

# **Central Carolina Presbytery Study Committee Report on 2018 Revoice Conference**

## **I. Introduction**

In July 2018, Memorial Presbyterian Church (PCA) hosted the Revoice Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. Affirming the historic Christian doctrine of marriage, but also using the language of gay Christian, sexual minorities, and queer culture, Revoice proved controversial even before the conference itself, generating both commendation and criticism. With plans for another conference, a new advisory council, and continued advocacy from (and in support of) last year's plenary speakers, Revoice is more than a one-time event. It is a burgeoning movement that deserves to be taken seriously and examined carefully.

On November 13, 2018 the Central Carolina Presbytery formed an Ad-Interim Study Committee "to explore the 2018 Revoice Conference and to report its findings to Central Carolina Presbytery and recommend any action that the Presbytery might take." In keeping with the Presbytery's instructions, the Moderator appointed seven members and one alternate to serve on the committee. Each of the following members voted in support of this report:

TE Dr. Bill Barclay (Sovereign Grace)  
TE Dr. Kevin DeYoung (Christ Covenant)  
TE Dr. Tom Hawkes (Uptown)  
TE Dr. Blair Smith (Reformed Theological Seminary)  
TE Mark Upton (Hope Community)  
RE Bob Goudzwaard (Christ Covenant)  
RE Tom Queen (Uptown)  
RE Charlie King, alt. (Providence)

Blair Smith served as chairman for the committee and Bob Goudzwaard as secretary. We met four times in person from December – April and also exchanged papers, resources, and reflections over email. While this report was written to fulfill the motion from our own Presbytery, we have also kept in mind that our findings may be of interest to others in the PCA, and perhaps to the wider church. We have tried to write with these broader audiences in mind.

## **II. Approach and Scope**

Because the event was hosted by one of its member churches, featured a speaker from one of its congregations, and included involvement from its denominational seminary, Revoice has been especially controversial in the Presbyterian Church in America. As a denomination, we take seriously Paul's injunction to keep a close watch on our life and doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). That means balancing fidelity to truth and faithfulness in pastoral care. When new approaches to ministry and new theological language arise, we believe it is important to examine whether these new ideas and new approaches are true to Scripture and supported by our own confessional tradition. We understand that if pursued in the wrong way or with the wrong spirit, this kind of

theological examination can amount to censorious nitpicking. As far as we know our own hearts, that is not our aim in this report. Rather, we come to our task as shepherds in the flock of God, aware of our own sinfulness and mindful that the topics we will explore are much more than intellectual curiosities for many sheep in our fold.

We intentionally limited our work as a committee to the talks given at the 2018 Revoice Conference. Our Presbytery did not task us with evaluating an entire movement or providing commentary on a constellation of speakers, articles, and books. During the writing of this report, Revoice issued a “Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience.” We applaud Revoice for increased clarity on a number of important issues. The Statement strongly affirms biblical marriage, the negative effects of the Fall, and the need for Christian obedience and sanctification. At the same time, as our report will bear out, we differ in areas related to identity, same-sex desire, and the nature of same-sex friendships. While our thoughts have been informed by this new Statement and by the wider conversation surrounding Revoice, our stated task was to evaluate the Revoice *Conference* that took place last July at a PCA church.

To that end, every committee member watched, listened to, or read the available pre-conference and conference messages. Since we did not have access to the breakout sessions, let alone to the personal look and feel of the conference, we have focused exclusively on the plenary addresses that can be accessed online.

### **III. Summary**

#### **A. Matthew Lee Anderson (Pre-Conference)**

Anderson’s message is an attempt to place Christian sexual desire within the broader category of desire itself. He calls for a “deflationary attitude” toward sexual desire: “The path toward ordering such [sexual] desires toward God’s love begins with posing the question of whether it is sex and its pleasures that they aim at, or whether the sexual desire is an echo or reflection of a deeper and more profound longing for intimacy and love that sexual union can only imperfectly anticipate.” For Anderson, the way sexual desire is sanctified is no different for gay Christians than for other Christians.

The obstacles facing gay Christians, however, make for a “double burden.” The first burden is the one we all share: our sexual desires must be sanctified. The second burden—and this one is unique to gay Christians—is that “they must also navigate such formation in the midst of a pervasive skepticism about the attempt to faithfully reclaim licit aspects of being gay while saying ‘no’ to illicit sexual desires.” For Anderson, gay Christians can sanctify illicit sexual desires while at the same time redeeming—through friendship and an “aesthetic vision”—the “licit aspects of being gay.”

#### **B. Ron Belgau (Pre-Conference)**

Ron Belgau is the cofounder, with Wesley Hill, of *Spiritual Friendship*, a group blog (and now something of a movement) committed to the recovery of Christian teaching on friendship.

In this lecture, Belgau seeks to communicate three things. First, he argues that “a robust understanding of friendship is necessary in order to rightly order same-sex love.” Second, Belgau insists that sexual desires directed toward the same sex are the result of the fall and must be mortified. Third, Belgau teaches that healthy Christ-centered friendship “is a way of learning how to love and desire other people in accordance with God's design.” Belgau argues that in the most important biblical covenants—with Abraham, with Moses, and with the disciples in the New Covenant—the relationship between God and the covenanting party is described as friendship.

