

Re-Thinking “Revoice”: A Biblical Analysis of Same-Sex Attraction

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Scripture is clear that engaging in homosexual activity is contrary to God's created design and God's will for humanity. But what about same-sex attraction? Is sexual desire for someone of the same sex sinful, even if it is not acted upon? What if these desires seem to come without a person consciously choosing for them to be there? And if these desires persist over a long period of time, should a professing Christian label himself as a "gay Christian"?

There are influences within the Church, particularly those affiliated with the Revoice conference¹, that put forth the following lines of argument:² First, same-sex desire is in and of itself morally neutral, if not acted upon. Second, believers can find a legitimate identity in a homosexual orientation; thus, a person can be both gay and Christian. Third, believers with a homosexual orientation want to be connected with similar persons in the gay community, even while pledging to abstain from sexual relations. Fourth, because the same-sex desire is morally neutral, there is no need to mortify the sin; indeed everything about being gay, minus the sex, can be embraced by the believer. Believers can embrace gay culture and sensibilities. Under this line of reasoning, mortifying the homosexual desires and separating from gay culture would be a form of suicide because the orientation is wrapped up in one's identity. This would also be a way of cutting oneself off from the community that matters most, the gay community. There is no need to seek to change same-sex desires or seek sexual reorientation, as the status quo is morally acceptable.

Same-Sex Sexual Desires

The first point highlighted from Revoice proponents is the claim that same-sex desire is morally neutral. Ron Belgau says, “The desire to have sex with others of our own sex is a temptation to sin which is a result of the fall, but it is not, in itself, sinful. I believe that gay sex is sinful, and that the desire for gay sex, though not itself sinful, is a temptation.”³

But is same-sex attraction morally neutral? In the Scriptures, Paul calls same-sex sexual attraction a "vile passion" (Romans 1:26). Same-sex sexual activity is unnatural and unlawful. But Scripture is not just concerned with our actions; it also speaks to the drives, longings, and motivations of our hearts. Whether same-sex sexual desire is chosen or unchosen, it is condemned as shameful. When a man experiences same-sex attraction, he is not just noticing that someone of his sex is attractive. In itself, that is no problem. Some people, after all, are attractive and there is nothing wrong with taking note of that fact. A man can notice that Tom Brady is attractive and his wife can notice that Tom's wife is beautiful without either of them having same-sex attraction. But same-sex attraction is much more than appreciating the beauty of a person of the same-sex. Persons with same-sex attraction desire sexual intimacy and activity with same-sex partners.

Theologian John Frame somewhere defines “lust” as any “desire to engage in acts that are contrary to God's law.” To fantasize about the sexual attractiveness of someone (man or woman) who is

¹ At this point in their theology, the Revoice proponents say that they support the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman, and that sexual activity only belongs within marriage.

² Revoice is not a totally monolithic movement, so not every Revoice participant/supporter will agree on every detail. But I believe this is a faithful summary of Revoice in general.

³ Quoted from Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield web article: *Learning to Hate Our Sin without Hating Ourselves* (July 4, 2018). Found at <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/07/22066/>

forbidden to you is to cross the line Jesus draws when he warns against committing adultery in one's heart (Matthew 5:28). This is true even if one never actually decides to commit physical sexual sin. The desire itself is wrong and sinful. Same-sex attraction is sin, because it is a desire for something God forbids. It is sodomy of the heart (analogous to adultery of the heart). It is always already lust—that is what it means to have same-sex attraction. The desire for something sinful is itself sinful. If Jesus condemned a married man sexually desiring a woman who is not his wife, how much more would he condemn sexual desire for someone of the same sex?

This is true even if the desire is unwanted and seemingly unchosen. Indeed, this is one of the central points of theological confusion found in the Revoice movement. As Rosaria Butterfield has pointed out, Revoice seems to be operating with a Roman Catholic understanding of concupiscence rather than a Reformed doctrine of total depravity. Reformed theologians, going all the way back to Calvin, have confessed that sinful thoughts and desires can arise within us, even apart from a conscious act of our will. This means the practice of mortifying unlawful sexual desires has to go a lot further and deeper than the Revoice teachers will admit.

Does this mean the mere temptation to engage in homosexual sex is sinful? No, no one has said temptation itself is sin, assuming the temptation comes from outside. Sin and temptation are distinct categories. As we know from Scripture, Jesus Himself was tempted by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11; Hebrews 4:15). But it should be noted that temptation can also come from within, from our own sinful desires. In this case, the temptation is actually to go further into the sin one has already entered. James 1:13-15 says:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

Same-sex attraction is not just a temptation, it is a condition of the person's heart. That condition makes such persons vulnerable to certain same-sex temptations. From my conversations with people who experience same-sex attraction as a condition (Christian and non-Christian), it is a form of desire that arises from within, first and foremost. Yes, there can be external stimuli that enflame it, but the desires are already operating within the person. The temptation does not create the desire, it appeals to the desire. The desire must be mortified if this sin is to be uprooted.

To be sure, all Christians struggle with sinful desires, and struggles with particular sins may last our whole lives. There is no easy pathway to victory, even though we have the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. But Revoice is giving deadly counsel. It tells Christians struggling with same-sex sexual desires that those desires do not need to be eradicated. It tells Christians who are sexually oriented to desire the same sex that they do not need to work to change their orientation. These lies are pastoral disasters waiting to happen. The words of John Owen are still true: "Be killing sin, or it will kill you." Our message those experiencing same-sex attraction is straight forward: Kill the vile passions before they kill you.

Robert Gagnon has pointed out that Revoice fails to engage the deep questions that would allow its supporters to see the depth of the sin involved in their sexual desires:

What is the false narrative that gives these impulses particular strength? Why am I viewing a person of the same sex as a sexual complement or counterpart to my own sex? Why am I aroused by the distinctive sexual features of my own sex, by what I already have? Am I thinking of myself as only half of my own sex? What kind of strategies for renewing my mind can I use to counter this false narrative beyond 'washed and waiting'?"⁴

⁴ <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/1517/robert-gagnon-on-revoice#.XPYV8Ht7m01>

In other words, refraining from gay sex is not enough. God calls us to more. Unfortunately Revoice comes up short in its understanding of chastity and its call to repentance.

If God is going to give the “gay Christian” a new orientation and new desires in the resurrection, there is no reason why he cannot do so in the present time, since the power of Christian’s resurrection is already at work in us. Revoice minimizes the gravity of sexual sin involved in same-sex desires, but in doing so also minimizes the grace of God offered in the gospel. Instead of “revoicing” their sexual desires, “gay Christians” should repent of their illicit sexual desires. Revoice advocates are boasting in what is shameful. They are defending desires that should be destroyed, they are proud over things that ought to cause them to mourn (cf. 1 Cor. 5:2). They are helping to destigmatize what ought to be revolting to us.

Orientation and Identity

The second major point Revoice proponents make is that a person’s identity is rooted in their sexual orientation. Thus, a person can be both gay *and* Christian. This assumes an essentialist understanding of human sexuality, which treats homosexuality as an incorrigible, immutable condition. Notice how Wesley Hill roots his identity, and thus his very being, in his erotic orientation:

Being gay colors everything about me, even though I am celibate...Being gay is, for me, as much a sensibility as anything else: a heightened sensitivity to and passion for same-sex beauty that helps determine the kind of conversations I have, which people I’m drawn to spend time with, what novels and poems and films I enjoy, the particular visual art I appreciate, and also, I think, the kind of friendships I pursue and try to strengthen. I don’t imagine I would have invested half as much effort in loving my male friends, and making sacrifices of time, energy, and even money on their behalf, if I weren’t gay. My sexuality, my basic erotic orientation to the world, is inescapably intertwined with how I go about finding and keeping friends.⁵

Note that we do not do this with any other sin – elevating it into a “orientation” in which the desires that would drive a sinful course of action are protected from the need of mortification. This is certainly not the way the historic church has dealt with proclivities towards same-sex sexual activity. This means the claims of Revoice to “uphold the traditional Christian sex ethic” are way overblown. They are actually departing from the historic Christian faith at key points.

