

# A LITTLE LEAVEN

Confronting the Ideology  
of the Revoice Movement

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## Confronting the Ideology of the Revoice Movement

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## ❖❖ INTRODUCTION ❖❖

### Should I Be Concerned About the Revoice Movement?

The theological debate about homosexuality has changed. Many Christians are only just beginning to take notice. Some are uneasy with the shift but haven't figured out exactly why. Some are rushing out to defend orthodox sexual ethics without a clear picture of what they are combating. Some are naively assuming everything that claims to be orthodox truly is. Some are very aware of what is happening and are happily embracing the shift. It is for all these reasons that I am writing this paper.

Mainline Protestant denominations began discussing homosexuality in earnest during the 1970s. This started with general statements from churches in support of gay rights, such as the United Church of Christ speaking against anti-sodomy laws and public employment policies that might exclude homosexuals. Other mainline churches offered statements that, according to one historian, "largely condemned homosexual behaviors while supporting the civil rights of gay and lesbian people."<sup>1</sup> There were many orthodox believers who saw this as an erosion but even more who were ignorant of what was transpiring around them. Yet, there were some denominational leaders who wanted to see homosexuality more broadly affirmed by the church.

The debate around gay ordination emerged rather quickly, as the United Church of Christ became the first mainline church to ordain an openly gay man in 1972. The Episcopal Church and the United Presbyterian Church would each have gay ordination cases within their church courts by the late 1970s. Study committees would also be formed to look into the theological and social concerns surrounding homosexuality. Among both Presbyterians and Methodists, the language that emerged to describe candidates under examination for ordination was that of the *self-avowed and practicing homosexual*.

By *self-avowed* it was meant that a person considered himself to be born with an innate homosexual orientation and would therefore call himself a "homosexual" or "gay." By *practicing* it was meant that a homosexual was living with a gay partner or otherwise actively living a homosexual lifestyle. The words typically appeared together but, by the use of "self-avowed and practicing," there seemed to be an implied distinction between the words that caused much controversy. Some saw this to be an important distinction: that *being gay* was not inherently sinful, while engaging in *homosexual practice* was inherently sinful. Others saw this as a slippery slope that would, over time, lead to a weakening of the Christian teaching on sexuality and the qualifications for church ordination. Still others saw the whole attempt as purely discriminatory toward homosexuals and in need of full revision. These phrases of "self-avowed" and "practicing" are mostly dated now, but they express fault lines that still exist within the evangelical church today.

Many things have changed since the homosexual ordination debates of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Society's overall acceptance of homosexuality has greatly increased. The legality of gay marriage has thrust new definitions of marriage and family on the church and society. The basic assumption in secular psychology and popular science is that homosexuality is a healthy and normal aspect of human sexuality. Likewise, many so-called evangelical churches have adjusted their doctrine in order to keep up with the times. Words such as "affirming," "inclusive," and "welcoming" have been loaded with certain moral obligations, while words like "bigotry," "hatred," "homophobia," "heterosexism," and "heteronormativity" carry a unique effectiveness to silence opposition. Not to mention, the untold damage done by the mass proliferation of hardcore internet pornography—making degrading images readily available to anyone with a smart phone or computer.

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<sup>1</sup> Cadge, Wendy. "Vital Conflicts: The Mainline Denominations Debate Homosexuality." *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, edited by Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 267.

Within this milieu, several generations of young people have grown up. Impacted by the overall decadence and effeminacy of the present age, many have come to find certain unexpected sexual desires inside themselves. Despite this, some of these young people have also been unwilling to reject the orthodox teaching they have received on human sexuality. This means, at the very least, acknowledging homosexual behavior as sinful and male-female marriage as the only marital union ordained by God. When it comes to the topics of *homosexual orientation* and *same-sex attraction* (as distinguished from *homosexual behavior*), they say more nuance is required than Romans 1, Leviticus 18, and 1 Corinthians 6 can give us. This is where secular psychology, sociology, and personal experience can step in and fill in the blanks left by the Bible's silence.

This view that the Bible is clear on homosexual behavior yet silent or ambivalent on homosexual orientation is what I am calling "gay celibate theology." There are many other facets to the ideology that this paper will cover but the big idea is that homosexual orientation is seen as innate and immutable—thereby distinctly shaping an individual's self-conception and personal identity. Despite claims to the contrary, this is in line with how "gay Christians" with gay-affirming Bible interpretations see themselves as well. The only difference here is whether it is proper for someone to act on those desires or not: "gay-affirming Christians" say yes while "gay celibate Christians" say no.