### **C. Brother Trout (Pre-Conference)**

Brother Trout is a Dominican who lives in a common-life community with other monks for prayer and mutual encouragement in obedience to God. According to Trout, the gay Christian conversation is difficult because we have people who are not comfortable with themselves and people programmed to avoid all difficult conversations and social interactions.

Trout argues that instead of reducing Christianity to a set of do's and don'ts, we need to find common ground by placing each of our stories within the old, old story of Jesus and our relationship with him. Every life has purpose and meaning. We all are part of God's larger story that is still being played out today. Trout sees in Moses, and ultimately in Jesus, examples of how we can put ourselves “at the service of a story already being told.”

### **D. Johanna Finegan (Pre-Conference)**

Finegan's talk addresses criticisms of Revoice and the gay Christian movement. Finegan is concerned to lift unnecessary guilt and worry from those who identify as gay Christians. To this end, she identifies and responds to five different criticisms, each of which touch on progressive sanctification.

First, Finegan addresses the idea that “not using the word gay is a sign of holiness and maturity.” She gives personal background on coming to terms with the word in her own life as a teenager and how her mother instinctively labeled her as “gay.” The word need not carry any other baggage, she argues.

Second, she rejects the notion that to identify as gay makes homosexuality central to one's identity. For her, identifying as gay is not a dominant category. Rather, it is a way of identifying “specific kinds of questions and specific kinds of needs for pastoral care.”

Third, Finegan seeks to counter the objection that gay Christians are “too ok with being gay.” Finegan thinks that seeing gayness within God's sovereignty and providence can highlight weakness as well as God's work in and through this unique weakness.

Fourth, she encourages gay Christians not to see themselves as “broken straight people.” She suggests that when gays become sanctified—but do not become straight—it might be a sign that desiring the opposite sex is not fundamental to God's plan.

Finally, Finegan addresses the criticism that gay Christians do not see themselves on a trajectory that includes a change in orientation. She argues that within the gay Christian community, most people do not see orientation change, but they do see change in being drawn closer to God and growing Christ-likeness.

In Finegan's own life, she relates how she had to learn the importance of agreeing with God and coming to share his mind and attitude on the matter of sexuality. By becoming examples of losing one's life for Jesus, Finegan insists that gay Christians can be "illustrations of what it looks like to faithfully follow Jesus that can help our straight brothers and sisters."

### **E. Eve Tushnet**

In her message on "Praise," Tushnet argues that those struggling with homosexuality (1) can find guidance for their same-sex attraction by looking at models of biblical friendships, like Jonathan and David, and (2) should draw comfort from God's love for the marginalized, since the church has marginalized those with homosexual desires.

Tushnet alludes to the wrongness of some homosexual activity and implores "gays" not to marry in same-sex marriages. She also admits that the friendship between David and Jonathan was not sexual. She calls for all people to have their deepest needs for love met, not by people, but by God, and she asserts that loving the law of the Lord is good. At the same time, Tushnet presents homosexuality as in some ways healthy and often commends "same-sex love." She insists that homosexual desire, though it should not be fully acted upon, can be embraced, celebrated, and redirected.

### **F. Nate Collins**

Collins's message, which focuses on the ministries of Jeremiah and Jesus, is a word of lament. Jeremiah called Judah to repentance, a message and ministry that led to Jeremiah's suffering. Because the spiritual shepherds of Israel allowed false prophets to arise, Jeremiah's message went unheeded. The spiritual shepherds, argues Collins, were ultimately to blame. Likewise, Jesus denounced the Pharisees as bad and unjust shepherds who laid burdens on people they could not bear (just as bad shepherds today lay impossible burdens on those who have different orientations).

Both Jeremiah and Jesus provide examples of godly exasperation, of prophetic lamentation that is not without hope. "Is it possible," Collins asks, "that gay people today are being sent by God like Jeremiah to find God's words for the church, to eat them and make them our own? . . . Is it possible that gender and sexual minorities who live lives of costly obedience are themselves a prophetic call to the church to abandon idolatrous attitudes toward the nuclear family, toward sexual pleasure?" Collins urges gender and sexual minorities to embrace the call to suffer, that they might be a blessing to the church and that the church might learn to provide the help and comfort they need.

## **G. Wesley Hill**

Hill approached the topic of hope through the lens of shame, beginning with a story about one gay writer's sense of overwhelming shame when he was caught, as a young man, looking at a shirtless man on a father-son fishing trip. From there, Hill transitioned to John 8 "to put a different story up against the story that I just read." Hill suggests there are three things to notice from the familiar story of the woman caught in adultery.

First, Jesus is not soft on sin. He "does not combat the shame of this woman caught in adultery by rewriting the rule book." Hill admits that he struggles at times with the biblical definition of marriage—an exclusive covenant between a man and a woman, ordered around the procreation of children—but like the woman in John 8, Jesus does not want to redeem us by "changing the standard of morality" to fit our lives.