In fact, the notion of sexual orientation is a rather new invention, coming in the 1860s. Historically, “homosexuality” described a kind of behavior. Today it describes a kind of person. This shift from act to orientation, from behavior to personhood, has massive consequences. This is not to say that actions have ever been separable from identities, but this still represents a profound change in how our culture understands what it means to be human. We are now defined by desires within rather than our Creator without. We construct our own identity out of our wants and likes, rather than receiving our identity as a gift from God. This is why “sexual orientation” as a way of self-definition is a truly new thing. It allows the psychological to triumph over the physical, for wants to overrule biology, for desire to trump design. Michael W. Hannon traces the historical rise of the notion of orientation:

Contrary to our cultural preconceptions and the lies of what has come to be called “orientation essentialism,” “straight” and “gay” are not ageless absolutes. Sexual orientation is a conceptual scheme with a history, and a dark one at that. It is a history that began far more recently than most people know, and it is one that will likely end much sooner than most people think...

Michel Foucault, an unexpected ally, details the pedigree of sexual orientation in his *History of Sexuality*. Whereas “sodomy” had long identified a class of actions, suddenly for the first time, in the

⁵ Quoted from Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield web article: *Learning to Hate Our Sin without Hating Ourselves* (July 4, 2018). Found at <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/07/22066/>.

second half of the nineteenth century, the term “homosexual” appeared alongside it. This European neologism was used in a way that would have struck previous generations as a plain category mistake, designating not actions, but people—and so also with its counterpart and foil “heterosexual.”

Psychiatrists and legislators of the mid- to late-1800s, Foucault recounts, rejected the classical convention in which the “perpetrator” of sodomitical acts was “nothing more than the juridical subject of them.” With secular society rendering classical religious beliefs publicly illegitimate, pseudoscience stepped in and replaced religion as the moral foundation for venereal norms. To achieve secular sexual social stability, the medical experts crafted what Foucault describes as “a natural order of disorder.”

“The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage,” “a type of life,” “a morphology,” Foucault writes. This perverted psychiatric identity, elevated to the status of a mutant “life form” in order to safeguard polite society against its disgusting depravities, swallowed up the entire character of the afflicted: “Nothing that went into [the homosexual’s] total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle.”

The imprudent aristocrats encouraging these medical innovations changed the measure of public morality, substituting religiously colored human nature with the secularly safer option of individual passion. In doing so, they were forced also to trade the robust natural law tradition for the recently constructed standard of “psychiatric normality,” with “heterosexuality” serving as the new normal for human sexuality. Such a vague standard of normality, unsurprisingly, offered far flimsier support for sexual ethics than did the classical natural law tradition.

But emphasizing this new standard did succeed in cementing these categories of hetero- and homosexuality in the popular imagination. “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality,” Foucault writes, “when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” Sexual orientation, then, is nothing more than a fragile social construct, and one constructed terribly recently...

[W]ithin orientation essentialism, the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality is a construct that is dishonest about its identity as a construct. These classifications masquerade as natural categories, applicable to all people in all times and places according to the typical objects of their sexual desires (albeit with perhaps a few more options on offer for the more politically correct categorizers). Claiming to be not simply an accidental nineteenth-century invention but a timeless truth about human sexual nature, this framework puts on airs, deceiving those who adopt its labels into believing that such distinctions are worth far more than they really are.⁶

The way it is generally used, the terminology of “sexual orientation” is an unhelpful (and unnatural) social construct. This very way of looking at what it means to be human allows our desires to nullify our design. “If I want it, if I desire it, how can it be wrong? To deny my desire is to deny who I am!” Thus, conceiving of sexuality in terms of orientation rather than action allows us to replace God’s law with our own desires.

“Orientation” becomes all the more problematic when brought into the church. The Scriptures know of no such thing; for a Christian to describe his settled identity (or orientation) in a way that includes disordered desires that run so deep as to be unchangeable is a denial of the power of God’s transforming grace. The language of “sexual orientation” is especially problematic when joined with a kind of essentialism, in which one’s orientation becomes a fixed part of one’s identity, impenetrable even by the grace of the gospel. The modern homosexual, unlike the ancient sodomite, becomes a new species, as Foucault pointed out.

But, while the category and language are novelties, treating “sexual orientation” as a fixed reality is remarkably common today in the wider culture and now unfortunately is being advocated in the church by the Revoice proponents. But if this is the case, what of Paul’s glorious phrase in 1

⁶ Michael W. Hannon: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/03/against-heterosexuality>

Corinthians 6, “such *were* some of you”? Paul says “such *were* some of you” to men who had practiced sodomy. He sees their conversion as a break with the old desires/practices and whatever kind of identity flowed out of them.

Wesley Hill and Greg Johnson say “I am a gay Christian.” Paul says to gays who have repented and trusted Christ, “such *were* some of you.” In other words, Paul says, “You were once gay, engaged in homosexual activity. But not anymore. You have been washed, justified, and sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Where Paul sees a definite break between a past, pre-Christian gay identity and the Christian’s present identity in Christ, Hill and Johnson want to see continuity (they are just as gay after conversion as they were before). In this case, we must side with the apostle Paul over the apostles of Revoice.⁷

The problems with identifying as a “gay Christian” can be seen if we plug in other sins. Are we fine with folks who identify as “racist Christians”? What if they say their racism was not a chosen behavior? They do not act on it, but do not mortify the racist orientation. What then? Obviously we would not accept this. Likewise, what if someone identified as a “pedophile Christian”? Oh sure, he doesn’t act on his attraction to children. But he says his attraction to children was never a conscious choice so the orientation towards children cannot be sinful in itself. In fact, analogous to Revoice, he finds many things in pedophile culture to celebrate and believes they will be carried into the New Jerusalem. Again, this is obviously non-sense. *The only reason something like Revoice can exist is because our sexually revolutionized culture has been desensitizing us to the filth of the sodomite lifestyle for decades and the process is largely complete, even in some quarters of the church.* This is why “gay Christian” sounds acceptable to many but “racist Christian” and “pedophile Christian” do not (at least not yet).

As we have seen “sexual orientation” is a rather recent invention. But it pervasive and it has radically transformed how we speak and think of sexuality. Today, people tend to identify as heterosexual or homosexual. This is our sexual binary. In other words, we define ourselves according to our desires. But the biblical sexual binary is not between straight and gay; it is between male and female. This goes all the way back to Genesis 1 – God did not make straights and gays, he made men and women. We are not defined by our internal desires (which are often fluid, leading to an unstable identity); we are defined by God’s act of creation (which gives us a fixed sexual identity as a man or woman, with obligations flowing from that created identity).⁸ Biblically, a man is to obey his nature ordinarily by pursuing a woman, marrying her, and consummating his relationship with her sexually (normally resulting in children). Likewise, a woman lives out her God-given womanhood by receiving a

⁷ Paul’s sharp before and after language in 1 Corinthians should not be taken to mean that practicing gays who come to Christ will no longer struggle with same sex attraction or other associated sins. It is very likely they will – just as Christians struggle with a wide variety of sinful patterns and tendencies. While sin no longer reigns over the Christian, we all know indwelling sin remains and is often (and sadly) a very powerful force in our lives. But I think Paul’s definitive “such *were* some of you” answers the question of gay identity. The Christian who once lived a gay lifestyle should say, “I once was gay, now I am Christian. I may struggle with what I was, but I left the old identity behind. I am a new creation in Christ. I have a new identity.” This does not mean he never sins, but it does mean he refuses to *identify* with what is sinful and shameful. His struggle with homosexual practice is not his identity; it is the contradiction of his identity in Christ.

At this point, I should also point out that there are some even in Christian circles who seem to believe “once gay, always gay,” as if full change was impossible. But 1 Corinthians 6 – as well as the testimony of countless ex-gays in the world today – disprove this assertion. Some homosexuals repent, and experience a very complete victory of their former same-sex sexual desires.