The reason I belabor these points is because it is important to realize the climate in which the "gay celibate theology" of the Revoice movement emerges. This isn't exactly like the homosexuality debates of the past. Although there are certainly historical parallels to older theological battles, it will not do to simply assume that the arguments of Revoice are between progressives who reject the authority of Scripture and conservatives who hold to it. Indeed, both sides claim to hold to the same Scripture and they claim to do so for the same reasons—that the Bible is inerrant, authoritative, and wholly true. The commitment of either side to that claim can certainly be tested—and should be, using their own words matched against the Bible's—and this is why Scripture will be appealed to quite frequently throughout this paper.

The Revoice movement represents a view of homosexuality that places itself somewhere in-between the revisionist inclusion of the affirming church and the staunch traditionalism of the conservative church. What stands in the middle—this Side B thinking (in contrast to the Side A thinking of the gay affirming church)—says that the evangelical church has mostly had the right doctrine but has gotten the application wrong. In fact, it has gotten things wrong for a long, long time. In fact, it's only now that we might actually be able to have a clear witness on these issues. But, they say, within this middle road, faithfulness can be found if we allow them to lead the conversation and define the terms.

It should be clearly understood that gay celibate theology claims to embrace the historic Christian sexual ethic but also embraces the psychological concept of an innate and immutable homosexual orientation. This means that a person may see himself as inherently gay but he does not see his gayness as any great hinderance to his Christian faith—so long as he does not have homosexual intercourse or actively fantasize about such activity. Within gay celibate theology, homosexuals are seen as victims of the Fall—having been born with an unchanging condition that orients them toward a particular type of sin. But they are also seen as victims of conservative churches who have burdened them with the false hope of orientation change, where Christians have cruelly and wrongly insisted that the Holy Spirit's work in sanctification should have some evidence in a person finding victory in his battle against unnatural desires.

This thinking has been variously labelled: Side B thinking, the Spiritual Friendship movement, gay celibate theology, or the Revoice movement. Each term is basically synonymous, yet each also imperfectly captures a different emphasis or historic moment of the stream of thinking. They each require a little context in order to appreciate why they have been variously used by people trying to understand or define the ideology.

The term *Side B* began as a label adopted by some "gay Christians" on the Gay Christian Network website in the early 2000s in conversations between Justin Lee (gay affirming author)

and Ron Belgau (gay celibate Catholic). Side B Christians believe homosexual behavior to be sinful and that “gay Christians” should remain celibate because of the Bible’s teaching. Nevertheless, Side B Christians found abiding comradery with affirming “gay Christians” (or Side A) because of their shared experience as homosexuals, frequently recounting stories about being mistreated or misunderstood in conservative churches.

Both Side A and Side B shared a resistance to “ex-gay” ministry (such as Exodus International) and trauma counseling. They both tended to de-emphasize the potential causes of homosexuality, implicitly assuming some inherent cause, and quickly moving on to focus on how someone should live in light of the experience of same-sex attraction. They both emphasized that homosexual orientation could not change and that Christians needed to alter their culture war response to LGBT issues in society. With this also came an emphasis on LGBT visibility—insisting that having gay church leaders and “out of the closet” church members increased cultural credibility by making the church seem like a safe place to be a “sexual minority.”

*Spiritual Friendship* is the name of a blog begun by Ron Belgau and Wesley Hill in April 2012. The blog started as a place where the two gay celibate men could journal about what it means to be gay and Christian—with a particular emphasis on updating Aelred of Rievaulx’s 12<sup>th</sup> century monastic views on covenanted, same-sex friendship for the 21<sup>st</sup> century situation of Side B gay celibacy. Hill used the blog to flesh out some of his thinking for his book *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (2015) while many other Side B Christians were invited to contribute to the blog. With the mix of thoughtful writers and a lively comments section, *SpiritualFriendship.org* became a compendium of the theology, philosophy, preoccupations, frustrations, observations, and personal stories of Side B “gay Christians.”

*Gay celibate theology* has been a general catch-all term for the thinking exemplified by the Side B or Spiritual Friendship movement. However, it can be a bit of a misnomer sometimes in that there are a number of Side B “gay Christians” within the movement who are not celibate but married to an opposite-sex spouse. These marriages have been termed *mixed orientation marriages* because one spouse identifies as gay while the other identifies as heterosexual.

The last term of note—and the one that I have chosen to use most frequently in this paper—is *the Revoice movement*. I have chosen this term because of the way Side B/Spiritual Friendship/gay celibate thinking became exemplified and “mainstreamed” in the Revoice organization and the annual conference that emerged under that banner. The first Revoice conference was organized in 2018 by Nate Collins and Stephen Moss in St. Louis, Missouri and has happened annually ever since.