Second, gay Christians are no better off or worse off than other Christians. "This woman gets saved from shame, not by being told that she's not a sinner, but by being placed in the company of other sinners."

Third, liberation entails a new way of life. Jesus did not mean to condemn the woman, but he did mean to transform her. Referencing Romans 6 and Titus 2, along with John 8, Hill argues that in Christ, "We are free now to say yes to the kind of love he wants to give us."

## **IV. Evaluation**

Rather than respond to each talk separately, we thought it would be more useful to organize our evaluation around five main themes.

- Desire and temptation
- Labels and identity
- Spiritual friendship
- Homosexuality as a gift
- The pervasiveness of pain

Before moving through these categories, it is worth noting the diversity in content and tone among the seven plenary speakers. Some were warm, others more sarcastic. Some were academic, others more personal. Some were obviously hurt and frustrated, others more hopeful. Anderson, Finegan, and Tushnet did the most to cover the themes listed above, while Belgau and Collins focused more narrowly on their respective topics, friendship and pain. Hill's message was the most pastoral and constructive in nature. Trout's message, though not without good observations, did not contribute much to the broader themes of the conference. Importantly, Tushnet, Belgau, and Trout are Roman Catholic. As far as we know, only Finegan is part of a PCA congregation.

Even with this diversity, however, we believe the themes we've chosen to highlight were addressed by most speakers and represent the most important ideas put forth in the conference.

## A. Desire and Temptation

The Revoice speakers we heard were all united in their belief that the Bible does not allow for gay marriage and that sexual activity between persons of the same-sex is forbidden by God. Given the mood of our culture, not to mention the many revisionist theologies clamoring for our attention, Revoice's affirmation of certain aspects of biblical sexuality is to be highly commended. We thank God for their commitment to an orthodox, Christian understanding of marriage, especially when such a commitment comes at a personal cost for many in the Revoice movement.

### *Desire for Sin or Sinful Desires?*

While Revoice is premised upon a rejection of same-sex sexual relationships, the speakers did not reject those sexual desires outright. In multiple places, Anderson refers to permissible forms of same-sex desire and licit aspects of being gay. Tushnet's message assumes that homosexual desires, though they should not be acted upon, are not in themselves sinful but can be redeployed, and perhaps even celebrated. Belgau insists that sexual desires directed toward the same sex are the result of the fall and must be mortified, but he stops short of affirming that the desires themselves are sinful.

This is a key area of disagreement among Christians who hold to a traditional understanding of marriage: are same-sex desires sinful, or are they merely disordered desires that become sinful when acted upon? The answer to that question will profoundly shape our pastoral care, our advice for the same-sex attracted, our language, our prayers, and the labels we use. Most of our disagreements with Revoice start with the theological conviction that *the desire for an illicit end is itself an illicit desire*. Because this is such an important point, we will spend considerably more time in this first section than in any of the other four.

The Bible is full of examples of the sinfulness of misplaced and misdirected desires. The tenth commandment forbids coveting your neighbor's house or your neighbor's wife (Exod. 20:17). The word translated "covet" is simply the Hebrew word (and in the Septuagint, the Greek word) for desire. Likewise, the New Testament describes our fallen desires (*epithumia*) as sinful desires, ignorant desires, and fleshly desires (Rom. 6:11-12; 1 Pet. 1:14; 2:11). Clearly, we do not have to act upon a desire for that desire to be condemned by God (Matt. 5:27-28).

According to the Reformed tradition, we are held accountable not only for the sins we commit by an act of the will, but also the original sin we inherited from Adam. "This corruption of nature, during this life," the Westminster Confession states, "doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified, yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly called sin" (WCF 6.5). Later the Confession declares that "Every sin, both original and actual," is a "transgression of the righteous law of God," and does, "in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner" (WCF 6.6). The fall does not simply make us broken and disordered, it condemns us before God.

To be sure, many same-sex attracted persons testify that their desires were not freely chosen. That is, they did not wake up one day and decide to be same-sex attracted. While the reality of

these unbidden desires should move us to greater sympathy and understanding, it does not change the moral calculus of those desires. It is one of the hallmarks of Reformed anthropology that sin can be both unchosen bondage and willful rebellion at the same time, “a kind of voluntary servitude” as Calvin put it.<sup>1</sup> This is true for all people, not just for those with same-sex attraction. We all have disordered desires that arise in us unbidden.

How we describe our involuntary, disordered desires is a major difference between a Roman Catholic understanding of sin and a Reformed understanding of sin. According to the Catholic Catechism, the “inclination to sin that Tradition calls concupiscence” is “left for us to wrestle with,” but “it cannot harm those who do not consent.”<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, the Catechism explains that “Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, disordered desire, though a result of the Fall, does not become sin apart from a consenting act of the will.

