

The Westminster Statement on Biblical Sexuality

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Ray Ortlund, one of the original signers of the Nashville Statement, in his book *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*

, wrote poignantly on the gospel implications of taking a public stand on sexual issues in a culture such as ours:

"Everyone who reveres the gospel has compelling reasons to champion biblical sexual ethics. It is falling to our generation to raise up a prophetic counterculture in the face of the sexual revolution's direct attack on Christ and his marital appeal at the heart of the gospel. The fact that we too are sinners does not exempt us from taking this stand. Our own sinfulness simply means that we take our stand with humility and honesty. But we must not be silent. What is at stake in our sexuality is nothing less than the gospel itself."

The PCA has agreed with this sentiment, recently passing an overture to "declare the Nashville Statement to be a biblically faithful declaration." Some have pointed out that what the PCA did is tremendously important for several reasons, including the benefits of showing forth the clarity of God's word as it speaks to current and pressing cultural issues.

However, some within the denomination have argued that this was a mistake because there is no need for making such a statement, citing the fact that we are a confessional denomination, and our standards speak clearly enough. Others have argued that it is not pastoral in nature. It was even argued on the floor of our General Assembly that certain parts of the Nashville Statement are hurtful to those who identify as same sex attracted.

If this is the case then I would simply point out that the Nashville Statement overture passed by the PCA was simply a "declaration" that this was a "biblically faithful declaration" about a specific, culturally sensitive, and terribly relevant issue. The real pastoral help should, can, and does come from Scripture and is set out in our confessional standards.

Therefore, given some of these recent arguments *against* the PCA's decision to declare the Nashville Statement to be biblically faithful, I thought it would be helpful to look at the clarity of the Westminster Standards, specifically as to what our standards have to say about sexual ethics and the ordering of sexual desires. After all, I and all ministers in the PCA have taken vows "to *sincerely* receive and adopt" the teaching of these devotionally and pastorally useful doctrinal standards. While pastoral in nature, they are far

more convicting and constricting than the Nashville Statement regarding how our sexual desires are to be ordered and directed.

According to LC 139, among the sins forbidden by the 7th Commandment are all "unnatural lusts" and "all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections." The *Westminster Confession of Faith* 6.4-5 teaches that the corruption of nature itself, from which our sins proceed, is in itself, prior to any transgression, *truly and properly sin*. So, when comparisons are being made that seem to put SSA in the same category as non-moral physical maladies (unless I am misunderstanding something) there seems to be some--at least implicit--disagreement between teaching that includes comparisons such as these and the Confession and Catechism's teaching on the taxonomy of sin and corruption.

But there is another line in the previous WLC question (138) that should be very relevant to the current issues in the PCA. Larger Catechism 138 seems to speak into the current situation in a way that I have not yet seen addressed in any sort comprehensive manner. Among the duties required by the 7th Commandment is "marriage by those that have not the gift of Continency." Also forbidden by the 7th Commandment (LC 139) according to our standards is the "undue delay of marriage."

Here seems to be a significant area that some of the Spiritual Friendship and Revoice proponents within the PCA need to address: do our confessional standards teach that the 7th commandment requires biblical marriage for those who have strong sexual desires (however disordered)? The Catechism seems to be arguing that the presence of strong sexual desires rules out one's having the "gift" of continency. Here is what the English Puritan, Thomas Ridgeley, in his famous exposition of the Westminster Larger Catechism, *A Body of Divinity*, says:

"As for those who cannot, without inconveniency, govern their affections, but are *sometimes tempted to any thing which is inconsistent with that purity of heart and life which all ought religiously to maintain*, it is their duty to enter into a married state; which is an ordinance that God has appointed to prevent the breach of this commandment."

In 1 Corinthians 7:2 and 7:9 (the same texts the Westminster Divines attached as proofs for this clause) Paul sets forth the distinction between the gift of continency (celibacy) and the need to marry because of sexual desires. Paul never says someone should stay single out of an inability to fulfill disordered sexual desires, rather he charges those with unbridled sexual desires to marry quickly. Moreover, Paul's teaching on believers being regenerate and sanctified members of the new creation order (6:11ff) quite naturally flows into his teaching on sexual desire and marriage in chapter 7. Regarding those who had been guilty of homosexual behavior or desires prior to being "washed" by Christ (6:11) and given their new identity in Christ, Paul trumpets the resounding and comforting, "And such were some of you!"