⁸ I suppose this would be the place to meander into a discussion of transgenderism, but let me leave it at this: It is impossible for a man to become a woman and vice versa.

man's pursuit, uniting with him in a covenant, and becoming one with him in the marriage bed.⁹ True, some men deny their maleness by seeking out other men as sexual partners. And women can do the same with other women. But these are violations of our created natures. A man who has sex with other men is violating the essence of his manhood. He is not expressing an "orientation" – he is rebelling against what God made him to be! This is why Romans 1 describes homosexual practice as unnatural.

A man who has sex with other men is not a different kind of man from the man who marries a woman. He does not have a different orientation. He is simply a bad man – or a man who is bad at being a man. He is denying his fundamental God-given masculinity. He is exchanging the right use of the body for a dishonorable use of the body.¹⁰

Rather than using the language of "sexual orientation," a more helpful, pastoral, and Scriptural approach is to talk about patterns of temptation and personal vulnerabilities. What is the advantage of creating categories of people and identities for people based solely on their temptations? Or their disordered desires? We don't do that with any other sin, so why do it with sexual sin? If I am tempted regularly to overindulge in alcohol, but consistently resist, I do not say I have a "drunkenness orientation," and I certainly do not identify as a "drunkard Christian." I may have a particular weakness that leaves me susceptible to temptation in that area, but I do not create an identity or orientation out of that weakness. If anything, I seek to rise above it, to become the kind of person who is not so weak or easily tempted in the presence of alcohol. I try to eradicate my attraction to alcohol abuse; I seek to mortify my desire to get drunk.

It is true that Christians can struggle with same-sex attraction even as they struggle with a multitude of other sins. But this struggle is not so much a part of the Christian's identity as it the *contradiction* of his true identity. Fundamentally, the Christian is a new creation in Christ Jesus. Yes, he still struggles with indwelling sin, but sin no longer reigns over him and therefore no longer has power to define him. For a believer to identify as a "gay Christian" is an act of unbelief; it is to name oneself in a way contrary to the new name God has bestowed upon him. For a believer to identify as a "gay Christian" is an act of autonomy, an attempt to define oneself rather than submit to God's assigned definition. This act of self-naming, self-defining, or even self-creating, is nothing less than idolatry. We must believe what God says about us in the gospel. We must submit to the way God describes his people in his Word. We must define ourselves the way God defines us.

Christians are rarely, if ever, identified as sinners in the New Testament, which suggests sin is not part of our redeemed identity. Fundamentally, Christians are saints, not sinners. We find our identity as saints in union with Christ. However, because God's redemptive work is not yet finished, we have things in our lives that contradict our deepest identity, what theologians have usually called indwelling sin, or the flesh. So do I sin? Yes. To say otherwise would make me a liar (1 John 1:5-10). I am

⁹ Are there legitimate exceptions to this pattern of male/female union in marriage? Yes, in several passages of Scripture (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7), we find that there are some people who are called to a life of celibacy/singleness. But this gift is quite rare and unique. And in such cases, a man is still going to live out his masculinity (albeit without marrying a woman) and a woman is still going to live out her femininity (albeit without marrying a man). The crucial point here is that we reject the hetero/homo binary, which is perverse social construct, and stick to the divinely ordained male/female binary.

¹⁰ There are a handful of Christian teachers who like to address the homosexual issue by saying something like, "If you are gay, becoming a heterosexual will not save you" or "Living as a homosexual does not send you to hell – refusing to trust Christ does." There is some sense in which this is technically true. But it is badly misleading. Yes, homosexual practice is a sin, but simply reverting to heterosexual sexual practice is not itself saving. One could go from sinning sexually with the same sex to sinning sexually with the opposite sex. It is not as if everyone who avoids the sin of sodomy is saved. But here is the problem with this kind of rhetorical move: It confuses the issue. It still uses the gay/straight binary instead of the male/female binary. It mitigates the fullness of God's saving grace, which ultimately restores us to the men and women God designed us to be.

not yet perfect. I am not yet what I shall be. But my indwelling sin does not identify me, it is the contradiction of my true identity. This is why Paul's ethic can be boiled down to "Be who you are!" in Romans 6. We are to live out our union with Christ, and in Christ we are dead to sin and alive to righteousness. If my sin is still allowed to define me just as deeply as my union with Christ, then "Be who you are" is an exhortation to live in sin as much as it is the opposite. To the gay Christian, we should say, "You are dead to your gayness! You are dead to your same-sex desires! You are a new creation in Christ! Sin is no longer your master, for the old you has died and you have been raised up a new man, alive to righteousness!" Revoice garbles these gospel truths, if not completely denying them. In this respect, the rhetoric of Revoice is very similar to what we have found in other antinomian teachers in the Reformed camp who have become all too popular in recent years, sometimes with disastrous results (e.g., Tullian Tchividjian).¹¹ God not only requires our transformation, he supplies the power for us to live transformed lives. We are not in bondage to sinful desires any longer. In the power of the Spirit, we can fight against the flesh and overcome. The gospel means no Christian is ever totally stuck in his sin. There is always reason to hope for and expect change. We are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus.

Michael Bird has said that Paul's anthropological pessimism is matched and overcome by his pneumatological optimism. This is exactly right. While Christians can and do still fall into sin – sometimes grievously – we also have the freedom and power to obey. We are new creatures, given new a new identity and new powers. We are in Christ and he is in us. We have the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, at work in us.

This is why it is so problematic to identify as a "gay Christian." It is resigning oneself to defeat in the war against the flesh. It is a way of giving up on the power of the gospel to bring real and lasting change. Revoice proponents see it as an act of humility – a way of confessing their own brokenness. In reality, it is waving the white flag of surrender instead of fighting manfully under the banner of the cross against the world, the flesh, and the devil. It's not that real Christians cannot struggle with same-sex attraction. Christians struggle with all kinds of sins. But those sins do not define the real me, they contradict the real me. Calling oneself a "gay Christian" is like saying there is such a thing as "dark lightness" or "square circleness." It's an absurdity and a contradiction. Michael Hannon summarizes these thoughts: "I am not my sin. I am not my temptation to sin. By the blood of Jesus Christ, I have been liberated from this bondage. I will have all sorts of identities, to be sure, especially in our crazily over-psychoanalytic age. But at the very least, none of these identities should be essentially defined by my attraction to that which separates me from God."¹²

Along with these confusions, Revoice bungles another area of biblical sexuality. The kind of teaching, lifestyle, and culture promoted by Revoice could never foster true manhood or womanhood. Many critics of Revoice have missed this point, but it is vital. Because Revoice treats orientation as a deep feature of a person, linking them to a whole culture where disordered sexual desires are given free reign, Revoice can never actually teach men how to live out their God-given masculinity, or teach women how to live out their God-given femininity. Revoice actually encourages Christians to get sucked into the sexual chaos of our age, in which the God-ordained lines between men and women get blurred and smudged. Revoice simply cannot make sense of the kind of definition of manhood assumed by a text like 1 Corinthians 16:13 (echoing David's parting words to Solomon in 1 Kings 2:2), where Paul tells the brethren to "be strong" and "act like men." Revoice actually ends up promoting the antithesis of biblical manhood by embracing effeminacy as a valid option. But in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul includes the

¹¹ In fact, if we are looking for further reasons why Revoice has become plausible in the Reformed community, it is because many in the Reformed church adopted an antinomian view of salvation (or at least a lot of antinomian rhetoric) long ago. I believe Tchividjian was disqualified for pastoral ministry *before* he became an adulterer. When he fell into serious sin, he was really just practicing the antinomian message he had been preaching for years.

¹² Michael W. Hannon: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/03/against-heterosexuality>

effeminate among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Not all forms of effeminacy are damning in the way that homosexual practice is, but effeminacy and sodomy exist on the same continuum of sexual rebellion. Homosexuality is just the effeminacy becoming consistent. Again, Revoice is poison instead of medicine. Just when we need to recover a biblical and creational understanding of what makes men men and what makes women women, Revoice essentially denies there is any such thing as true masculinity and true femininity. How does Revoice help men become better men? Or more to the point, how does Revoice help men become better at being men? (The same questions could be asked for women.) It does not. Instead it further dilutes masculinity in a culture that is already highly effeminate. But toxic effeminacy is the bane of our age.¹³

LGBTQ Tribe vs. Gospel Community

The third observation from the Revoice proponents' writings is their desire to be part of the LGBTQ tribe. They very much consider themselves as "insiders" to the LGBTQ community. They emphasize the need for "gay Christians" to have strong relational networks. The desire for relational connection, of course, is fully understandable. Being created in the image of the triune God, we all have longings for community. For two millennia, orthodox Christian churches have rejected homosexuality as sinful and outside the lines of acceptable living. Revoice proponents do not challenge that ethic, but want to carve out space for gay culture and queer culture in the church. If queer culture can be brought into the New Jerusalem at the last day (as they argue), surely it can be brought into the church now as well. Revoice advocates want to live in the gay world and in the ecclesial world at the same time, even bridging these communities.

