

# Thoughts on Revoice, Unnecessary Division, and the PCA

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At the risk of speaking too soon, I thought I would share a few thoughts as my denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, heads into its annual General Assembly gathering in Dallas (think Southern Baptist Convention, but for Presbyterians).

Speaking of the SBC, earlier this month our Baptist friends debated and approved a resolution regarding human sexuality and marriage. This resolution was spawned by an ongoing debate within the SBC that is similar to the one happening currently in the PCA. It's a big conversation these days, not only for us but for the entire Church in the West.

At the center of the debate is a conference on human sexuality called Revoice. According to its website, Revoice aims to provide support and encouragement for same-sex attracted Christians and their loved ones, "so that all in the Church might be empowered to live in gospel unity *while observing the historic Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality*" (emphasis mine).

Revoice participants gather not to celebrate homosexuality or "gayness," but rather to find support, understanding, and inspiration for obedience and personal holiness from a community that understands and empathizes more fully than many (culturally) conservative, nuclear family focused, and sometimes homophobic churches do.

## Some Background

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I am a big empathy-plus-faithfulness guy. So, when I was first introduced to the core message, beliefs, and goals of this organization, I thought:

"This is good. Another ministry that upholds the biblical teaching on sex and marriage—namely, that sex is a gift from God to be freely enjoyed by one man and one woman inside a lifelong, exclusive, monogamous marriage covenant. In addition, Revoice wants to help provide guidance, empathy, and support for Christian men and women who (a) experience same-sex attraction, and (b) seek to uphold and encourage obedience to the biblical sex and marriage ethic by chaste, celibate singleness akin to Jesus and the apostle Paul, or by marrying a person of the opposite sex as Revoice founder, Nate Collins, has done."

When I first announced my appreciation for Revoice's core message as stated above, I experienced a backlash from a few folks that I did not expect. To be fair, some of the backlash was warranted because of a seminar title that appeared later on their website that was provocative, potentially misleading, and in many ways unhelpful. To Revoice's credit, they humbly listened to their critics (including me) and have since become more careful

with their words. They have also since released a detailed doctrinal statement, a statement on sexual ethics and Christian obedience, and a statement on public posture and Christian witness.

In addition to this, some concerned parties also began to characterize Revoice (and my general appreciation for their core message as stated above) as some sort of first step in a “slippery slope” toward liberalism, biblical infidelity, and so forth. I was even accused on a blog, written by someone that I have never met (that’s usually how it goes), of having some sort of secret, hidden agenda up my sleeve to steer the PCA toward denial of the historic, biblical teaching on sex and marriage. This accusation was comical to me for two reasons. First, I have neither the power nor the influence to steer the PCA in such a way. Second, even if I did, I would have no interest in doing so.

Anyone who has read my books, listened to my sermons in their full context (which of course is different than pulling sound-bites out of their context to try to make them say what they are not intended to say), or read any of my related essays on the subject (here is a sample), should be quite aware that I have no interest in trashing historic, biblical ethics. Rather, my interest is to support and encourage people who wish to organize their lives (and sexuality) around healthy biblical faith, healthy biblical repentance, and healthy biblical ethics.

## **Some Things I Hope We Will All Consider**

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Going in to General Assembly, whatever they may or may not think of Revoice (there should be room to disagree agreeably in our preferred methodologies and nuances), I hope my fellow ministers and elders will carefully consider the following thoughts.

My hope here is to resist and renounce all slippery slopes. This includes slopes that slip liberal left as well as ones that slip conservative right. The left-leaning slope subtracts from Scripture. The right-leaning slope adds to Scripture. Both create division in Christ’s Church, and both invite the Lord’s displeasure and judgment (Revelation 22:18-19).

I also hope that we will be careful to honor the prayer that our Lord offered up for us before he journeyed to the cross, namely, that we would love one another. As my beloved friend and esteemed colleague David Filson has said, Jesus is reading all of our emails and Facebook posts, and he is listening in on all of our conversations, debates, and the ways that we talk about each other.

## **On the Use of Language**

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One common concern expressed by some is over the use of the word “gay” to describe anyone who also identifies as “Christian.”

For example, conservative theologian and Gospel Coalition founder, Don Carson, writes of a “gay young man who wants to live his life under the authority of King Jesus” in his endorsement of Gregory Coles’ book, *Single, Gay, Christian* (Coles also led the worship at Revoice).