The Reformed tradition has uniformly disagreed with this understanding of concupiscence. “The Reformation,” writes Bavinck, “spoke out against that position, asserting that also the impure thoughts and desires that arose in us prior to and apart from our will are sin.”<sup>4</sup> Calvin explicitly teaches these “inordinate desires” (*concupiscentiis*) should be called not merely “weakness” but “sin.” “We label ‘sin,’” he writes, “that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort. We accordingly teach that in the saints, until they are divested of mortal bodies, there is always sin; for in their flesh there resides the depravity of inordinate desiring which contends against righteousness.”<sup>5</sup> We repent of these sins, therefore, not because we are necessarily changing our minds about something (an etymological definition of repentance that scholars have rightly rejected), but because we grieve for our sin, hate our sin, and “turn from them all unto God” (WCF 15.2).

At this point, some in the Revoice conversation might argue for a qualitative difference between desire and attraction. Anderson, for example, makes this distinction in his category of “aesthetic vision.” Specifically, he says, “It seems to this observer that one thing which remains after the purification of same-sex sexual desires—besides faith, hope, and charity—is the complex set of *noticings* and *attractions* toward members of one’s own sex” (emphasis added). While noticing is not the same as desire, it is hard to imagine how “attraction” does not carry some sense of magnetic pull, arousal, or desire. By a simple dictionary definition, to notice is to observe or perceive, while attraction suggests interest and allurement. A mother may recognize that her teenage son is quite handsome or that her daughter has grown into an objectively beautiful woman. These noticings can take place apart from any sexual longing. But if a mother were to experience any *attraction* to her son or daughter surely we would describe this kind of noticing as illicit, as a perverse response—however unbidden—that should be mortified at all costs. In short, while we

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.iii.5.

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 1264.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2515.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:143. Later Bavinck explains that “though it is true that the voluntary element in this restricted sense is not always a constituent in the concept of sin, the sins of the human state and involuntary sins still do not totally occur apart from the will” (3:144).

<sup>5</sup> *Inst.* III.iii.10.

distinguish between noticing and attraction, we do not see how attraction and desire are fundamentally different moral categories.

This does not mean same-sex attracted Christians should be full of morbid self-loathing, any more than Christians who constantly battle unwanted heterosexual desires should be consigned forever to the slough of despond. It does mean, however, that when the heart is drawn after an illegitimate end, we must repent of that sinful desire, longing, or attraction and run to Christ for cleanness of conscience and forgiveness of sin.

### *Lead Us Not Into Temptation*

If a desire for something illicit is itself an illicit desire, and if being attracted to that illicit end is another expression of that disordered (and sinful) desire, perhaps temptation provides the moral space we are looking for. Although temptation was not a major theme at Revoice, it is closely related to the questions above and was a major theme in our discussion as a committee.

The key text is James 1:14-15.

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

On the face of it, this passage seems to indicate that it is possible to be tempted by evil desires without sinning. Only when the will consents to the temptation does the alluring and enticing desire become sin. Although a plausible reading of the text at first glance, the Reformed tradition has consistently interpreted James 1:14-15 along different lines. Here, for example is John Calvin distinguishing his view on verse 15 from that of the Roman Catholic Church:

It seems, however, improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture, to restrict the word sin to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins. But as the use of a word is various, there is nothing unreasonable if it be taken here, as in many other places, for actual sin. And the Papists ignorantly lay hold on this passage, and seek to prove from it that vicious, yea, filthy, wicked, and the most abominable lusts are not sins, provided there is no assent; for James does not shew when sin begins to be born, so as to be sin, and so accounted by God, but when it breaks forth.<sup>6</sup>

For Calvin, there is indwelling sin (the temptations caused by desire in v. 14b), actual sin (the birth of sin in v. 15a), and—mentioned in the next paragraph in his *Commentary*—“perfected” sin (the deadly fully grown sin in v. 15b). When James talks about temptations leading to sin, he does not mean that the temptation (in this case) is itself morally neutral.

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<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 290.

The word “sin” is used in different ways in Scripture, just as the word “temptation” has a range of meanings. In fact, the word for “tempts” (*peirazei*) and “tempted” (*peirazetai*) in verses 13 and 14 is the same word (in noun form) translated as “trials” (*peirasmois*) in verse 2. Clearly, there are some “temptations” God gives us in the form of morally neutral trials and some “temptations” God never gives us because they arise from within as morally illicit desires. The one who is experiencing temptation caused by his own desire (*epithumias*) is already experiencing the reality of indwelling sin, though that indwelling sin (in the Christian) can be resisted so as not to give birth to actual (i.e., acted upon) sin.