Revoice participants say that those who struggle with same-sex sexual desires have been unfairly marginalized in faithful ecclesiastical communities. They are thus trying to "revoice" the arguments against full acceptance and participation of "gay Christians" in the church. They believe their particular "disabilities" can actually be used to enrich and diversify the church in healthy ways. They want the church to repent of the way she has treated gays and other with abnormal sexualities. They want the church to embrace them (same-sex attraction included) and the gay culture of which they are a part.¹⁴

Revoice advocates claim there is much more to being gay than the sex – gays are not just "sex machines." There is more to be gay than the sex; in fact, one can be gay without the sex. Gayness is a way of seeing, a way of relating, a way of being. Gayness is a style and an aesthetic. And gays, like other groups, have their own distinctive culture which, according to Revoice, should be appreciated by Christians. A lot Revoice speakers point out that even if someone is gay they can still produce cultural

¹³ I have argued elsewhere that effeminacy may be considered (from one perspective) the "original sin" in Genesis 3. Adam was given the distinctively masculine task of guarding and keeping the garden (which imaged his bride; cf. Song of Solomon, where the woman is described using garden imagery). When the satanic invader entered the garden, Adam should have smashed his head. Instead, he stood by and watched as the serpent attacked his wife. Adam's failure to crush the head of the serpent allowed his wife to be deceived by the devil. This is to say that, bound up in the fall, is the failure of a man to act as a man, to engage in a manly and godly act of violence by destroying the serpent. Adam allowed the fall to happen by becoming a pacifist when he should have gone to war; he became effeminate when he should have been manly. Our culture's wide-ranging embrace of effeminacy and feminism (movements which essentially make men womanly and women manly) is a sign of darkness and rebellion. Our confusion about sex and sex roles is incredibly debilitating. The church's calling includes discipling men in true masculinity and women in true femininity.

¹⁴ One wonders why other categories of sinners could try the same trick. What is white supremacist "Christians" argued their position could actually benefit the church in various ways? But today, we tend to be very sensitive to the heinous sin of racism; it is disgusting and revolting to us. Meanwhile, we have been very desensitized to the various sexual sins.

beauty (“treasures”) that will be brought into the final kingdom of God. Of course, that claim is not totally false; we would say the same of all unbelievers, thanks to common grace. But the way Revoice frames these cultural contributions is troubling. They are trying to celebrate certain things that really belong underground. They want to separate out same-sex sexual activity from the culture that virtually always goes with that activity, and it really can’t be done. There are a lot of things about gay culture that are more problematic and dangerous than Revoice teachers are willing to admit. Ex-gays like Robert Oscar Lopez are helpful in pointing just how full of shame and degradation gay culture really is.

Reflecting on Grant Hartley’s “Queer Treasure” workshop at the 2018 Revoice Conference, Wesley Hill said, “Kicked out of homes and churches, gay people created alternative communities and took care of one another, he said, describing institutions like the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in New York and *The Body Politic*, an alternative newspaper.” Hill went on to say, “Revoice attendees like Grant have come to love queer culture and communities. LGBTQ people are ‘our people,’ we feel.”¹⁵

But this way of framing the matter is hugely problematic. If Hartley’s and Hill’s people are found in the LGBTQ community, how can they be faithful Christians? How can membership in those communities be harmonized? Does Hill’s gay identity mean more to him than his ecclesial identity? Is his Christian faith tacked on to his gay identity? Is his Church membership less determinative of who he is than his membership in gay community? Is Hill suggesting that becoming a Christian merely adds another feature to one’s personal identity, but does not fundamentally remake and recreate that identity? How can one be a new creature in Christ, a citizen of the kingdom of God, a member of the New Jerusalem that is the Church, the body and bride of Christ, and yet still say that the LGBTQ group is “my people”? Hill and Hartley are, at best, terribly confused about what it means to be a Christian and a member of the church.

Christians are obviously members of various groups – a biological family, a nation, an ethnic group, and so forth. But our deepest and most formative community – “my people” – must always be the church. If any other group challenges my loyalty to the same degree, it has become a rival to Christ. This is all the more true if the competing group is defined by perversions God continually calls us away from in his Word. If a Christian was also a member of gang that existed solely for the purpose of raping and stealing, and said of the gang, “Those are my people,” we’d all see the problem. But that’s what Hill, following Hartley, has done.

I am not actually saying Hill and Hartley are apostates. What I am saying is their way of embracing and relating to the LGBTQ community is misguided and highly dangerous. It reeks of confusion at a deep level and is sure to mislead others. They are trying to synthesize a personal identity out of disparate communities that are simply not compatible. I cannot be a member of mosque and a church at the same time. I cannot call Muslims “my people” while remaining a fully faithful Christian. But this is the kind of thing Hill and Hartley are doing.

The reality is that the Church should accept anyone who repents of his sins and trusts in Jesus Christ, including those who struggle with same-sex attraction. We should be kind and gracious to brothers and sisters in the Lord who struggle with these sexual sins. There is certainly room for them in the church, just as there is room for any kind of sinner. But to enter the church, sinners must repent of their sin. But repentance is not part of the package for Revoice (apart from calling Biblically faithful orthodox churches to “repent” of following the Scriptures). Revoice leaders appear to want to be members of the Church while also maintaining their place in the homosexual community—“LGBTQ people are ‘our people.’”

Hill elaborates on the “Queer Treasure” workshop:

¹⁵ <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2019/02/19/about-revoices-queer-treasure/>

Using the theological category of “common grace,” the general benevolence that God bestows on all peoples and cultures, regardless of whether they are Christian, Grant asked his audience what signposts and foretastes of a yet-unknown saving grace might be present already within queer communities — foretastes which might allow for fruitful dialogue and friendship between LGBTQ folks and those Christians who remain alienated from them. The notion of “chosen family” — long prized by LGBTQ people who have lost, sometimes forcibly, ties with their own biological kin — is, Grant suggested, one such signpost or foretaste. Citing Jesus’ own countercultural redefinition of family (“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”), Grant asked, “What could happen if we learned from LGBT people about the intricacies and practicalities of chosen family?” And, vice versa, what might happen if LGBT people could see that this most beautiful aspect of their own lives could find elevation and transformation, rather than simple erasure, through Jesus Christ?¹⁶

In other words, Hill sees the LGBTQ family as existing parallel to the community of Jesus. But a community formed around sin, temptation, and sinful desires is never really a model. Instead, the LGBTQ family is a rival and counterfeit to the true and faithful community of Jesus—the Church. I would urge all those who have joined the Revoice bandwagon: Choose this day whom you will serve. Choose which will be your true community — the church or the LGBT movement. Choose which culture you will embrace, the culture of the kingdom of God or queer culture. But do not think you can bring these things together and find peace. You will not. It is not possible to dwell in the New Jerusalem and in Sodom at the same time.

To repeat myself: Christians cannot have one foot in the LGBTQ community and one foot in the Church community any more than they could have one foot in the Islamic community and the other in the Church, or one foot in Mormonism and the other in the Church. If same-sex desires present a temptation to act on those desires — as Revoice proponents admit — then why embrace the community that is built around acting on those temptations? Doesn’t Scripture command us to flee tempting situations? How is Revoice fleeing temptation if its proponents are embracing the very community where those temptations would be most acute?