Although the language of “Side B” is not used in Revoice’s official communication, the mission and thinking of the organization is an obvious continuation of the Side B movement which precedes it. Wesley Hill also sees this continuity in his Foreword to Mark Yarhouse & Olya Zaporozhets’ book, *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community* (2019). In that way, I may sometimes refer to those who promote Side B views as *Side B proponents*—whether or not such a person self-identifies as gay or same-sex attracted. For example, Preston Sprinkle (president of the Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender), Scott Sauls (Presbyterian pastor), and Tish Harrison Warren (Anglican priest) would not call themselves same-sex attracted, yet they have committed themselves to being heavy promoters and defenders of the Revoice conference and many of the speakers associated with it. For that reason, I consider them to be Side B proponents and therefore part of the Revoice movement.

Revoice’s official mission statement says why it exists:

To support and encourage gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other same-sex attracted Christians—as well as those who love them—so that all in the Church might be empowered to live in gospel unity while observing the historic Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Our Mission and Vision.” *Revoice*, accessed April 29, 2021. <https://revoice.us/about/our-mission-and-vision/>

As the mission indicates, this is not a movement of the affirming church. This is a movement that appeals to conservative evangelical doctrine—declaring a commitment to maintaining the historic Christian understanding of marriage and sexuality. It is important to note this distinction from the theologically liberal inclusivity movements such as More Light Presbyterians,<sup>3</sup> Reconciling Ministries Network,<sup>4</sup> or Room for All.<sup>5</sup> It is also to be distinguished from the affirming “gay Christianity” championed by Justin Lee, Matthew Vines, Kathy Baldock, and the Reformation Project.

Despite being different from the affirming church movement, the Revoice movement still departs from orthodox sexual ethics while claiming to uphold them. The shift is subtle, with seemingly small accommodations of gay orientation, gay identity, and gay desire that are justified as being honest or being missional. These shifts are no less dangerous, though they are often buried beneath delicately worded language. It is for this reason that controversy over Revoice and the questions it poses has been brewing within the larger conservative denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Church of the Nazarene, and Anglican Church of North America (ACNA)—not to mention hundreds of non-affiliated evangelical churches across the country.

In light of Revoice, practical discussions of same-sex attraction, gay identity, celibacy and singleness, friendship, using “gay Christian” terminology, and the presence of “homophobia” in the conservative church have become more open in many churches and Christian publications. This discussion has also touched on a number of theological questions on the nature of sin, temptation, sanctification, stewardship, creation, resurrection, and holiness. All of these questions are significant and their discussion among Christians is important in applying the truth of Scripture within our current age. But, as Bible-believing Christians, the conversation in itself is not a zero-sum game—what is important are the answers we come to, not simply the experience of having the conversation.

It is my contention that the Revoice movement consistently and repeatedly finds wrong answers to the theological questions—which leads them to wrong application in the practical matters. The proponents of Side B thinking deny this. They insist that their views are clear and allowable within biblical orthodoxy—further implying that those who do not proclaim this consistency are willfully ignorant or prejudiced or lying. Whenever a criticism is brought forward, they claim that their personal motives are being judged and that their statements are being misrepresented.

But the question is: what is the basis for coming to valid conclusions? Orthodox believers continue to hold the Bible up as our ultimate authority and standard. Yet, the Revoice movement presents a threat to this pattern—not by attacking the Bible’s total authority outright, but by undermining the Bible’s sufficiency in guiding our application. This was expressed quite plainly by Revoice founder Nate Collins in his book *All but Invisible*:

How is gayness related to the fall? and What does gayness look like when it’s redeemed? Christians have traditionally used terms like sin, temptation, and healing to answer these questions, all of which are found in various texts in Scripture. My suspicion, however, is that we could provide more specific, and potentially more meaningful, answers to these questions if we broaden our search for descriptions of gay people’s experience beyond terms explicitly found in Scripture. In essence, I’m proposing that we develop a theology of orientation that can flesh out our biblical doctrines of sin, temptation, and healing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> More Light Presbyterians is an affirming movement within the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (PCUSA) that began in 1974. <https://mlp.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Reconciling Ministries Network is an affirming movement within the United Methodist Church (UMC) that began in 1984. <https://rmnetwork.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Room for All is an affirming movement with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) that began in 2005. <https://roomforall.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 190.

In writing this report, I sought to study and understand the public statements of the Revoice movement—exemplified most notably by Nate Collins, Wesley Hill, Greg Johnson, Ron Belgau, Gregory Coles, Grant Hartley, and Bekah Mason. The statements quoted here are not the only ones that could have been pulled. Indeed, the books, blogs, presentations, and social media discourses of the Side B advocates who comprise the Revoice movement are full of equally problematic statements that move listeners away from biblical orthodoxy while inviting them to be more “biblically nuanced, theologically sophisticated, missionally sensitive, pastorally sensitive.”<sup>7</sup> We must also recognize that the move away from orthodoxy is a move away from diligent care over the souls of men and women.