The parsing of sin and temptation can be thorny, which is why Reformed theologians have typically explained these issues with careful nuance. A case in point is John Owen’s handling of temptation in *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin* (1667).<sup>7</sup> Once again, James 1:14-15 is a pivotal text:

Now, what is it to be tempted? It is to have that proposed to man’s consideration which, if he close, it is evil, it is sin unto him. This is sin’s trade: *epithumei*—“it lusts.” It is raising up in the heart, and proposing unto the mind and affections, that which is evil; trying, as it were, whether the soul will close with its suggestions, or how far it will carry them on, though it does not wholly prevail.<sup>8</sup>

Up to this point, it sounds like Owen may consider temptation caused by lusts to be morally neutral, to be a kind of spiritual struggle that cannot be called sin until we acquiesce to its allurements. But notice what Owen says next:

Now, when such a temptation comes from without, it is unto the soul an indifferent thing, neither good nor evil, unless it be consented unto; but the very proposal from within, it being the soul’s own act, is its sin.<sup>9</sup>

Again, key to Owen’s understanding is the distinction between indwelling sin—arising from within, perhaps even unbidden—and actual sin. Later in the same paragraph, Owen describes the tempting proposal from within as “this power of sin to beget figments and ideas of actual evil in the heart.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Owen argues that “every man is tempted—that is, every man is beguiled or deceived—by his own lust, or indwelling sin, which we have often declared to be the same.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, when there is this kind of “temptation”—the kind that arises from within—it is no different than the lusts of the heart and indwelling sin itself. What makes temptation a “temptation” is that it tempts us to actual, observable sin, but this does not make the temptation something other than sin.

In *Of Temptation*, Owen explains that temptations are taken two ways: passively (as in James 1:2) and actively (as in James 1:13-14). Roughly speaking, passive temptation is that which entreats us

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<sup>7</sup> Published along with *The Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656) and *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It* (1658) as *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006). All quotations for these works come from this volume.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, *Indwelling Sin*, 275-76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; see also 333.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

from without, while active temptation is that which arises from within. Christ, then, suffered real temptation (Heb. 2:18; 4:15), but it was a temptation that befell him in the form of trials and the devil's entreaties, not a temptation that was stirred up due to disordered desire. "Christ had only the *suffering* part of temptation, when he entered into it" Owen observes, "we have also the *sinning* part."<sup>12</sup>

For Owen, James 1:14-15 describes the process of (1) the mind being drawn away, (2) the affections being entangled, (3) the will consenting to actual sin, (4) the conversation wherein sin is brought forth into view, and (5) the stubborn course that finishes sin and ends in death.<sup>13</sup> Each step of the process is worse than the next. We should not think that the entanglement of the affections is equivalent to obstinately pursuing a life of sin. There *is* moral space to be found between each step. And yet, this process is not one that moves from innocence to sin, but rather one that sees indwelling sin move from the mind to the affections to the will and finally to the outward working of sin in the life (and death) of a person.

## B. Labels and Identity

"Demand for recognition of one's identity," political scientist Francis Fukuyama writes, "is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today."<sup>14</sup> The "identity discourse" that is so pronounced in the wider culture has also been welcomed into some quarters of the Church. Revoice has adopted identity language on its website, speaking of "gender and sexual minorities" as well as "gay, lesbian, [and] same-sex-attracted Christians." What is more, identity was a theme across various talks held at its 2018 Conference, especially the pre-conference talk by Johanna Finegan.

According to some at Revoice, using the language of "gay Christian" is nothing more than the reasonable desire to "speak English," which is why there was a pervasive sense among the speakers that they were tired of being chided for "using the wrong words," and "not using enough of the right words." Getting exercised over labels is, for many in the Revoice conversation, little more than overwrought scrupulosity.

There are times when Revoice's presenters deploy gay identity contextually so that those who struggle with same-sex attraction can receive the pastoral care they need. In this sense, "gay" or "sexual minority" might be used occasionally in order to identify a persistent struggle that must be mortified by the power of the Holy Spirit. Insofar as identity language is used in this way, we see it as consistent with the manner in which faithful Christians have talked throughout the centuries (e.g., "I'm an alcoholic but a Christian who is seeking to forsake this sin.").

But there are other times when Revoice's presenters appear more comfortable with identity language taking on a semi-permanent role and are rather cavalier regarding the shaping influence of the language used to identify ourselves. If someone says, "I wrestle with unwanted desires for persons of the same sex," that indicates a struggle against sin (even if the desires do not

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<sup>12</sup> Owen, *Of Temptation*, 183.

<sup>13</sup> Owen, *Indwelling Sin*, 297-98.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), xv.

change and the struggle lasts a lifetime). It also suggests that these desires are not morally neutral. By contrast, a phrase like “sexual minority” speaks of a settled identity. Besides, 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?

Klyne Snodgrass says, “Identity is the sum of everything that pertains to us and shapes us.”<sup>15</sup> When Christians adopt a category that includes sinful desires, they are not merely identifying a struggle. Such linguistic moves signal an inappropriate add-on to what we all agree is a more fundamental category: Christian. As the Apostle Paul makes abundantly clear throughout his letter to the Ephesians, “Christ is not an add-on to an existing identity; he seeks to remake our identity.”<sup>16</sup> To the church at Corinth Paul writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Accordingly, when Paul addressed Christians at the beginning of his letters he was deliberate in his use of “saints” (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2). Such a label certainly does not capture the entirety of a Christian’s life still fighting sin, but it does provide an identity that partially grasps a present reality and *fully* pictures a future one. For Christians, language provides realities we inhabit in Christ and seek to live into by faith. Rather than reveling in the tension between identifying as gay yet practicing chastity (as many within Revoice do), Christians are called to “own” our identity in Christ as incompatible with any sinful inclination that is contrary to the way of Christ.

