

# Words, Labels, and 'Sexual Minorities'

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June 1, 2018 | Kevin DeYoung Share Words, Labels, and 'Sexual Minorities'

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You may have heard about the upcoming [Revoice Conference](#) coming to [Memorial Presbyterian Church \(PCA\)](#) in St. Louis at the end of July. The goal of the conference is stated succinctly: "Supporting, encouraging, and empowering gay, lesbian, same-sex-attracted, and other LGBT Christians so they can experience the life-giving character of the historic Christian tradition." The plenary speakers are well-known in the celibate gay identity movement, a movement in which many authors and writers are happy to embrace the self-description "gay Christian."

Much has been written already about the term "gay Christian." I agree with [Rosaria Butterfield](#) (among others) who find the term deeply problematic in that (1) it makes sexual orientation an accurate and essential category of personhood, and (2) it undermines the biblical notion that a desire for something illegitimate is in itself an illegitimate desire in need of repentance and grace.

While I have my concerns about some of the topics, speakers, and aims of the event, I want to comment briefly on one specific issue: the use of the term "sexual minority." Sexual minority is a popular synonym (more or less) for those who identify as LGBT+. It is common in the wider culture and increasingly so within Christian circles. The Revoice website uses the term often. As Greg Johnson, pastor of Memorial Presbyterian, [explains](#): "The conference organizers have preferred the term 'sexual minority' because it encompasses all those whose experience of sexuality is significantly different from the norm, and even includes eunuchs like the African man who was the first Gentile convert." Johnson goes on to argue that homosexually-inclined believers should have freedom to "describe their struggle" and that the rest of us should not quarrel about words.

But of course, Paul's injunction "not to quarrel about words" (2 Tim. 2:14) presumes that the quarrels in question are fruitless, nothing but irreverent babble, leading people into more ungodliness (2 Tim. 2:16). The fact that Paul goes on to rebuke Hymenaeus and Philetus for swerving from the truth and making false claims about the resurrection (2 Tim. 2:17-18), shows that the apostle did not always consider words to be a waste of his time.

With that in mind, I see several related concerns with the term "sexual minority."

1. The term comes from somewhere. According to [Wikipedia](#), "The term *sexual minority* was coined most likely in the late 1960s under the influence of Lars Ullerstam's groundbreaking book *The Erotic Minorities: A Swedish View*, which came strongly in favor of tolerance and empathy to uncommon varieties of sexuality, such as paedophilia and 'sex criminals.' The

term was used as analogous to ethnic minority.” Even if we care nothing for Ullerstam’s views (and I’m sure most of us have never heard of him), it is important to note that that term was coined in an effort to make deviant behavior more tolerable. My argument, then, is not that the term has to mean what some book from the 1960s wanted it to mean. Rather, my contention is that the term—whatever our intentions—has the effect of normalizing desires that are, at the least, not the way things are supposed to be.

2. The term is ambiguous. Some argue that the term is too politically correct and that it ought to include, if it doesn’t already, those with a proclivity to pedophilia, polygamy, polyamory, and all other expressions of sexuality that differ from heterosexual normativity between consenting adults. Is that what we mean by making the church a haven for sexual minorities?

3. The word “minority” is out of place. It’s troubling because it makes disordered sexual desires (which can be repented of and forgiven, just like any disordered desire) essential to one’s personhood. More to the point, in our culture, “minority” does not simply mean “less than the majority.” Minorities are considered an aggrieved group in our society. Because of the heroism of many in the civil-rights movement, and because most Americans recognize that non-whites have been mistreated in our nation’s past, any new identity that can achieve minority status is automatically afforded moral weight and authority. The term “sexual minority” is prescriptive, not merely descriptive. This is to say nothing of the legal burdens that will ensue when the language of sexual minority is added to federal guidelines and regulations.

4. The term does not do what it purports to accomplish. If the goal is to make the church a safe place for all image bearers seeking to follow Christ in faith and repentance, why would we isolate some inclinations as majority and others as minority? Why not focus on our common humanity, our need for grace, and our shared hope in the gospel, instead of forming a new class of people based on specific sin struggles?

5. The term undermines Johnson’s argument that we ought to “be sensitive to issues of personal freedom in how homosexually-inclined believers choose to describe their struggle.” Notice the last word: *struggle*. Our church has a ministry called Set Free, which provides biblical resources, counsel, and compassion for sexual strugglers and their families. I’m sure it’s not the only good phrase, but I like “sexual struggler” because it underlines that we are fighting against desires, temptations, and habits that we consider at odds with our commitment to grow in Christ. If someone says, “I wrestle with unwanted desires for persons of the same sex,” that indicates a struggle (even if the desires do not change and the struggle lasts a lifetime). It also suggests that these desires are not morally neutral. By contrast, “sexual minority” speaks of a settled identity. I’m not saying for a moment that orthodox Christians embracing the term do not struggle or are not daily dying to themselves in courageous ways. What I am saying is that the term suggest that sexual orientation is a constituent part of one’s identity, and a neutral, or even a positive part at

that.

In short, words matter. It's not alarmism to point out that indifference to words and definitions has often been one of the first steps to theological liberalism. I hope we in the PCA, and in the broader church, will pay more careful attention to the words and terms we use in these controversial matters. Once the labels stick, they become sticky indeed.