In this way, it is important to consider that the statements examined in this paper were given by those who are teachers within the movement or who present themselves as such online. We must recall that teachers are held to account for their words: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1). It is deeply important to see the shaping and discipling influence words have on others. The broader LGBT movement have seen this from the early days of the movement and have been at the forefront of the nation’s softening of language regarding sodomy (specifically) and homosexuality (more generally). Are we more disciplined by the world or by the Scripture?

As with many theological issues, the concern over the Revoice movement is not merely how these views are presented now but how these ideas will develop in the future and be applied downstream. Many of the authors writing in support of “gay celibate theology” have noted how their own ideas have evolved over the years. Indeed, even Revoice’s own mission statement has gone through several iterations. In other words, this is not a static movement, and the convictions held today may not be the ones still confessed tomorrow.

That said, I trust that there are genuine believers who have embraced “gay celibate theology” hoping that it might help them navigate the temptations they face. Yet, even as I write that statement, I must honestly assess whether the word “navigate” or the word “overcome” is more appropriate. “Overcome” is certainly the more biblical way of thinking about it. But “navigate” is probably more accurate of how the Revoice movement sees their desires and temptations. And therein lies the problem.

This paper is not written to discourage someone who struggles with sexual sin from pursuing holiness. Rather, it is intended to help Christians think biblically about the issues related to this struggle. There are many deceptions at work in our world today that would seek to devour Christians. “Gay Christianity” is one of them. Compassion is more than offering comfort and being biblical is more than agreeing with certain views on theology or ethics. All of our lives must be understood, guided, and conformed to the standard of God’s holy Word.

It is in the spirit of Ephesians 2:10 that this paper is written, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

I pray that clarity, honesty, and understanding will be granted to those who read.

M.D. Perkins  
Tupelo, Mississippi — May 2021

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<sup>7</sup> Language is a quote from Greg Johnson’s floor speech at the 47<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. Honza Pokorny. “Greg Johnson’s speech at the PCA General Assembly 2019.” *YouTube*, June 28, 2019, timecode 4:40. <https://youtu.be/NkWdMBQyVkc>

## ❖❖ PART I ❖❖ Sexual Orientation

Any current discussion of homosexuality must inevitably deal with the concept of *sexual orientation*. The ontological dimension of orientation is one of the most foundational aspects of gay activism today—claiming that a homosexual is essentially so from birth and unable to change. This belief drives discussions of gay rights, social stigma, and LGBT oppression. Because sexual orientation is also a concept fundamental to everything the Revoice movement says and does, it must be understood before discussing other aspects of Side B teaching.

### Secular Definitions of Sexual Orientation

Defining sexual orientation is not nearly as straightforward as we might expect from a commonly used and socially accepted term. Merriam-Webster's says that *sexual orientation* is "a person's sexual identity or self-identification as bisexual, straight, gay, pansexual, etc." or "the state of being bisexual, straight, gay, pansexual, etc."<sup>8</sup> The language is vague but *sexual identity* and *a state of being* are both invoked by the term.

The American Psychological Association (APA) gives a fuller definition:

Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.<sup>9</sup>

While "an enduring pattern" of attractions may be what someone thinks of first, the APA also believes that the concept of identity (both *sexual identity* and *group identity*) are so central to sexual orientation that the definition is incomplete without mentioning it:

Sexual orientation is commonly discussed as if it were solely a characteristic of an individual, like biological sex, gender identity or age. This perspective is incomplete because sexual orientation is defined in terms of relationships with others. People express their sexual orientation through behaviors with others, including such simple actions as holding hands or kissing. Thus, sexual orientation is closely tied to the intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love, attachment and intimacy. In addition to sexual behaviors, these bonds include nonsexual physical affection between partners, shared goals and values, mutual support, and ongoing commitment. Therefore, sexual orientation is not merely a personal characteristic within an individual. Rather, one's sexual orientation defines the group of people in which one is likely to find the satisfying and fulfilling romantic relationships that are an essential component of personal identity for many people.<sup>10</sup>

For the American Psychological Association, sexual orientation may be first observed as an individual pattern of attractions, but it does not happen in isolation. It is necessarily defined by its focus upon others and therefore also forms group identity. This group identity would also reinforce one's personal identity as a person expresses his attractions through self-identifying language and behavior.