To be sure, believers may refer to themselves as “evangelical Christians” or “Reformed Christians” in such a way that the modifier does not take precedence over the noun. But “evangelical” and “Reformed” are not modifiers rooted in sinful desires. No one is insisting that Christians only and always describe themselves as Christians, or that they only put the modifiers after the noun. The controversy is not about syntax but about whether it is biblically appropriate to think of oneself, and to label oneself, according to a sexual inclination that is rooted in the fall.

It is true that Romans 7 (according to most Reformed interpreters) depicts the believer’s struggle between the old man and the new man. But Paul never appropriates the wickedness of his flesh as an inseparable part of his regenerate personhood. It would be like a man calling himself a “pornography Christian” or an “opioid Christian.” Romans 7 can helpfully remind us that our brothers and sisters may struggle with same-sex attraction their whole lives, just as every Christian continues to struggle with indwelling sin, but Romans 7 lends no credence to the notion that those struggles should be a constitutive part of our identity in Christ.

In a related vein, we wonder whether the language of “gay Christian” tends to undermine the expectation that those who are in Christ will be conformed more and more into his image. We agree with the uniform presentation at Revoice that same-sex attracted Christians often do not see their fallen desires *totally* overcome. Further, we recognize that progressive sanctification must

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<sup>15</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

not be construed automatically as a movement from homosexual attraction to heterosexual attraction. And yet, we believe it is a mistake to treat sexual orientation (a category of recent invention) as immutable (or nearly so). The very concept of sexual orientation has a dubious history and must not be construed as a hegemonic category of personhood. If same-sex attraction is a result of the fall, we should expect it to be removed from the experience of glorified Christians, and consequently we should anticipate that these desires will begin to be sanctified here on earth. While it would be pastorally unwise to promise complete or immediate change for same-sex attracted believers, it is also unwise (and unbiblical) to hold out little hope that God can do more than we ask or imagine when it comes to any of our sinful desires.<sup>17</sup> Every Christian is, after all, being transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

### C. Spiritual Friendship

Several speakers talked about the importance of reclaiming a fully biblical understanding of friendship. This was a key theme for Tushnet and especially for Belgau. As Belgau tells the story, he began researching spiritual friendship after writing a 18,500-word essay which was overwhelmingly negative toward homosexuality. Belgau realizes now that while he “made very clear what the Bible said gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians could not do,” he failed to explain “how we could actively fulfill the call to love God and love neighbor.” For Belgau, recovering a Christian understanding of friendship is paramount—for the same-sex attracted *and* for the heterosexually attracted. At the Last Supper, Jesus related to his disciples not as mere servants, but as friends who knew their master’s business. Christ also framed his sacrifice on the cross as an act of friendship (John 15:13).

Like Tushnet in her talk, Belgau helpfully reminds the church that friendship is a significant biblical category. Knowing that it is all too easy for churches to focus on marriages and children, to the exclusion of friendship, Belgau’s insistence on being a friend of God and friends with each other is a necessary exhortation. He offers same-sex attracted believers a positive vision of friendship and is careful to distinguish between carnal sexuality and true spiritual relationships.

At the same time, Belgau acknowledges that his most controversial position may be that he sees covenant friendships as more binding than marriage. We disagree with Belgau in this understanding of covenant friendship. In his new book *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, Saul Olyan (himself a practicing gay man) concludes that although friends in the Hebrew Bible are often compared to relatives and share many of the same expectations and terms, friendship and family differ fundamentally in that friendship is “voluntary and more easily terminated.”<sup>18</sup> Friendship is

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<sup>17</sup> Articles 1 and 2 of the Canons of Dort’s Fifth Head of Doctrine reflect well this reality *and* hope: “Whom God calls, according to his purpose, to the communion of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and regenerates by the Holy Spirit, he delivers also from the dominion and slavery of sin in this life; though not altogether from the body of sin, and from the infirmities of the flesh, so long as they continue in this world. Hence spring daily sins of infirmity, and hence spots adhere to the best works of the saints; which furnish them with constant matter for humiliation before God, and flying for refuge to Christ crucified; for mortifying the flesh more and more by the spirit of prayer, and by holy exercises of piety; and for pressing forward to the goal of perfection, till being at length delivered from this body of death, they are brought to reign with the Lamb of God in heaven.”

<sup>18</sup> Saul Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 115.

not permanent, exclusive, and legally defined like marriage.<sup>19</sup> Friends do not share the same obligations as family members (like the role of *Levir* or kinsman-redeemer) and more easily enter or exit the story of one's life. Biblical friendship is important, Olyan argues, and often overlooked, but it ranks below familial relations.