In spite of Carson’s long record of biblical orthodoxy and strong commitment to the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of Scripture and biblical ethics, some would allege that his use of the word “gay,” even in this context, is problematic. According to those critics, the word “gay” ought never be used to describe someone who identifies as “Christian” and that the word “Christian” ought never be used to describe someone who identifies as “gay.” *Period.*

Similar concerns have been raised about the use of the term “sexual minority” as conservative reformed theologian and historian, Carl Trueman, uses the term in this book review.

Though I, like Trueman, have sometimes used the term “sexual minority” to describe the minority experience of having same-sex attraction, I don’t use terms like “gay Christian” in my own language. For those who wish to allege that I use or support such language, you will not find it anywhere in my teaching, preaching, or writing.

Instead of the “gay Christian” language, I use terms like “Christians who experience same-sex attraction” to ensure that I am clearly understood by my audience. Similarly, Nate Collins, Greg Johnson, and Stephen Moss—all of whom are leaders for Revoice—are uncomfortable using the “gay Christian” moniker to describe themselves, and they do not do so. Their website also puts emphasis on the phrase, “same sex attraction.”

This being said, it seems to me that it ought still to be allowed, provided that terms are carefully defined, for chaste Christians who experience same-sex attraction to use the word “gay” as a modifier to describe *their feelings and temptations*.

Lexically, the word “gay” can refer to homosexual practice, pornography, or indulged fantasy, which according to Romans 1 and other Scriptures is sinful. This kind of “gay” is on par with other *porneia*-related sins like pornography, sexual abuse, hetero-adultery, and hetero-immorality, all of which are even more ubiquitous among Christian churches than their homoerotic counterparts.

On the other hand, the word “gay” can also mean having feelings—including unwanted ones—toward people of the same sex. For Christians like Nate Collins, Greg Johnson, and Stephen Moss (as well as others like Tim Geiger from Harvest, USA), these feelings are not to be indulged or pursued, but rather, mortified daily. The classic word for these kinds of unwanted feelings is “temptation.”

Although he was in no way fallen, was without a sinful nature, and never for a moment

experienced a sinful desire, Jesus nonetheless was also “tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). In his deity, Jesus could not and therefore did not sin. In his humanity, Jesus nonetheless subjected himself to the same temptations we experience. In this, we see that sin and temptation are different things and must be treated as such.

## **Are We Consistent in Our Vernacular?**

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Shifting gears a bit, the question I would ask us PCA ministers and elders to consider is this:

*If it's always wrong for same-sex attracted, chaste and celibate Christians to use the word “gay” to describe their experience of temptation (versus using the word as an identity marker, which would not be right), is it also wrong for others to use words like “alcoholic” or “addict” or “anxious” or “insomniac” or “sinner” to describe THEIR unique feelings and the unique temptations that flow from them? Or, is it okay, at least under certain circumstances, to do so?*

For those like me who don't use the “gay Christian” language to describe fellow Christians, this empathy-filled, pastoral insight from same-sex attracted minister, Sam Alberry, is helpful:

*“I think people who come to faith from the LGBT+ community are going to instinctively say, ‘I'm a gay Christian.’ I think that's a very understandable starting point. It wouldn't be where I'd want them to finally land in terms of the language they use. But I wouldn't want to jump up and down on a new or young Christian just for using that language as if it's only, ever, always wrong. They may just not have had a chance to think that kind of thing through yet.”*

I appreciate Sam's thoughtful and pastoral approach toward people who are in process, especially for men and women who can't find other words to describe their feelings and temptations. Having himself shared their situation, Sam graciously and patiently makes allowance for others in the process of shepherding them.

Perhaps for similar reasons and in a specific context, Paul gave himself latitude to use two phrases from Stoic and Epicurean philosophy—two systems filled with biblical error but that, like all human systems and cultures, because of the Image of God have kernels of God's truth in them—in order to build relational, evangelistic, and pastoral bridges (Acts 17:28). Perhaps this is also why, in a specific context, Jesus affirmed prostitutes who were entering God's kingdom faster than strident, judicious, doctrinaire religious folk (Matthew 21:31). Perhaps it is also why, in a certain context, he identified a Samaritan—assumed by his religious audience to be both heretical and the moral scum of the earth—as the hero and protagonist of one of his most famous parables (Luke 10:25-37).

As for Paul's own self-understanding, he identifies himself not only as a saint but as a sinner. He does not say "I *was* the chief of sinners," but "I *am* the chief of sinners." Paul's present-tense language is acceptable to us because he is Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is also acceptable because of the manner in which Paul uses it.