This self-awareness of one's attractions and the ways one identifies with them is something the APA has labelled *sexual orientation identity*—but it is more commonly called *sexual identity*.<sup>11</sup> Although the APA presents a distinction between sexual identity and sexual orientation

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<sup>8</sup> Merriam-Webster's. "Sexual Orientation," accessed April 29, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexual%20orientation>

<sup>9</sup> American Psychological Association. "Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality | What is sexual orientation?" accessed April 29, 2021. <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Glassgold, Judith M., et al. *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), p. 30. <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>

in order to discuss each idea individually, modern psychologists typically see *orientation* and *identity* as inseparable. In their mind, sexual identity cannot exist without sexual orientation and vice versa.

Another phrase common to the definition of sexual orientation is “inherent and immutable.” This can be seen in the definition offered by the LGBT activist organization the Human Rights Campaign (HRC): “Sexual orientation: an inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.”<sup>12</sup> The definition has clear political intent, where sexual orientation is seen as an essential biological trait worthy of unique civil rights protection. Within this is the expectation that this enduring attraction must not be questioned or hindered.

In scientific terms, the definitions offered by Merriam-Webster’s, the American Psychological Association, and the Human Rights Campaign are too broad to be very exact. This was a point made by psychiatrists Paul McHugh and Lawrence Mayer when they posited that the “born that way” hypothesis of sexual orientation is counter to the scientific evidence:

While some people are under the impression that sexual orientation is an innate, fixed, and biological trait of human beings—that, whether heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, we are “born that way”—there is insufficient scientific evidence to support that claim. In fact, the concept of sexual orientation itself is highly ambiguous; it can refer to a set of behaviors, to feelings of attraction, or to a sense of identity... Overall, the evidence suggests some measure of fluidity in patterns of sexual attraction and behavior—contrary to the “born that way” notion that oversimplifies the vast complexity of human sexuality.<sup>13</sup>

Thinking of orientation as a pattern of inherent attractions obviously lends itself to identity formation. Any aspect of a person that is perceived as completely outside one’s control is likely to be seen this way. As a sense of identity is developed this would likely include some level of participation in certain sets of romantic and sexual behaviors. Sexual behavior means more than sexual intercourse—it can and does include sexual fantasizing, masturbation, and the use of pornography styled specifically to those attractions. Further, a person may find self-identification with certain terms, ideas, and cultural symbols that are connected to these attractions and their expression. This is all far more elusive than simply saying a homosexual is someone who engages in homosexual intercourse. It is also more elusive than saying a homosexual merely experiences sexual desire for members of the same sex.

It is the subjectivity of personal *identification* that makes this whole concept so vague. An individual could choose to identify with a certain sexual orientation yet participate in activities that might be associated with another. An example of this is seen in the recently minted sexual orientation category of *heteroflexible*, where a person who identifies as heterosexual is attracted to or engages in sex acts with people of the same sex yet does not identify as gay or bisexual.<sup>14</sup> In this way, heteroflexible is distinguished from bisexual by the fact that heteroflexible people prefer to identify as heterosexual rather than bisexual. Their preference is based purely on their own personal feelings of identity.

The distinction between *bisexuality* and *pansexuality* is another place where the tenuous nature of identifying by a sexual orientation can be seen. As *Healthline.com* defines it, “Bisexual means attracted to multiple genders, and pansexual means attracted to all genders. These are

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<sup>12</sup> *Human Rights Campaign*. “Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions,” accessed April 29, 2021. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>

<sup>13</sup> Mayer, Lawrence S. & Paul R. McHugh. “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences.” *The New Atlantis*, Number 50 – Fall 2016, p. 13. <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/part-one-sexual-orientation-sexuality-and-gender>

<sup>14</sup> Rockett, Darcel. “There’s a new sexual orientation category called heteroflexible. And it brings health issues that need to be addressed.” *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-life-heteroflexibles-new-sexual-orientation-category-tt-20200130-20200131-rcodzschyrap7o7uhfldtu77lu-story.html>

different because ‘multiple’ isn’t the same thing as ‘all.’”<sup>15</sup> Much controversy has arisen recently over the legitimacy of the term bisexuality, since it presents a gender binary within its very naming convention. Some consider this to be an “erasing” of transgender people which leads many to prefer the term pansexuality.

Many more examples could be given to highlight the inherent contradictions of being defined by emotional, romantic and/or sexual feelings. According to one current list, there are as many as 23 different sexual orientations—including the sexual orientation of not being sexually oriented, otherwise known as asexuality.<sup>16</sup> This chaos is unsustainable yet it is how unregenerate men and women think.

### **Side B Definitions of Sexual Orientation**

The way the Revoice movement describes sexual orientation is not uniform but it does correspond closely with the secular definitions provided above. The correspondence is in the basic agreement that homosexual orientation is inherent and immutable. The ways in which Side B definitions differ—both amongst themselves and from the secular definitions—is in exactly how *sexual identity* is connected to sexual orientation or to what degree it is accommodated overall.