What has the New Jerusalem to do with Sodom? Those involved in Revoice want to live in both cities, but they cannot. One is destined for eternal glory, the other for eternal destruction. One represents a culture of life, the other a culture of death. There is no way to mix these together, as Revoice wants to do. Citizens of Jerusalem cannot look longingly at Sodom and say, “Those are my people.” We can have compassion on the residents of Sodom, and call them out of their perversity. But we dare not join them.

If the LGBTQ family is better at hospitality (as some have claimed) than many Christian churches, this exposes a need for the Church to reform and repent. The Church should see this as a challenge, and should seek to outdo any and all rivals in love and fellowship. However, the faithful Church will never be centered around a sinful identity, but around the redeeming and transforming grace and mercy of Christ.

Revoice is also associated with what has been called “spiritual friendship” as a way of creating community that individuals who are same-sex attracted would otherwise miss. “Spiritual friendship” is supposed to allow same-sex attracted individuals find connection with other people while managing their sexual desires so they remain chaste. But the model of friendship being proposed, while not always clear or consistent, raises a number of issues, and again, some of them are serious.

Friendships must be distinguished from other relationships which also include an element of sexual attraction. While sexual relationships can include friendship (e.g., a husband and wife are going to be friends with one another, as well as lovers), friendships as such do not include a sexual component. Friends do not share erotic love. A friendship that includes any kind of romantic tension is

¹⁶ <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2019/02/19/about-revoices-queer-treasure/>

not merely a friendship any more (this is why it can be so difficult for men and women to be “just friends” – the sexual tension keeps getting in the way of the friendship).

Obviously, those who experience same-sex attraction are going to need to be careful about the kinds of same-sex friendships they pursue, just as a married man needs to be careful about the kinds of friendships he has with women who are not his wife. Romantic feelings should never be allowed to tinge such friendships. But when Revoice supporters describe their own experience, this is exactly what we find happening. Several Revoice teachers want to create a category of homosexual friendship that includes romance of some sort but not sexual consummation. To put it mildly, this is playing with fire and many who follow the counsel of Revoice will get burned. For example, Hill admits that in many of his same-sex friendships, he found himself romantically and sexually attracted to the other man, even “falling in love” with him and then undergoing something akin to a devastating “break up” when the friendship ended. This is a deranged and inappropriate version of friendship, and to encourage it in any way is deeply unhealthy. While those who are struggling with same-sex attraction certainly need community, they must also learn to de-sexualize same-sex friendships, doing whatever it takes to avoid kindling their unnatural lusts.

Related to this is the language of “sexual minorities,” which Revoice promotional literature used to describe the conference. “Minority” language is very problematic in this context, and not just because it tends to be self-affirming when a call to be self-denying would be more appropriate. What does it mean to identify as a “sexual minority”? “Minority” language comes out of the identity politics movement, which is cancerous to our culture and to the Church in itself. In our current political landscape, identifiable minority groups are awarded special status. To be a part of a minority means you are a victim, a member of an oppressed group. “Sexual minority” language is especially perilous politically since adding LGBTQ people to the federally protected classes of persons in our legal code could make orthodox Christian faith all but illegal in our nation. Is Revoice encouraging this kind of political action, even implicitly? Is it aiding and abetting the LGBT political agenda (which so often has conservative Christians as its target)?

Of course, “sexual minority” language also invites comparison with racial minorities and suggests that those who object to these sexual minorities on moral grounds are actually the equivalent of racists (hence the frequent charge of homophobia against those who say homosexuality is wrong). But of course, sexual orientations and race are not actually parallel, as the former is a form of sexual deviance (a moral issue) and the latter is a feature of God’s creation (not a moral issue). Gay is not, and never can be, the “new black.”

Because Revoice supporters so closely align themselves with the LGBTQ movement, we are justified in wondering where they will come down on the politics of the LGBTQ rights movement. Where does Revoice stand on the *Obergefell* ruling? Will they consistently join us in opposing gay marriage? Will they work with us to see *Obergefell* overturned? Will they seek to protect Christians in civil government, in the wedding industry, and so forth, from persecution when they do want to participate in gay weddings in any way? Where do their loyalties fall? When Christians increasingly face persecution for not going along with the gay rights agenda, will Revoice supporters stand up for us as their brothers and sisters in Christ? Or will they side with politically active gays against orthodox Christians? Will they defend the right of Christian pastors and counseling ministries to seek to redirect the same-sex desires of those who want help? Or will they join the rising tide to outlaw reparative and conversion therapies, as well as other forms of counseling – especially since at least some Revoice teachers see homosexuality an unchangeable orientation? Are Revoice leaders really with orthodox Christians in these cultural and political battles, or are they against us?

That last question is crucial because the LGBTQ+ movement is intent on destroying the orthodox Christian faith. LGBTQ+ has become the new cultural orthodoxy; dissenting from it increasingly means one will pay a price, including the accusation of “bigotry,” but often in other ways as well. We should not

be naïve about this reality. To see who controls any culture, all you have to do is see who you are not allowed to criticize in public. We have blasphemy laws as much as any theocracy – just criticize the sexual revolution, especially sodomy, and see what happens. You will quickly find out who the god of our culture really is.

Revoice garners supporters in the church today largely because empathy has become the glittering vice of our age. Empathy feels so good, so virtuous – and in some contexts it is virtuous -- but if we empathize with the wrong things or the wrong people, it becomes wicked. Nothing is more dangerous than the tendency to empathize with those who seem to be victims, but who use victimhood to cloak an agenda. No one wants to be thought as mean-spirited or bigoted or even homophobic. But we do not do any favors to those struggling with same-sex attraction if we affirm them in their desires and orientation. We need to challenge their paradigm and self-understanding, as we call them to repentance. We need to show them that the church can be their home, their community, their family – but to enjoy all the communion of the saints has to offer, they will have to reject their membership in rivalrous communities.

Sublimation vs. Repentance and Mortification

The fourth point from the Revoice proponents that must be highlighted is their refusal to call for the mortification of same-sex desires. While this is related to our first point, we want to draw together several strands here to show why the whole Revoice project is opposed to God’s creational design and to the gospel, and therefore is destined to fail.

Within the logic of Revoice, same-sex sexual desires themselves are not sinful, and so an identity can be legitimately formed around a person’s homosexual orientation, and true community can be found within the LGBTQ+ movement. Within this line of reasoning, mortification doesn’t make sense on several fronts. There is no designation of sin, no distinction between the person and the desires, and a core community is found outside the church. From their perspective, mortification sounds like death to the person, rather than death to the sin.

It is quite possible that many Christians who have ended up in this system of thought have done so after years of trying to change, with no ultimate success. Perhaps these persons are tired of battling and struggling, and just want some sense of peace in their lives. Then along comes the Revoice advocates, who say that you don’t have to battle it out, that there is nothing to repent of. Rather, you should just see yourself as being put under a vocation of suffering and use this to form friendships with others who have similar experiences.¹⁷ Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield see this as an insertion of the Freudian notion of sublimation into the conversation:

Eve Tushnet and Nate Collins (the founder of Revoice) have both argued that same-sex attraction calls for sublimation—a Freudian notion that requires not *repentance* but *redirection* of same-sex erotic love. Collins writes, “Christians should outline their own theological account of sublimation, or something like it, so they can understand how libido can be redirected in productive ways that are faithful to the call to pursue holiness” ...*Sublimation* directs strugglers away from the Biblical invitations of mortification and repentance—Christian graces that lead to God’s honor and our blessing and growth in union with Christ.¹⁸

But as we have seen, the whole line of reasoning is counter to the Scriptures. Same-sex desires are called “vile passions” in Romans 1. The notion of an immutable orientation is really a social construct, created in the 1860s, and not a timeless descriptor of humanity, much less a Biblical category. A Christian’s identity is not shaped by sin, temptation, or illicit desires, but by the believer’s union with

¹⁷ From Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield web article: *Learning to Hate Our Sin without Hating Ourselves* (July 4, 2018). Found at <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/07/22066/>

¹⁸ Quoted from Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield web article: *Learning to Hate Our Sin without Hating Ourselves* (July 4, 2018). Found at <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/07/22066/>

Christ. Furthermore, believers find their true community in the Church, the community of grace and forgiveness. We don't look to the world or its systems to find relationships of ultimate meaning.