In calling himself a sinner, we know and accept that Paul is not celebrating sin or declaring any intention to commit sin. At the same time, sin is something that is always crouching at his door. It will remain for him daily *struggle* (not an identity, but a struggle; not a cause for celebration, but a cause for daily repentance and reliance on the Lord) until the day of his death.

Even the Lord Jesus "became sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Although he did not in any way *share* our experience as sinners, in some mysterious way he *bore* and *carried* our experience as sinners. He named himself among us, allowing himself to be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

As a man who, unlike Jesus, *did* have a fallen and sinful nature, David wrote, "In sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5). Sin is not merely about our behavior. It is also a condition into which we have been born. Theologians call this condition "original sin," and the Bible uses terms like "the flesh" and "the old man" to describe it. Even in our most redeemed and holy and sanctified state, until we are Home, we will always be sinners.

Although it's not a complete apples-to-apples comparison, most of the Christians I know who describe themselves as "gay" use the word in a similar way that Paul did when he called himself a sinner. They use the word not as a banner or as an identity, but as an honest recognition of their broken state as those effected by original sin.

To be frank, many of these Christians steward their sexuality far better, and far more faithfully, than their single straight Christian peers. We mustn't forget or downplay that the most common sex and marriage sins in our churches are hetero-lust, hetero-porn, hetero-immorality, hetero-abuse, and the kinds of divorce and remarriage that are condemned by Scripture.

We also embrace Luther's famous assertion that Christians are "simultaneously saints and sinners" until the Lord returns. Until that day, we will never be one without the other. Biblically, we aren't merely permitted to use the word "sinner" in reference to ourselves. Rather, we are required to do so. It is only when we confess our sins—both original sin and volitional sin—that we are healed.

Many PCA ministers and elders resonate with, preach, and teach John Piper's concept of "Christian hedonism." We allow this because we accept Piper's own explanation of what he means by the word "hedonist." To Piper, a Christian hedonist is one who seeks her or his

ultimate pleasure in God. With this new reframing and redefining of a word that is typically associated with seeking pleasure through self-indulgence, promiscuity, and sin, we nonetheless accept and embrace and even champion Piper's alternative use of the term.

Why can't we offer similar charity and latitude regarding the use of words, especially when such words are placed within the context of statements like this one from the Revoice website:

*"We believe God calls his people to a life of holiness, and that it is the responsibility of every Christian to turn away from all illicit sexual desire, and to steward their sexuality in obedience to Christ. Further, we believe that both singleness and marriage are vocations to be honored and commended by the Church. We believe that all Christians who joyfully embrace celibacy—whether on a temporary basis before marrying, or as a lifelong pattern of faithfulness—uniquely model the life of the world to come, when the people of God neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels. (Matt. 5:8,48; 1 Cor. 6:13; Heb. 13:4; 1 Cor. 7:6–9; Matt. 19:10-12; Matt. 22:30)"*

## **On Mortification and God's Providence**

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Another concern that has been raised by some in the PCA is over a supposed de-emphasis upon the mortification of sin (My personal favorite on the subject is an oldie by John Owen, which can be purchased [here](#)).

Christians who experience same-sex attraction tell us that trying to "pray the gay away" has, in their experience, been about as effective as similar attempts to pray terminal cancer away. For same-sex attraction and terminal cancer (or if you don't like the cancer analogy, let's say a chronic insomnia), in rare instances the healing does miraculously come, and we have God to thank and praise for that.

But to presume upon God that change *will* and *should* come—and if it doesn't then we have a moral problem and cause for bringing someone up on charges—is to take a triumphalistic, unrealistic, dishonest, un-reformed, pastorally and emotionally and psychologically and spiritually injurious stance regarding sanctification and holiness. It is also to deny the "not yet" in our already/not yet theology regarding the kingdom of God.

In God's providence and according to all the statistics, prayerful healing from terminal cancer and prayerful healing from same sex attraction *in this lifetime* are both quite rare. This does not mean that the person praying for healing is any less faithful, or any more flawed, than the rest of us. Rather, it means that sometimes God, in his mysterious wisdom, chooses to answer our prayers with a "no" for the purpose of giving us what he determines to be a better "yes."

The redemptive "no" from our Father has precedent. Even Jesus prayed that he wouldn't have to go to the cross, and God declined the request so that we could all be saved:

*“Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).*

Then, to show the full extent of his love toward both his Father and us, Jesus was obedient to death, even death on a cross, as the Triune God had determined before the creation of the world. There was nothing fallen or sinful associated with Jesus’ prayer, only temptation—for he was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.