This can be seen in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) component of Revoice’s website when they ask the question, “What is ‘sexual orientation’ and is it a helpful category?” Notice how Revoice speaks of sexual orientation:

Sexual orientation describes an enduring pattern of sexual and/or romantic attraction. The concept offers a convenient way for people to describe how their experiences of sexual and/or romantic attraction follow a clear and persistent pattern—toward the same sex, toward the opposite sex, or toward individuals of both sexes.

We recognize that some in our culture have gone beyond that simple definition and treated sexual orientation as something that must be celebrated as part of who one is. We reject this view of orientation but do not believe that it invalidates the usefulness of the concept. We can still call a pattern of attractions “sexual orientation” while recognizing that pattern as contrary to God’s design.<sup>17</sup>

It is immediately obvious that Revoice’s language is borrowed directly from the American Psychological Association definition with the sexual identity component minimized. Despite this common association, Revoice says the term is still useful. Ironically, Revoice founder and president Nate Collins gives the opposite impression in his book *All but Invisible*, “I find that the concept of sexual orientation is of limited use for evangelical Christians.”<sup>18</sup> The point of the Revoice statement is to draw a distinction between an orientation and an identity in order to embrace the former while minimizing the latter.

What exactly is useful about the term sexual orientation? Revoice gives this paragraph in the FAQ:

It can be useful to recognize that a particular pattern of attraction has been enduring and is likely to continue to be so. For those who struggle with homosexual temptation, the concept can be helpful as a

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<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, Sian. “Is Being Bisexual the Same Thing as Being Pansexual?” *Healthline.com*, September 27, 2019. <https://www.healthline.com/health/bisexual-vs-pansexual>

<sup>16</sup> Barnes, Stephanie. “From Graysexual to Heteroflexible: Here’s a Big List of Sexualities in 2021.” *Mindbodygreen.com*, April 12, 2021. <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/list-of-sexualities>

<sup>17</sup> “What is ‘sexual orientation’ and is it a helpful category?” *Revoice*, March 16, 2020, accessed February 4, 2021. <https://revoice.us/ufaq/what-is-sexual-orientation-and-is-it-a-helpful-category/>

<sup>18</sup> Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 145.

way of acknowledging a specific vulnerability, helping them and those who love them be aware of potential temptations so that they don't get blindsided and overwhelmed.<sup>19</sup>

According to Revoice, sexual orientation is a useful term specifically because it implies an inherent and unchanging condition that makes someone vulnerable to “homosexual temptation.” In other words, when a gay person realizes that they are not going to stop being gay, sexual orientation is the reminder to keep them from being blindsided and overwhelmed by that presumed reality. Sexual orientation is there to remind them that they will always be gay so homosexual temptation will always be with them.

It is worth noting the subjectivity that is imbedded within Side B's definitions of orientation. Ron Belgau—gay celibate Catholic and co-founder of *SpiritualFriendship.org*—gives what he considers to be a “reasonably uncontroversial descriptive account” of sexual orientation:

With the rare asexual exception, the overwhelming majority of people experience sexual attraction to various people during the course of their life. Most people's sexual attractions are directed exclusively to persons of the opposite sex; some experience some mixture of sexual attractions to persons of either sex, and a few experience sexual attractions only to persons of the same sex. In common parlance, those who fit the first description are straight, those who fit the second bi, and those who fit the third, gay.<sup>20</sup>

This may sound like an objective definition, but Belgau still infuses it with a great deal of subjectivity when he applies it to himself:

Like Chris [Damien], I describe myself as gay because my sexual attractions are almost always directed toward someone of my own sex. Jeremy Erickson describes himself as bisexual because his sexual attractions have been directed toward persons of both sexes. For myself, one of the reasons that it is important to simply and straightforwardly acknowledge that I am gay is that I have seen how much damage was done by the strange semantic games many in the exgay movement have played to conceal ongoing homosexual attraction.<sup>21</sup>

Belgau says he “acknowledges” he is gay (which sounds objectively observed) and yet, within that statement, he also says his sexual attractions are “almost always” towards men. “Almost always” is a hedge phrase that undercuts exclusivity. This means simply that Ron Belgau has at some time or in some way experienced sexual attraction toward a woman. According to Belgau's own definition of orientation in the earlier quote, Belgau would be defined as bisexual. Yet, he is the one playing semantic games when he calls himself gay as if it is a mere statement of fact.

The point here isn't to decipher Belgau's “true” sexual orientation but to highlight the extreme subjectivity of the concept of sexual orientation altogether. It has all the appearances of an objective description and yet it is always subjectively experienced. Further, Ron Belgau—like Revoice—wants to use the idea of sexual orientation to speak to the immutability of homosexuality. He places this in direct contrast to “ex-gay” ministries, which he opposes.