Rather than sublimation, repentance of sin and mortification of sin is the Scriptural path for those who struggle with same-sex attraction. Repentance cannot be brought about if those who have same-sex sexual desires deny that they are sinful in the first place. Nor can repentance occur with those who identify themselves as "gay Christians," for to them the "gayness" is part of their personhood rather than indwelling sin. But their confusions keep them from grasping the fullness of the gospel, which includes not only forgiveness but transformation. When we start to move in the direction of repentance and mortification, Scripture passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 make more sense:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

According to the Scriptures, gospel transformation is possible. Paul said to the Corinthians who had committed a variety of sins, including homosexuality: "*And such were some of you.* But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." They *were* homosexuals, but because of the gospel that is in the past tense. It is no more. We know from 1 Corinthians 6 as well as countless personal testimonies that a "sexual orientation" is actually quite fluid and one's sexual proclivities can change over time, by God's grace. Once a homosexual does not mean always a homosexual. Rosaria Butterfield, who is living proof of this, sees the approach of the Revoice proponents as literally a dead end:

We must recognize same-sex sexual desire as one of the many possible ways Adam's thumbprint shapes our feelings. If we do not drive a fresh nail daily into this aspect of original sin, sinful desire will eventually give birth to sinful deed (James 1:14-15). It is urgent to recognize the need for quick—and daily—repentance and mortification of these and other vestiges of original sin. Our mortification and repentance give glory to God, and they help us grow in both holiness and union with Christ. True Christian repentance never leaves you in a state of shame; rather, it opens you to the love of Christ.

Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its desires. (Rom. 6:11-12)

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly desires, which wage war against the soul. (1 Pet. 2:11)

As obedient children, do not be conformed to desires which were yours formerly in your ignorance. (1 Pet. 1:14)

True life and true freedom are found in Christ and obeying His commands. True wisdom is found in living within God's creational design.

The person with same-sex attraction has to go to war with his unnatural affections. In the beginning of this section, battle fatigue was mentioned as one of the attractions of the Revoice theology. Christians may have struggled for years without success, and just want some sense of peace in their lives. But the reality is that *all* who call upon the name of Christ will have to battle sin and temptation until we are called to glory. We may have different vulnerabilities and temptations, but none of us in the Church Militant are exempted from these battles. Ephesians 6:10 tells us to, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." In this arena of battle "against spiritual hosts of wickedness" we are told to:

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.

Those who struggle with same-sex sexual attraction and want to live as faithful Christians have a tough path. Repentance is hard. Many may never completely shake free of illicit desires and patterns of temptation in this life. But those with same-sex attraction should be very vigilant to guard themselves against sexually desiring those of the same sex every time an occasion arises to do so. The goal should be to have sexual desires and practices aligned with God's design for their bodies. With God all things are possible. Spiritual transformation even from long-held patterns of sin, temptation, and unlawful desires can and does happen in this lifetime.

Conclusion: A Voice of Confusion Rather than Clarity

No doubt, there are many things we can learn from the Revoice movement, particularly about how to minister more effectively to the LGBT community. But in the end, Revoice is not a movement we can in any way endorse. The voice of Revoice needs to be silenced. We should reject Revoice as a dangerous project that will mislead many. Revoice is not rooted in the grace of the gospel and does not do justice to God's creational patterns. Revoice makes peace with many things all Christians should be fighting against. Revoice is teaching Christians who struggle with same-sex desires to revel in their broken sexuality rather than repent of it.

Revoice claims to uphold the traditional Christian and biblical sex ethic because it is committed to male/female marriage and requires those with same-sex desires to remain celibate. While these are commendable features, there is much more to a traditional biblical sex ethic than these commitments. A proper understanding of sex and sexuality is richer, deeper, broader. Traditionally, Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction have never identified as "gay" and have never viewed homosexuality as a fixed orientation. These are dangerous novelties, either introduced or underwritten by Revoice. Same-sex sexual desire has always been understood as sinful in itself. Same-sex attraction has been regarded as a vile passion that must be mortified, as with any other evil desire. Certainly the traditional and biblical sex ethic has not celebrated "queer culture" the way Revoice does; indeed traditional Christians would say whatever insights and contributions queers make, they do so in spite of their broken sexuality, not because of it. "Queer culture" is a result of the fall and can never be celebrated in itself, and certainly cannot be blended into the culture of the church without serious compromise. What Revoice proponents seem to regard as cultural treasures are at best fool's gold, and more often dung. Traditionally and biblically, Christians have been committed to sex-specific roles that clearly distinguish masculinity and femininity; effeminate men and butch women have been viewed as violating creational norms and called to repent from such deviancies. But Revoice revels in confusion of sexual roles, and remains oblivious to the fact that effeminacy and androgyny are identified as sins before God in the Scriptures. Revoice uses the language of identity politics, referring to sexual perverts as "sexual minorities." While it is true that sometimes Christians have been unkind to gays, and that must be addressed so the church is properly evangelistic, these missional failures do not mean that Christians dealing with same-sex attraction should be given a place of privilege or leadership in the church, unless they are seeking to mortify those desires and are clearly headed towards Christian maturity. Same-sex attraction cannot be used for kingdom purposes; it can only be killed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The fact that Revoice teachers want gay Christians to be included in leadership *as gays*, premised on the claim that their gayness will actually enrich the Church's diversity, is hugely problematic.

By using the category of “orientation,” and thus defining and categorizing people according to their sexual desires, Revoice has adopted a worldly way of looking at humans and human sexuality. Revoice has followed the world in replacing God’s male/female binary with the heterosexual/homosexual binary. This creates numerous traps from which Revoice proponents cannot extricate themselves unless they leave the project behind altogether. It will not be surprising at all if, in the coming years, many who have advocated the Revoice project, end up leaving the Christian faith altogether. Revoice represents a volatile, unstable mix of biblical theology and worldly philosophy. It wants to bring Sodom into the New Jerusalem but they are simply not compatible.

In the end, Revoice has been weighed and found wanting. While Revoice promised a way forward for “gay Christians” who remain committed to the biblical definition of marriage and the biblical practice of chastity outside of marriage, it has far too many problems to commend it. Ultimately, Revoice is influenced more by the moral blindness and darkness of the sexual revolution than by the Word of God. My hope and prayer is those who are entangled in Revoice and who struggle with same-sex desires will be set free by the grace of God.

Addendum #1: Analyzing Key Passages from Wesley Hill

As a sort of post-script, I want to analyze a couple crucial sections from Wesley Hill that crystallize the way he sees gay identity, gay culture, and gay friendship intersecting with his Christian faith. This is taken from pages 78-81 of his book *Spiritual Friendship* and I have broken it up with my own commentary below.

In my experience, the question isn’t so much whether my male friendships will involve some sort of romantic attraction. The question is how they will do so, and how my friends and I will choose to respond to or negotiate that reality when it appears.

This sounds to me like two men who experience same-sex attraction who are then going to try to figure out what to do with their romantic attraction once it manifests itself. But why even go there? This is already a problem. How is this consistent with the command to flee temptation? Hill does not come out and say the attraction is mutual, but it certainly could be. Whatever the case, romantic feelings towards another man are part of the friendship for Hill and rather than repenting of them, he wants to “negotiate” them. This is a bizarre and unhealthy and unconventional notion of friendship. It is mixing friendship love with erotic love, but in a context where erotic love should have no place at all. The fact that romantic attraction is entering into a same-sex friendship is highly problematic and calls for mortification of the desires that drive the romantic attachment. But mortifying those desires is the one thing Hill will not commit himself to doing. In fact, he suggests doing the opposite, seeing his same-sex desires as a gift and a calling, even though he must not act on them by having sex with another man. Hill says:

I also want to explore the way my same-sex attractions are inescapably bound up with my gift for and calling to friendship. My question, at root, is how I can steward and sanctify my homosexual orientation in such a way that it can be a doorway to blessing and grace.