Our Anglican brothers agree with the LC in their Book of Common Prayer, teaching that marriage "was ordained for a remedy against sins, and to avoid fornication; that such persons *as have not the gift of continency* might marry, and keep themselves undefiled

members of Christ's body."

Philip Melanchthon, in his Apology of the (Augsburg) Confession agrees:

Paul here commands those who have not the gift of continence to marry; for, soon afterwards he explains himself, saying: "It is better to marry than to burn;" 1 Cor. 7:9. And Matt. 19:11, Christ clearly says: "All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given." As then, since the fall of Adam, both the natural affection and the inborn evil lust exist in all of us, and this lust fomented the natural desires, so that matrimony is even more necessary than before the corruption of human nature, Paul thus speaks of matrimony, in order to assist our weakness; and to prevent burning passion, he commands those to marry, to whom marriage is necessary. And the declaration: "It is better to marry than to burn," cannot be abolished by any human law or monastic vow; for no law can change the inborn constitution of our nature. All, therefore, who are subject to sexual passion, have the right to marry; [17] and all those who are unable to continue truly pure and chaste, are bound to follow the command of Paul: To avoid fornication let each one have his own wife. In this matter each one must examine his own conscience."

By way of contrast, the Roman Catholic Church has redefined the "gift" of continency and chastity and singleness for SSA individuals. Revoice and Spiritual Friendship sound far more in accord with t

he teaching of Rome on this point than with the historic teaching of Protestantism. The Roman Catholic Catechism reads,

"Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection."

So, the idea that the earnest endeavor to live a chaste, single life *rather than* to employ God's primary appointed means of alleviating sexual passions and temptations is the *Roman Catholic solution* to a problem the Scriptures and all of Protestantism has up until quite recently understood and approached much differently.

If the Reformed, Anglican and Lutheran teaching on continence is the same as that which the Larger Catechism teaches concerning the 7th commandment, it leaves me to wonder whether some of the Spiritual Friendship and/or Revoice proponents in the PCA might not have some significant disagreement with the Westminster Standards on this issue and all other implicated areas as well.

I am certainly not claiming that the temptations of those who struggle with same sex attraction will ever completely go away. What I am intimating is that our doctrinal standards interpret Paul as saying that biblically defined marriage is one of God's foremost means

against all sexual immorality *and temptations*. It is one thing to be in the fight of your life against your sexual desires and temptations--it is quite another altogether to do so without fighting equally as hard to pursue and make use of God's appointed means to satisfy those sexual desires as an aid to mortifying lust. To fight to abstain without making use of God's means is rather self-defeating in the battle against lust and unclean affections. This neglect of God's gift of marriage--perhaps unnecessarily--has also been said to result in crippling loneliness for suffering believers.

It may be objected that there are a great many exceptions to being able to marry. There are obvious physical disabilities or any number of other preventative providences that make up life in a fallen world that prevent someone from marriage, temporarily or permanently. These are real trials and need to be addressed on a person-by-person basis with great compassion. I have experienced loneliness only for a fraction of my life, and it is an awful thing. However, the presence of disordered sexual desires and unnatural affections does not seem to fit in the WLC's understanding of a person's possession of the 'gift' of continency. Simply being single does not mean one has been endowed with the "gift" of continency or celibacy.

I am prayerfully optimistic that the Study committee that was approved by the General Assembly (not yet named) will serve our denomination along with the broader church well. I also trust that they will address this particular issue, *especially as to how it is addressed in our confessional standards*, as it would seem to have a direct impact on how we as ministers teach and shepherd God's people on this tremendously volatile and sensitive issue--especially those who valiantly struggle against the sin of SSA.

At the end of the day, while extraordinarily helpful and clear and biblically faithful regarding such a culturally relevant and pressing issue, the Nashville Statement says much less, and in much softer tones, than that which I and my fathers and brothers in the PCA have already vowed to *sincerely* receive and adopt as our binding confessional standards.

Furthermore, those things which our standards make clear regarding sexual ethics and ordering of desires are also tremendously pastoral and useful in shepherding, teaching, and counseling struggling believers through the difficulties of SSA and other disordered desires and unclean affections. They not only point them to the Savior, but to God's ordained means of grace and to His plan for great blessing and aid in this life. These things are pastoral indeed.

If I have vowed to sincerely receive and adopt these things, how am I--how are we--using this in our evaluation of current trends in the PCA and in our ministry to God's people, especially those who struggle with these issues? For the sake of the gospel, are we taking a stand not only on what the Nashville Statement declares, but on what the Westminster Standards pastorally and clearly teach on these ever so important issues?

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