This is exactly what makes sexual orientation elusive to define—especially among Side B proponents who want to nuance a careful distinction between their attractions and their identity. Yet there are some Side B proponents who are so wrapped up in their orientation they struggle to clearly set that distinction. For instance, Wesley Hill—co-founder of *SpiritualFriendship.org*, advisor to Revoice, and one of the most formative influences on Side B theology—sees his personal identity as deeply intertwined with his sexuality:

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<sup>19</sup> “What is ‘sexual orientation’ and is it a helpful category?” *Revoice*, March 16, 2020, accessed February 4, 2021. <https://revoice.us/ufaqs/what-is-sexual-orientation-and-is-it-a-helpful-category/>

<sup>20</sup> Belgau, Ron. “Some Clarifications Regarding Sexual Orientation and Spiritual Friendship.” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, February 16, 2015. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/02/16/some-clarifications-regarding-sexual-orientation-and-spiritual-friendship/>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

We, for reasons that could be, by turns, highly useful and highly misleading and problematic, have chosen to speak of certain same-sex bonds under the label of ‘sexuality.’ When I, for instance, form close friendships with men, I often attribute my original impulse to do so, and my continuing efforts to maintain those friendships, to my sexuality. (That paradigm seems to make sense of my experience: as I once said in an email to a friend, ‘A sexual orientation is such a complex and, in most cases, it seems, intractable thing; I for one cannot imagine what ‘healing’ from my orientation would look like, given that it seems to manifest itself not only in physical attraction to male bodies but also in a preference for male company, with all that it entails,’ such as conversation and emotional intimacy.)<sup>22</sup>

Hill draws a clear line from orientation to identity—claiming that his orientation is so central to who he is that it affects his friendships. He desires male bodies sexually and he desires male company relationally. His sexual orientation is “inescapably intertwined” within the fabric of his being to the point that he cannot imagine life without it. Hill repeats the same sentiment in his book, *Spiritual Friendship*: “My sexuality, my basic erotic orientation to the world, is inescapably intertwined with how I go about finding and keeping friends.”<sup>23</sup> Here again is the concept of immutability—Hill can’t imagine his orientation being “healed,” therefore he does not believe it is possible without changing other aspects of his personal identity—a prospect he also implies is undesirable.

The immutability of homosexual orientation comes out loud and clear when gay celibate PCA pastor Greg Johnson wraps up his testimony in *Christianity Today*:

Jesus hasn’t made me straight. But he covers over my shame. Jesus really loves gay people. The gospel doesn’t erase this part of my story so much as it redeems it. My sexual orientation doesn’t define me. It’s not the most important or most interesting thing about me. It is the backdrop for that, the backdrop for the story of Jesus who rescued me.<sup>24</sup>

Notice the sense of both inevitability and permanence that Johnson ascribes to his homosexuality—even Jesus doesn’t change that part of him. Johnson says his orientation doesn’t define him yet the whole point of his story is how he realizes he is gay and how being a Christian gives him the freedom to admit he is gay to others. He describes himself formerly as a “gay atheist teenager” but he now describes himself as a Christian pastor who is not straight. The difference, he says, is that he is no longer ashamed of his homosexuality the way he once was.

Why are Side B proponents so committed to the concept of *sexual orientation* when those same proponents say that the term is insufficient and problematic? One explanation is, as the Revoice FAQ says, it is “convenient.” This may explain some of its use in social media posts or everyday conversation but not among the main teachers of the Revoice movement who are publishing detailed writing on the topic. Why would they not encourage using a more biblically-rooted phrase like “homosexual temptation,” a phrase Revoice itself uses in the FAQ?

The only sufficient explanation is that “homosexual temptation” communicates something different than what they want to communicate. They do not define exactly what they mean by “homosexual temptation” but it is fair to assume, based on other Side B writing, that “homosexual temptation” means specifically the temptation toward lustful fantasizing of homosexual intercourse. It does not mean “same-sex attraction,” as this term is loaded with its own layers of nuance.

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<sup>22</sup> Hill, Wesley. “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, February 26, 2014. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2014/02/26/is-being-gay-sanctifiable/>

<sup>23</sup> Hill, Wesley. *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, Greg. “I Used to Hide My Shame. Now I Take Shelter Under the Gospel.” *Christianity Today*, May 20, 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/may-web-only/greg-johnson-hide-shame-shelter-gospel-gay-teenager.html>

## Orientation and Stewardship

For Side B proponents, sexual orientation communicates that same-sex attracted Christians have a *condition* (apart from original sin) that makes them uniquely susceptible to homosexual temptation. This condition, they say, is certainly the result of the Fall. Yet they also say they are utterly unable to overcome this condition in their earthly lives because it is embedded so deeply in their person. In this way, it is not unlike a disability or other physical impairment. They must await the resurrection of their bodies to be free of homosexuality.