Hill’s same-sex attraction is inseparable from his same-sex friendships. I suppose even if the friend were a straight man, there would be limits to the kind of intimacy he should seek, since he seems to be admitting his same-sex attraction is inevitably intertwined with these friendships. Hill admits his sexual desire colors his friendships with men, giving those friendships an erotic dimension that should not be

there (whether mutual or not). (Think of a pedophile who wants to remain celibate but also says he has a special calling to friendship with children.)

While acknowledging this kind of thing can be parsed and nuanced indefinitely, it must be said that to speak of “sanctifying” a homosexual orientation is just wrong. How can one make holy what is intrinsically unholy? He is seeking to sanctify a part of himself that should be rejected as unclean. His gayness is not to be “stewarded,” it is to be repented of.

Hill includes his same-sex desires as part of his calling to a special kind of friendship. But this is just the problem — same-sex sexual attraction is no more a “vocation” than drunkenness or coveting is a “vocation.” The program of Hill and Revoice ends up embracing an aspect of identity that should be fought against. Some Revoice speakers will say that same sex desire is not benign or innocent — but then they won’t say it should be repented of or mortified, and they will go on to celebrate it and affirm it in various ways. It’s a very confused and confusing project. Well intended perhaps, but very unwise. It is high on empathy, low on prudence.

Elsewhere Hill uses an analogy that same-sex desire to blindness. But unpacking this analogy can help us get at the problem. Blindness is a physical defect. But same-sex desire is a moral defect. They are not comparable in the way that most matters to this discussion. Physical blindness is not something anyone should ever be told to repent of because it isn’t that kind of thing. But having misdirected sexual desires is an issue of moral culpability, no matter how those desires got there and no matter how innate they might feel to the one who has them. Romans 1 addresses just this point. It’s simply a matter of exegesis.

Finally, Hill says he wants his homosexual orientation to be a doorway to blessing and grace. But what does it mean to knock on that door? Or to walk through that doorway? Why assume there is blessing on the other side? In reality, that door only leads to death. Same-sex attraction cannot, in the nature of the case, be a doorway to something good, any more than any other evil desire can be a doorway to a blessing. Where does Scripture tell us such desires can be a doorway to anything good? Again, this points to the radical confusion at the heart of the Revoice project. Hill should look for another door if he wants blessing and grace.

Again, Hill:

In my experience, at least, being gay colors everything about me, even though I’m celibate.

This statement seem to be very confused. I do not want to fight over words, but how why does Hill say being gay shapes his whole identity if he is not acting out his gayness in a sexual way? It seems there is at least one thing about his life – what he does with his sex organ, to put it bluntly – that is not determined by his being gay. That’s a good thing of course – his commitment to celibacy is commendable. But why go to such lengths to embrace a gay identity, only to reject the thing that is most crucial to being gay in the common parlance – namely, sex with other men? If he not going to let his gayness determine what he does with his penis, why should it determine anything else about his life? Why give gayness such power and control over other features of one’s life? Doesn’t this lead to a kind of moral and cultural schizophrenia – his whole life and culture is gay, except for what he does with his genitalia, so how he claim to have wholeness and integrity? If he is not going to use his penis in a gay way, why not reject other features of being gay, e.g., effeminacy in all its manifestations.

Perhaps being gay is not as pervasive and central to Hill’s identity as he professes. Perhaps there is a better way for him to describe himself. Perhaps there is a better way for him to live. And if Hill were to let go of his insistence on being called a “gay Christian,” what else might change?

Again, Hill:

It's less a separable piece of my experience, like a shelf in my office, which is distinguishable from the other shelves, and more like the proverbial drop of ink in a glass of water: not identical with the water, but also not entirely distinct from it either. Being gay is, for me, as much a sensibility as anything else: a heightened sensitivity to and passion for same-sex beauty that helps determine the kind of conversations I have, which people I'm drawn to spend time with, what novels and poems and films I enjoy, the particular visual art I appreciate, and also, I think, the kind of friendships I pursue and try to strengthen. I don't imagine I would have invested half as much effort in loving my male friends, and making sacrifices of time, energy, and even money on their behalf, if I weren't gay. My sexuality, my basic erotic orientation to the world, is inescapably intertwined with how I go about finding and keeping friends

The way I read this, he pursues friendships specifically with men he has an erotic appreciation for, even if he does not intend to act on it. He is drawn to these men specifically because of his heightened sensitivity to same-sex beauty. He chooses them as friends for this reason. I cannot see that as anything other than foolish or dangerous. What does it mean for his passion "for same sex beauty" to determine the kinds of friendships he pursues, unless it means he is pursuing friendships with men he is actually attracted to? For him, eros is intertwined into his male friendships.

Hill says he has loved his male friends better because he is sexually drawn to them. If he were straight, he would not have loved them as well (but no doubt, he could have found a woman to love, and could have loved her far more fully than he can love his male friends!). I am not at all convinced Hill is a better friend to other males because of his sexual orientation. In fact, my guess is that a lot the investment he made in his male friends was actually very unhealthy for him, if not also for them. Who is to say the time, energy, and money poured into these male friendships, tinged with romance and eroticism, even if only in Hill's mind and feelings, could have been spent much better elsewhere?

Hill says that for him being gay is a kind of sensibility. But why does he think this sensibility is healthy or righteous? How is it consistent with the kinds of things God calls men to be and to do? For example, where does Scripture call a man to have a "heightened sensitivity" to and "passion" for same-sex beauty? In reality, Scripture repeatedly calls on men to appreciate opposite sex beauty (e.g., Proverbs 5). Hill, and the entire Revoice project, takes vices and reframes them as virtues. But it simply doesn't work. Revoice is unnatural and therefore ungodly. Revoicing needs to give way to repenting.

Addendum #2: A Post-Script to the 2019 PCA General Assembly

I want to add another section to this paper in light of the recent PCA General Assembly. I am not in the PCA any more but I continue to watch it with a vested interest, as it is bellwether for conservative, traditional Christian faith in America. My hope and prayer is that the PCA will stand firm on biblical orthodoxy, but there are reasons to be concerned for her future.

The PCA General Assembly did not resolve the Revoice controversy in the denomination's midst, though I was thankful the General Assembly voted approvingly of the Nashville Statement, which, while certainly capable of being greatly improved upon, firmly rejects "gay Christian" identity.¹⁹ However, the

¹⁹ Much has been made of the fact the vote in favor of the Nashville Statement was relatively close. But this should not be overinterpreted. The way PCA polity works, many elders who have broad agreement with the Nashville Statement might have still voted against it, premised on the claim that the PCA already has sufficient guardrails against "gay Christianity" in the Westminster Standards. These elders would argue that multiplying documents is often pastorally unhelpful and confusing. Nevertheless, I still think denominational support of the Nashville Statement is important, for pastoral reasons (e.g., helping PCA churches and families guard against the further influence of Revoice and associated movements) and cultural reasons (e.g., it communicates to the rest of

most interesting moment in the assembly was the speech against the Nashville Statement made by “gay pastor” Greg Johnson:

I knew I was gay at age 11 ... that was the day I realized Christians hated gay people. ... At this point I am 46 years old and still same-sex attracted. My orientation has not changed. ... I love Jesus and I want to serve Him and I am willing to suffer for Him and yet, friends, when I read Article 7 of the Nashville Statement, it hurts, because Article 7 says it is a sin to adopt a homosexual self conception. And we don't do that for any other people group. We don't tell alcoholics that it is a sin to conceive of themselves as alcoholics because drunkenness is a sin. It is the beginning of learning to manage your alcoholism in obedience to Christ so that it doesn't define you. We don't tell paraplegics that they should conceive of themselves as able-bodied because that is God's ideal. ... Friends, I'm broken, I'm fallen and Jesus has washed me and saved me and my prayer is that you will consider the damage that will be done to people like me when Article 7 says that it is a sin to acknowledge our brokenness and our shame and the suffering and sorrow that goes with that. My prayer is that we will instead do the hard work of coming up with something biblically nuanced, theologically sophisticated, missionally sensitive, pastorally sensitive, so that people like me don't have to go through all of the suffering I had because their pastors will be well equipped to love people who are broken and same sex attracted and waiting for glory.