On a different occasion under different circumstances, Paul prayed that God would take away his thorn in the flesh, a prayer that God denied three times. Why? So that the virtues of humility and dependence would be further advanced in Paul, and that God’s glory and power would be manifest through Paul’s weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

When people ask God to take away their terminal cancer or their chronic insomnia or their same-sex attraction, it often plays out in the same way. My own personal belief is that God puts obedient, same-sex attracted Christians in our midst to show us what denying oneself, taking up a cross daily, and following Jesus can look like. Our faith is supposed to cost us something, and our brothers and sisters help show us the way.

Along similar lines, my lovely friend and hero Joni Eareckson Tada is fond of saying, “Sometimes God allows what he hates in order to accomplish what God loves.”

Are the Scriptures above (or am I) suggesting that God *cannot* or *does not* answer “yes” in this lifetime to such healing prayers? Absolutely not. God can do anything that is in accord with his holy will.

Are the same Scriptures (or am I) suggesting that sometimes God’s holy will is to say a temporary “no” to our healing prayers in order to give us a better “yes” according to his infinite wisdom? Absolutely yes.

## **Pastoral Considerations**

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Former PCA minister, Francis Schaeffer, offers a helpful perspective on this. Schaeffer wrote:

*“The mistake...that the orthodox people have made...is [to say] that homophile tendencies are sin in themselves, even if there is no homosexual practice. Therefore, the homophile tends to be pushed out of human life (and especially orthodox church life) even if he does not practice homosexuality. This, I believe, is both cruel and wrong.”*

Similarly, John Stott said that if “gay people” cannot find love, identity, and completeness in our church families, then we ought to stop using the word “family” to describe our churches.

If you are interested in hearing more about this reality, consider [this talk](#) by Johanna Finegan, who is a PCA member, is attracted to women, is married to a man, was educated at MIT, and quotes the likes of Luther, Trueman, Mohler, Butterfield, and several Puritans in her reasoning.

Or consider the following Facebook comment by Rev. Greg Johnson, a minister in the PCA who is single, sexually chaste, and has for over 40 years been attracted only to men:

*“I know that (those who do not share my experience) mean well when (they) say we are “downplaying the gospel’s power to mortify sinful desires” where same-sex attraction is concerned. I hope you will ask \_\_\_\_\_...I suspect he will give you the same answer that Alan Downs of Exodus gave. Or Mike Rosenbush of Focus on the Family gave. Or that I would give...I suspect none of us has seen an exclusively SSA man ever become straight. Obedient? Yes. But not straight. For now, I mortify my sinful flesh daily knowing that my true healing awaits me in glory. When Pentecostals sell the false hope of healing, their victims pay for that false hope with subsequent feelings of shame, defeat and despair when healing does not come. The same is true with Christians with SSA. When you suggest that it can be mortified away, we pay for that false hope with feelings of shame, defeat and despair when our orientations don’t change. That over-realized eschatology has driven most people like me from the faith. There is a reason this conversation desperately needs to be revoiced.”*

The basic point is this. If we aren’t inclined to punish or prosecute fellow Christians for failing to successfully eliminate their alcohol cravings, their cancer, or their chronic insomnia, why on earth would we be inclined to punish or prosecute a fellow Christian for failing to successfully eliminate *unwanted feelings* of same-sex attraction?

When we encounter a person who is tempted by greed but who lives generously, or who is tempted by anger but who lives kind, or who is tempted by gluttony but who lives self-controlled, or who is tempted by wanting to give a false report but who lives truthful, we applaud them for their biblical obedience. We might even invite them to give their testimony in church.

Why would we not likewise applaud, and even platform, those who are tempted by same-sex attraction but who live chaste? Something tells me, especially in this day and age, that we should.

Perhaps instead of piling on scrutiny, we ought to come alongside these Christians and help support them in their efforts to be faithful. As the same-sex attracted Christian and poet, W.H. Auden once wrote to a friend:

*“There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seem more than I can bear, and if it wasn’t for you, and a few—how few—like you, I don’t think I could.”*

Recently, Greg Johnson published his story in *Christianity Today*. The title given is, “I Used to Hide My Shame. Now I Take Shelter Under the Gospel.” I hope that you will carefully read Greg’s story. Greg, a Christian minister who has been attracted to men for his entire 40-plus years of life, has never once kissed or held hands romantically with another person, because he loves Jesus.