Throughout the book, Olyan argues against maximalist readings of friendship texts, suggesting that the language of "love" or "clinging to" are common in all sorts of relationships (like Ruth clung to Naomi but also clung to the harvesters in Boaz's fields). Some portrayals of friendship have an emotional component, but this cannot be assumed. Much of the friendship language has to do with typical Ancient Near East treaty formulas. In other words, while it's true that some friendships were formalized through treaties or covenants, these were usually political alliances.

Similarly, we are concerned that friendship was described by some of the speakers as "same-sex love." At best, this is an ambiguous phrase bound to confuse both Christian and non-Christian audiences. For example, in Kyle Harper's academic monograph on the Christian transformation of sexual morality in late antiquity, he routinely uses "same-sex love" to mean sexual behavior between persons of the same sex.<sup>20</sup> This is, we believe, how most people understand the phrase. To be sure, the Bible commands us to love people of the same sex, but "same-sex love" carries very different connotations.

At worst, the phrase is an intentional redirection of what most people understand by friendship, now meant to include notions of exclusive covenanting and certain types of physical intimacy. We certainly agree with the Revoice Conference that same-sex attracted persons can find in the Bible, and should find in the church, examples of deep, loyal, committed relationships between persons of the same sex. We think it unwise, however, to posit a separate class of homosexual friendship that goes by different names and looks substantially different from the healthy friendships all Christians should cultivate and enjoy.

#### **D. The Gift of Homosexuality**

Various sessions at Revoice suggested that the gay Christian movement is a unique and prophetic gift to the church. This was a major theme in Finegan's talk. She spoke of "gift" in three primary ways.

First, Finegan argues that there are gifts hidden in gayness or same-sex attraction. God may leave same-sex attracted Christians (and any Christian) to their fallen desires in order to chastise them, to show them the depth of their sin, to humble them, and to make them more dependent upon Christ. At the same time, Finegan acknowledges that same-sex desires, which lead some to Christ, may lead others into lust and worldliness and the power of the Evil One. Same-sex attraction will be a gift to some and a judgment for others. While we acknowledge that God may use our sin and temptation for good, Scripture never points to our fallen desires as gifts. Every

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Gordon Hugenberger's definition as covenant as "an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath" (*Marriage as Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994], 11).

<sup>20</sup> Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

good gift and every perfect gift is from above (James 1:17). A proper understanding of gift in this sense is to see God's law as the gift—rather than the sinful desire—since it shows us our sin and weakness and drives us to Christ.

Second, Finegan argues that gay Christians are a gift to the world. By their counter-cultural faith and resolute commitment to God's truth, gay Christians can proclaim to the world that we truly find our lives by losing them, that sexual desires do not have to define us, and that God's plan for marriage is good and right. While strictly speaking the gift is Christ himself (2 Cor. 9:15), we heartily agree that faithful same-sex attracted believers have a powerful role to play in declaring the goodness of God and the glory of the gospel to the world.

Third, Finegan also insists that gay Christians are a gift to the church. Again, this is certainly true in the sense that we can see in many same-sex attracted brothers and sisters an example of denying oneself and God's strength being perfected in weakness. As pastors and elders, we have known many faithful same-sex attracted believers and consider them blessings to us personally and to the church corporately.<sup>21</sup>

Finegan's discussion on "gifts" highlights the importance of one's basic posture toward same-sex attraction in shaping our theological response and pastoral care. Even among those who affirm a biblical definition of marriage, there are at least three different ways Christians often think about same-sex attraction:

- A sin to be mortified
- A struggle to be endured
- A gift to be celebrated

We have already seen that same-sex desires (which we take to be materially no different than attractions) are sinful, and as such should be repented of, put to death, and forgiven in Christ. Without this convictional plank in place, our theological and pastoral response to self-identified gay Christians and to their struggles will be misguided.

But there is more to say about same-sex attraction than just this. Homosexual desire is, in another sense often an unwanted struggle, a weakness, even a disability in that these desires may not have been consciously chosen and they present to the same-sex attracted believer a significant and specific burden that most Christians do not carry. Same-sex attracted brothers and sisters, then, are deserving (and desirous) of our compassion, sensitivity, and care.

Finally, as we discussed above, we do not believe it is right to characterize sinful inclinations as a gift. But if same-sex attraction is not a gift to be celebrated, our brothers and sisters who pursue Christ courageously in the midst of this attraction certainly are. In short, we believe it is important to affirm that same-sex desires are sinful, that the fight against these desires is an

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<sup>21</sup> In a technical sense, God's gifts are restricted to: Jesus Christ as head over all things (Eph. 1:22; 5:25), the Holy Spirit (John 7:39), the offices of the church (Eph. 4:11), and the abilities God gives his children for the building up of the church (1 Cor. 12). Scripture uses the language of "example" or "saints" or "co-laborers" rather than "gift" to describe faithful Christians, but there is nothing to prevent us from using the word "gift" more broadly so long as we keep the Scriptural usage in mind.

admirable struggle, and that those who labor in faith and repentance to overcome these desires should receive our sympathy, our gratitude, and our support.<sup>22</sup>

### **E. The Pervasiveness of Pain**

Throughout the conference, speakers made reference to the pain, sorrow, and sense of loneliness and exclusion that same-sex attracted Christians experience. This came out most clearly and most intentionally in the general session devoted to the topic “Lament.”

