote-39) preference and a refusal to humble themselves prevented the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. However, God promised to heal the wounds someday.[[40]](#footnote-40)

What will happen when a present-day humble, Spirit-filled church prioritizes missional community over comfort, tradition, and the chronic pursuit of superiority? The fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer for unity will transform our approach to the previously intimidating obstacles of racial, cultural, and theological diversity!

What are some practical ways self-sacrificing humility in relating to power could help produce the “one accord” of Acts 1 and fulfill Jesus’ John 17 prayer for us?

1. Realizing that racially charged sin within the church has caused relational brokenness, leaders from state and regional conferences could intentionally pursue reconciliation. Humility could heal the rifts caused by decades of defensive and dismissive responses to generations of pain and injustice. Building trust could open the path for cooperative, creative pursuit of relational healing and wholeness. The Seventh-day Adventist Church could model racial healing as a powerful witness before the world.
2. Families within the church could live out humility at home. Marital relationships could heal and flourish as conflicts were resolved through mutual submission instead of hierarchical tussles for domination. Parents could thus win children to Christ through creating a home atmosphere of heavenly harmony. Extended families could be impressed by Christlike processing of political and theological diversity without self-defensiveness or pride.
3. Humble love for one another could transform the church’s significant theological discussions. Issues of Creation vs. evolution, anti-Trinitarianism, and how to treat the LGBT+ community could be discussed without ridiculing, demonizing, or dismissing valid points from a variety of perspectives. While not every perspective could be accommodated within the church, common ground could be sought, and many wounded members who might otherwise leave the church could find healing community within it.
4. In discussion of women in ministry, leaders of the church could dialogue respectfully in search of common ground (women are equal image-bearers of God, can teach and preach the Word, can be paid tithe, etc.). Multiple approaches could be considered that would focus on common ground and prioritize unity and community while accommodating those from a wide variety of perspectives.

**Conclusion**

There has never been a time when humility was more needed in the church. Jesus’ warning is crucially applicable: “Those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Doctrine and theology serve a vital function: they define what we believe about the character of God, and therefore, how we define (and practice) love. However, our declared beliefs ring hollow if our lived experience does not reflect the self-emptying love of the God we claim to follow. Our use of power, especially amid conflict and diversity, lays bare the truth regarding whether we truly love God and others, or cherish self-exaltation. We must not allow our prideful responses to conflict to prevent us from receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit again.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Perhaps the last-day church will image God best as a diverse “bouquet” of believers bound together, not merely by a shared set of expressed beliefs, but by a humble commitment to love one another so deeply that shallow issues of language, culture, and interpretation cannot divide us.

In Acts 2, the language barriers that God instituted at the Tower of Babel were reversed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Could it be that the Latter Rain outpouring of the Spirit will again demonstrate the opposite of a Babylonian response to diversity, fusing the church together through love that conquers the barriers of difference by humility?

Prophecy indicates that someday the church will fulfill its mission to proclaim the gospel “to every nation and tribe and language and people.”[[43]](#footnote-43) May the “one accord” of Acts 1 pave the way again for the outpouring of the Spirit’s power among us. May Jesus’ prayer be fulfilled, “that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

1. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1892), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paquda, *Duties of the Heart/Chovot HaLevavot,* 1996, quoted in *Humility*, ed. Jennifer Cole Wright (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kook, 1966, p. 174, quoted in *Humility*, ed. Wright, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark R. Leary and Chloe C. Banker, “A Critical Examination and Reconceptualization of Humility,” quoted in *Humility*, ed. Wright, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James 4:1-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. White, *Early Writings* (District of Columbia: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1936), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Philippians 2:7, 8, ESV. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J. J. Müller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1995)*,* 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A. Leroy Moore, *The Power of Humility* (Weimar, CA: Weimar University Press, 2011), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 435, emphasis supplied. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Genesis 3:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Revelation 12:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mark 9:33-35 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Luke 14:11, NKJV [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John 17:11, NKJV [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Moore, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Isaiah 53:3, NKJV [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Acts 1:14, NKJV [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Acts 6:1-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Acts 6:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Acts 11:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Matthew 15:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Galatians 3:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Romans 16:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Colossians 4:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Romans 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Aristotle, *Politics,* 1259a37, quoted in *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome,* ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, 4th ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 46-49. “Taken at face value (a ‘plain and literal interpretation’), the household codes seem to sanctify the Roman patriarchal structure: the authority of the paterfamilias (husband/father) over women, children, and slaves… Paul wasn’t telling the early Christians to look like everyone else; he was telling them that, as Christians, they had to be different… The Christian household codes address all the people in the house church—men, women, children, and slaves. Everyone is included in the conversation. Theologian Lucy Peppiatt writes that this is ‘key’ to the Christian subversion of Roman patriarchy. Because the Christian household codes are directed to all members of the Roman household, instead of presuming the guardianship of the male head, they ‘contain within them the overturning of accepted positions accorded to men, women, slaves, and children, and the expectations placed upon them.’ Instead of endowing authority to a man who speaks and acts for those within his household, the Christian household codes offer each member of the shared community—knit together by their faith in Christ—the right to hear and act for themselves. This is radically different from the Roman patriarchal structure. The Christian structure of the house church *resists* the patriarchal world of the Roman Empire.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Moore, 28-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Barr, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jeff Sharlet, *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2010), 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Mike Cosper, “I Am Jack’s Raging Bile Duct,” July 15, 2021, in *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill,* produced by *Christianity Today*, podcast, 53 min, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/i-am-jacks-raging-bile-duct/id1569401963?i=1000528999507. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Kristin Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020),3. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. John 17:20-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. White, *Testimonies for the Church,* Vol. 8 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association), 104-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1915), 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. White, *The General Conference Bulletin,* April 25, 1901, quoted in *Last Day Events* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1992), 463, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Mark 10:42, 23, ESV [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. White, *Testimonies for the Church,* Vol. 8, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Revelation 14:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. John 17:23, NKJV [↑](#footnote-ref-44)