

reformation21

Many readers of Reformation21 will be familiar with the Revoice Conference. The first of its meetings was in the summer of 2018, and next will be this coming July. The stated purpose of the conference was, "Supporting, encouraging, and empowering gay, lesbian, same-sex attracted, and other gender and sexual minority Christians so they can flourish while observing the historic, Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality." It has now been modified slightly to read: "To support and encourage gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other same-sex attracted Christians—as well as those who love them—so that all in the Church might be empowered to live in gospel unity while observing the historic Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality." This new statement still uses the language of support and encouragement, but emphasizes the unity of the church as much as the flourishing of the "sexual minority Christians." In both statements, support and encouragement are the key objectives.

There were and are many reasons to be concerned about the Revoice Conference: Its speakers equivocated (at best) when it came to questions of identity and the need to mortify sinful desires and attractions; sinful aspects of the culture were held up as treasures of the kingdom of God; its basic approach was endorsed by many prominent evangelical leaders, and its first conference was hosted in a PCA church; it was conceived as a movement, with the instruction and training of youth as its stated long-term objective; and now, its latest statements seem designed to foster a kind of forced unity within the church regarding same-sex attraction.

Many of these concerns have been addressed already by others. But one question that has not received as much attention is the vision of spirituality that the Revoice movement embraces. Apart from the specific errors in its teaching, what is its overarching vision of Christian spirituality?

In his 1998 book, *Losing Our Virtue*, David Wells contrasts what he calls a "classical" view of spirituality, with a "postmodern" view.

He writes:

Wherein, then, lies the difference between a classical and a post-modern spirituality? The latter begins, not so much with sin as morally framed, but with sin as psychologically experienced, not so much with sin in relation to God, but with sin in relation to ourselves. It begins with our anxiety, pain, and disillusionment, with the world in its disorder, the family or marriage in its brokenness, or the workplace in its brutality and insecurity. God, in consequence, is valued to the extent that he is able to bathe these wounds, assuage these insecurities, calm these fears, restore some sense of internal order, and bring some sense of wholeness.[1]

This describes almost perfectly the assumptions behind the Revoice Conference. Look again at its original stated purpose: It starts with the idea of "supporting," "encouraging," "empowering," and has as its goal the "flourishing" of gays, lesbians, and others. In the new statement, "unity" is added. Even apart from the specific claims about sexuality made by some speakers at the first conference, its entire premise is based upon the psychological experience of sin in relation to the self.

And it is no accident that the proposed remedy involves "empowering." David Wells writes:

Another difference is that one spirituality is built around *truth*, but the other is defined by its search for *power*... outside charismatic circles, the search for power is most often construed in therapeutic ways: the power to conquer anxiety, to find enthusiasm for a new week, to repair the broken connections with the self, and to piece back together ruptured relationships. It is the power to restore ones daily functioning. It is power for survival.[2]

The sad fact is that this vision of spirituality is widespread. When worship is conceived as "fueling up" for the week ahead; when overarching questions about doctrine are reduced to "can it preach?;" when technical skill in management and advertising becomes the coin of the realm in church leadership; when endless individual counseling becomes the preoccupation of evangelical churches, we can hardly be surprised if this fundamentally therapeutic understanding of the spiritual life is applied to outer edges of human sexual confusion.

There is, of course, a better way. In Wells' analysis, it is called, "classical spirituality."

Wells summarizes it this way:

It is the shape given to classical spirituality by the importance of God as Other, as transcendent, as over against us, not only in the greatness of his being, but in the purity of his character. It is this that places at the center of this spirituality Christ's Cross and that defines sin, not only as what is morally wrong, but as what is an affront to God himself. It is the holiness of God that shapes the meaning of the Christian life in its sanctification and service, that demands self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness and thinks of sin as self-absorption. In consequence, worship in classical spirituality is God-centered and Cross-focused, and it is God-centered because it is Christ-focused.[3]

The Revoice Conference came as a shock to many within the evangelical and reformed community in the United States. For some, it was a wake-up call about the extent to which the world's labels and assumptions about sexuality had entered the church. Some realized they were unprepared, having never thought seriously about the particular temptations of homosexuality or about the need to minister carefully to those struggling with confusion and sexual sin. But our churches need to do far more than merely think more deeply about gender and sexuality. Instead we must consider whether our view of spirituality begins with God in his transcendent holiness, his wrath against sin, and our depravity by nature or with the psychological experience of sin. Does our worship reflect the classical understanding of God and of ourselves? Does our approach to him in prayer display these truths?

The antidote to the approach of the Revoice Conference is not simply more and clearer teaching about gender and sexuality, as important as that is; it is rather a renewed emphasis on the way in which we must approach our God and view ourselves as creatures. This antidote involves reclaiming classical Christian spirituality and the older biblical account of the earthly pilgrimage. The alternative to Revoice spirituality is one which points to the need for conversion – repentance from sin and a turn to the Truth – coupled with a life of worship shaped by these words: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29).

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Notes

[1] David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 42.

[2] *Ibid*, 43.

[3] *Ibid*, 35.