In his moving address, Nate Collins describes how he feels worn down and discouraged. “I’m tired” was his constant refrain. “I’m tired of feeling burdened by shame because I think my orientation makes me less human. I’m tired of feeling burdened by expectations from others because I think so little of myself. . . I’m tired of people saying I’m using the wrong words. I’m tired of people saying that I’m not using enough of the right words.” He then calls his hearers to “learn how to corporately lament the reality that gender and sexual minorities live with virtually each and every day in the church right now.” Later, Collins goes on to say that lament is real “because injustice is real. For us, that means injustice against gender and sexual minorities is real.”

There is much that can be said to Collins’s heartfelt reflections. For starters, we believe there are many faithful churches in the PCA who have sought to care well for their members who are same-sex attracted. Not every congregation is failing in its ministry to singles and to sexual strugglers. At the same time, we recognize that many Christians have been too fearful or too insensitive to minister effectively. The church’s first response must be one of compassion. Mistreatment of same-sex attracted believers is real, and the church must stand against it. No person should be made to feel less than human. We have all been created in God’s image with dignity and value. Moreover, we must acknowledge that churches have not always felt like a hospitable place for strugglers (of any kind) and that Christian families do not always know how to handle the news that someone they love has identified as gay or lesbian.

There is, however, another aspect of Christian love and compassion, and that is the willingness to speak the truth in love. While sympathizing with the pain of brothers and sisters who wrestle with same-sex attraction, we believe that important ideas promoted at Revoice will only lead to greater pain. We can understand Collins’s exasperation with “saying the wrong words,” but language has a powerful shaping influence on our identity and on the way we view the world. Labels matter. So does our understanding of the struggle itself—whether it is a temptation to sin or already an expression of indwelling sin.

One of the problems with pain is that it is impossible to measure. We do not know what the participants at Revoice have experienced. We do not know if their churches were better or worse

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<sup>22</sup> Our three ways are similar to Mark Yarhouse’s three lenses: the integrity lens, the disability lens, and the diversity lens (*Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015]). While we are making a similar point, we believe our formulations more accurately reflect the language Reformed Christians use and the language used at the Revoice Conference. In his book, Yarhouse, who is slated to be a speaker at Revoice 2019, advocates for positions regarding cross-gender identification and sex-change surgeries with which we do not agree.

than they described. We do not know what story of pain their friends and family members and congregations may share. What we do know is that whenever we talk about sexual sin, sexual identity, or same-sex attraction, pain is immediately a part of the equation. This means we must listen well and speak carefully. We must, as Spurgeon put it, use hard arguments and soft words. Churches that have rejected those who struggle with same-sex attraction must repent of their failed pastoral care, and all of us must repent of our sinful desires and Genesis 3 tendency to define our world and decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. We need God's word to guide us and guard us. And we need the love that God means to give us through one another.

## V. Conclusion

As members of the body of Christ we don't get to choose the controversies of our age. We might prefer to be talking about the Trinity or the two natures of Christ—and we should talk a lot about both doctrines—but the fact is that if we are going to be faithful as pastors, as Christians, and as a denomination we cannot avoid talking about sexuality. Sexual identity is one of the main sources of confusion and contention in our world—a reality that likely will not change in our lifetimes. We must find a way to navigate these issues that is biblically sound, theologically robust, historically informed, linguistically careful, relationally compassionate, and pastorally wise.

This means we must be a people committed to truth. We appreciate Revoice's commitment to biblical marriage. We commend them for their desire to help sexual strugglers stay rooted in Christ and in historic orthodoxy. At the same time, we are concerned that some of the principal voices in Revoice have not been careful enough with their labels, their theology, and their relational advice. Consequently, at present we do not feel Revoice is a safe guide in helping Christians navigate questions of gender and sexuality. We hope that within the PCA more attention will be given to the theology expressed in our Standards and to the doctrinal precision exemplified in the best of our tradition. We worry at times that some have traded a Reformed doctrine of sin for a therapeutic understanding of brokenness, or even for a Roman Catholic understanding of concupiscence. With a diminished view of sin comes a diminished role for repentance, a diminished understanding of the power of the gospel, and ultimately a diminished experience of worship itself. In a day where emoting comes easier than thinking, we must renew our conviction that truth does not get in the way of helping people; truth is fundamentally necessary if we are to be truly helpful.

Of course, truth is not all we must keep in view when thinking through these difficult issues. We must never forget that we are dealing with real people, flesh and blood human beings with hurts and fears and joys and hopes. While we disagree with important aspects of what was said and assumed at the Revoice Conference, in so far as the movement acts as a reminder for all of us to be welcoming, sympathetic, and hospitable, there are valuable things we can learn and necessary lessons to be appropriated. In the end, just as the Son came from the Father full of grace and truth, so we pray that we do not have to choose between the two. The same-sex attracted among us need what all of us need, and what can only be found in the church: the redeeming power of gospel truth and the transformational love of gospel people.