Several features of this speech are odd. It completely overlooks the biblical text that most directly speaks to the issue of identity, namely, 1 Corinthians 6. Greg Johnson says “I am gay.” Paul says “such were some of you.” In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says to ex-gay Christians, in effect, you are no longer to consider yourself a homosexual. In Johnson's speech, he said he did not know of people who had their sexual desires changed – “I do not know of anyone who has had their same sex desires taken away.” This is a claim I find hard to believe given how many folks have come out of gay lifestyle; they are not hard to find. But it is certainly a false claim biblically, given 1 Corinthians 6.

The comparison of Christians with same-sex attraction to paraplegics is bizarre. There is simply no connection here, as one is a moral issue and the other a physical condition. No one says being a paraplegic is sinful. No one says paraplegia is an orientation.

Johnson says that the Nashville Statement singles out “gay Christians” because we do not treat any other group of sinners this way. Again, this is a claim that is astoundingly out of touch with reality. It is actually backwards. In truth, it is advocates of homosexual practice who have singled it out, even trying to make those who engage in sodomy a protected class with special rights. All Christians are doing is responding to these cultural and political developments.

Other classes of sins don't get called out the way sodomy does because other classes of sins do not create subcultures in the same way. Christians who have struggled with drunkenness have not organized pride parades to celebrate their drunkenness. They do not hold conferences where they get together and celebrate their drunken identity or orientation. They do not promote drunken culture or boast of its treasures that will be carried into the New Jerusalem. It is not the Nashville Statement or orthodox Christians who have singled out homosexuality for special treatment; it is homosexuals themselves who have tried to build an entire identity around their desires. The sad thing here is that some Christians are getting sucked into it.

evangelicalism and to the world at large where the PCA stands). That being said, I believe those (like Greg Johnson) who see the tide turning in the PCA based on the demographic of who voted for and against the Nashville Statement are probably correct. Without some kind of significant shift, the PCA is in danger of drift.

Johnson says he is “hurt” by those who reject “gay Christian” identity. But his feelings are not the standard of righteousness. Jesu often hurt people’s feelings. Reading the Scriptures aloud is considered a “hate crime” by some because they are hurt by the very words of God. We should certainly love everyone who identifies as LGBTQ. But loving people and people *feeling* loved are two different things. A child who is disciplined by a father might not feel loved in that very moment since the discipline is painful (Heb. 12:7ff). But Scripture says discipline is a form of love (Prov. 13:24). John Piper’s words on emotional blackmail are appropriate rejoinder to Johnson’s hurt feelings:

Not feeling loved and not being loved are not the same. Jesus loved all people well. And many did not like the way he loved them. Was David’s zeal for the Lord imbalanced because his wife Michal despised him for it? Was Job’s devotion to the Lord inordinate because his wife urged him to curse God and die? Would Gomer be a reliable witness to Hosea’s devotion? . . . I have seen so much emotional blackmail in my ministry I am jealous to raise a warning against it. Emotional blackmail happens when a person equates his or her emotional pain with another person’s failure to love. They aren’t the same. A person may love well and the beloved still feel hurt, and use the hurt to blackmail the lover into admitting guilt he or she does not have. Emotional blackmail says, ‘If I feel hurt by you, you are guilty.’ There is no defense. The hurt person has become God. His emotion has become judge and jury. Truth does not matter. All that matters is the sovereign suffering of the aggrieved. It is above question. This emotional device is a great evil. I have seen it often in my three decades of ministry and I am eager to defend people who are being wrongly indicted by it.

In this case, Johnson may be hurt by Article 7 of the Nashville Statement, but that is not an argument against the Nashville Statement – or at least it shouldn’t be.

As is typical of our age, Johnson sees himself as the hero-victim. And as is typical of our age, those who are suckers for misguided empathy fall for it. In his speech he described what it was like to not be able to have a family because he is gay. He has had to sit alone on Christmas Day. He does not get romantic hugs or have family photos on the mantle His line will end with him. And so forth. He is sacrificing for Jesus by remaining celibate. (Are those who invest in a wife and children making sacrifices for Jesus?) Johnson may very well be making certain sacrifices for Jesus by remaining celibate, but if celibacy is truly a gift – if it is truly *his* gift -- he should not act as it is such a burden. The apostle Paul wished others could share in his gift of celibacy (1 Corinthians 7) whereas Johnson wishes he did not have to live a life of celibacy. Something about his way of describing his experience simply doesn’t add up. Paul, as a celibate man, could say, “I wish others could be like me.” Johnson, as a celibate man, says, “I wish I could be like others – like those who get to have a family.”

It is true that sometimes Christians have been cruel to gays. Gays have often been mocked and scorned. This is not right. When such actions have taken place, we should repent. But past failures of some Christians do not excuse the Revoice movement. Christians should learn how to minister the gospel to the LGBTQ+ persons in love and humility, but it should do so without compromise. Revoice is not the way forward. And Revoice has no place in the faithful church.

There was another interesting development at the PCA General Assembly I want to address. David Cassidy, a friend of mine and a superb preacher, delivered a sermon to the presbyters that was both challenging and stirring. Overall, the sermon had an excellent missional focus and should be taken to heart. But there was one rhetorical move in the sermon that I found unwise.

Cassidy pointed out that many folks have left the church, believing it to be judgmental, particularly towards gays. Surveys bear this out. The world already knows we are against homosexuality so we do not need to proclaim the “law” in this area. Instead, we need to focus on preaching the gospel.

I certainly agree with the focus on preaching the gospel. But I do not think we can go quiet (or silent) on speaking out against homosexuality for a couple of reasons. First, even as many inside and outside the church know that the Bible condemns homosexuality, there are many once faithful

Christians who have gone wobbly in just this area. There are plenty of evangelical leaders who have changed their minds, either softening or altogether rejecting the biblical norm in this area. With so much pro-gay propaganda and pressure out there, if we want our children to stand firm on biblical sexual ethics, we most certainly need to continue what Scripture says in these areas. Besides, can anyone imagine taking this approach with regard to other sins, e.g., most people know racism is wrong, so we are no longer going to preach against it, lest we offend the racists we are trying to evangelize?

But perhaps more importantly, second, we need to proclaim the law in this area of sexuality with greater depth than we ever have before. We need to explain the rationale behind God's prohibition of sodomy (just as we need to explain the rationale behind God's prohibition on other forms of sexual activity, e.g., fornication). Today, the world sees the law of God as bigotry. The only reason they can imagine we are against homosexuality is animus or prejudice. We need to show that is not the case at all. We oppose homosexual lusts and actions in the name of true love. We need to explain to those inside and outside the church why homosexuality is unnatural and destructive of human flourishing. God's law is not arbitrary. God's law is for our good, to serve our flourishing in the fullest sense. The prohibition against homosexual practice is not only a biblical law; it is a natural law, and we need to unpack why this particular way of using one's body is unnatural and harmful. We really have not done this very well – the world has not really heard what we have to say on this, and even many in the church could not explain why God commands what he commands and forbids what he forbids in the area of sexuality. I would say the opposite of Cassidy: we need to proclaim the law, in all its depth, complete with its rationale, to a world that, for the most part, has never really been confronted with the full case against homosexuality. We are not simply being judgmental or bigoted; we are advocating a beautiful and rich vision of human sexuality, a sex ethic that is fully compatible with our sexual natures because it is given to us by the Creator. Thus, instead of doing less education about homosexuality (as Cassidy seems to suggest), we need to do a whole lot more. I would suggest looking at writers like Ryan Anderson, Anthony Esolen, John Stonestreet, and J. Budziszewski, among others, for help in these areas.

Consider an analogy: In an egalitarian and feminist society, like modern America, the notion that only males can be pastors seems sexist. In the face of such misunderstanding, we need to patiently explain *why* God restricts pastoral leadership exclusively to men. This is not arbitrary or cruel; it fits with our sexual design. The rationale (found in both nature and Scripture) needs to be unpacked so the rule can be seen for what it is.

None of this is to say that we can actually silence the charges of bigotry. But proclaiming the whole of God's revealed truth is our calling. And for those who are given ears to hear, the arguments we make for God's law from Scripture and nature will be found persuasive.