While I’m on the subject of Greg, he took some hits when his church, Memorial PCA in St. Louis, hosted the first Revoice Conference in 2018. Instead of defending himself, Greg asked his Presbytery to investigate him for his views and practices. In effect, Greg invited his fellow ministers and elders to scrutinize him, and if found guilty of biblical infidelity, to prosecute him and kick him out of the denomination. The Presbytery obliged, and at the end of the investigation, Greg was judged orthodox and faithful.

The Presbytery report also concluded, “We do *not* believe that doctrinal positions contrary to the Scriptures and our confessional standards were advanced at Revoice 18” (emphasis mine).

It turns out that the closer you get to a person or a thing, the more faithful and orthodox that person or thing might reveal him/itself to be.

I wonder how many of us would consider inviting our own Presbyteries to investigate *us* for a wandering eye or questionable internet habits—or for that matter things like online gossip, slander, being quick to speak and slow to listen, mischaracterizing others, giving a false report, believing the worst about people, and not accepting people’s own explanations of their own words and statements as the truest understanding of what they actually believe?

I wonder how many of us would consider becoming more concerned about the logs in our own eyes than we are about the specks in the eyes of others?

## **Friends on All Sides**

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I do not write any of this to take a side. I actually have friends—*very good friends*—on all sides of this discussion, although I tend to agree with some friends more often than others. In all of these friendships, there have been moments of great encouragement as well as uncomfortable tension. Also in all of these friendships, not in spite of the tension but precisely because of it, my affection for my friends on all sides has deepened. What’s more, my perspective has been sharpened and refined because of them.

I think that's actually what happens in a real brotherhood or family. Sometimes we support and applaud each other, sometimes we get under each other's skin and even hurt each other. Sometimes we agree on things, sometimes we disagree. And through it all, those who are humble and teachable will become the better for it.

I believe that real relationship is a much more charitable alternative to private Facebook groups, "gotcha" blog posts, ill-informed conspiracy theories, and public-witness-damaging tribal echo chambers. In the days before us, I hope that all of my fellow ministers and elders in the PCA will join me in believing this, and be resolved to act upon it.

In the end, my own bottom line is this. Whether or not Revoice (or Harvest USA) is our cup of tea, I hope we in the PCA can at least agree and seek unity around one, simple fact. It remains indisputably true that not a single minister or elder in the PCA denies, diminishes, or doubts the historic, biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality.

As far as I can tell, every single minister and elder in the PCA believes and teaches that sex and marriage are God's gifts, given for one man and one woman in the context of marriage.

As far as I can tell, no PCA minister or elder takes issue with *Westminster Larger Catechism* answer #139.

As far as I can tell, the most "liberal" people in the PCA are on the "left" side of a denomination that is biblically, theologically, and ethically conservative. This means that the most liberal people in the PCA (if we want to call them that) are in fact biblically, theologically, and ethically conservative. Just ask their friends and neighbors who are gay but who *don't* identify as Christians.

Unless our universally shared biblical conservatism on these matters changes, why on earth would some of our members continue to take shots at others? It seems that in doing so, we are missing a whole forest because we remain judiciously fixated on a few trees. It seems that in doing so, we risk playing right into the devil's hands.

There is no smoking gun here, folks. Regrettable seminar titles in some circles, yes. Suspicion and judicious mistrust in other circles, yes.

But a smoking gun, no way.

So, what if we put the semantics and mortification discussions—which are indeed important discussions that should be had—inside the bigger, weightier context?

An easily-lost, and supremely significant reality is that the people we are talking about are denying themselves daily for the sake of Jesus. Like Greg Johnson and Stephen Moss, some of them are foregoing romantic involvement altogether because they love Jesus. In

this, they join the company of the apostle Paul and of Jesus. In this, they share a certain fellowship with the angels.

We are also talking about people who, like the same-sex attracted Nate Collins, Johanna Finegan, and Harvest USA's Tim Geiger marry and have children with a person of the opposite sex because they love Jesus.

As we have these discussions, let's also consider how we might celebrate and support these valiant, exemplary, self-denying, obedient souls in their ongoing pursuit of holiness.

Along the way, let's also consider what we might learn from them.

## **The End of the Matter**

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The last thing I'll add is this.

It is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I—while also being a deeply committed, theologically and biblically and ethically orthodox Christian—am the worst.

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