As the Revoice FAQ implies, they believe *sexual orientation* is distinct from a person's *sin nature*:

Some suggest that Christians should use a concept like 'sin nature' instead [of homosexual orientation]. While being aware of how we have been affected by original sin is important, some also find it helpful to be able to point to some of the specific (and somewhat unusual) aspects of their battle with sin, both in their own self-reflection and in their efforts to share their struggles with their fellow Christians.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, do not conflate *sin nature* and *orientation*. Sin nature is the general reason for the condition but it is not specific enough to describe someone's battle with sin. But, we might ask, how is the term *sexual orientation* helpful in the battle with sin? After all, isn't it orientation that says these desires are permanent and will never be overcome? Yes, says Revoice, and that is what makes it a helpful concept: "It can be useful to recognize that a particular pattern of attraction has been enduring and is likely to continue to be so."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, in light of this permanent condition, what must a person do with his sexuality? This is where the idea of *stewardship* gets presented.

During Christ Presbyterian Church's "Same-Sex Attraction Forum" in 2015—the event where future Revoice founder Stephen Moss was publicly platformed for the first time—PCA pastor Scott Sauls gave his church a message entitled "Redeeming Sexuality." In it, Sauls presented an unusual analogy for homosexual orientation: the man born blind in John 9. He gives his explanation of this encounter between Christ and the disciples as follows (note: Sauls wrongly attributes the disciples' questions to the Pharisees):

You remember when the Pharisees were asking, "Why is this man who was born blind—why was he born this way?" You know? "Who sinned?" the Pharisees said. "Who did something wrong that he was born this way? Was it him or was it his parents?" And Jesus says, "Nobody did anything wrong. It wasn't his parents. It wasn't him. He wasn't born this way because there's something wrong with him. He was born this way so that through his affliction, through his minority position as a blind person, God can be glorified in the way that he stewards the way that he was born and what I intend to do with the way that he was born."<sup>27</sup>

Sauls says that the reason the man in John 9 was born blind was so he could "steward" his blindness through "his minority status as a blind person." The works of God that the Apostle John records are, according to Sauls, the blind man's minority status and his stewardship of his blindness. This parallel is perfectly in line with Side B ideology—where the minority status of being LGBT is its own innate virtue and the struggle of stewarding one's "blindness" is the cross being taken up. This reading, however, does violence to the Scripture, where homosexual desire is a dishonorable passion and paralleled with idolatry in Romans 1.

The man in John 9 wasn't born blind in order to "steward" his blindness—whatever that even means. Christ says the man was born blind so "that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3) and then Christ heals the man. The works of God being displayed are not

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<sup>25</sup> "What is 'sexual orientation' and is it a helpful category?" *Revoice*, March 16, 2020, accessed February 4, 2021.

<https://revoice.us/ufaqs/what-is-sexual-orientation-and-is-it-a-helpful-category/>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Christ Presbyterian Church. "Sun. Morning (2/2) Scott Sauls: 'Redeeming Sexuality,' CPC (Nashville, TN)." *YouTube*, April 17, 2015, timecode 12:42. <https://youtu.be/49x4YBKcMqE>

the man's life of obedience as a blind man struggling for the rest of his days but the physical healing that Christ works in front of them. This is a testimony to the Lord's power that the man bears in his body. If Sauls wanted the analogy to picture homosexuality, then the story actually speaks to God's healing power to radically transform unnatural passions. However, this is obviously not Sauls' intention.

In order for Sauls' analogy to work, there must be some unique sin that the blind man is oriented toward as the result of his blindness. What sin does the blind man commit if he "lives out his blindness" rather than "steward" it? There isn't one. There is no self-denial unique to blindness. Blindness is a physical condition that certainly impacts a person's life deeply but blindness could potentially befall anyone through birth defect, old age, injury, or infirmity—while sexual orientation is spoken of as innate and immutable. And while a blind person's sensual experience of the world is obviously different from a sighted person's, the man born blind is not uniquely susceptible to a certain set of sins because he is blind. Scott Sauls speaks foolishly here—overreaching in order to make his views on homosexuality sound agreeable with Scripture.

Temptations are not spoken of as things we must faithfully steward. Instead, we are told to resist the devil (James 4:7), to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18), to take up the shield of faith so as to extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one (Ephesians 6:16), and to keep watch on ourselves, lest we be tempted (Galatians 6:1). On the other hand, stewardship in Scripture is spoken of in regards to gifts God entrusts to his people, such as children (Psalm 127:3), money (Proverbs 10:22), and spiritual gifts for the edification of the church (1 Peter 4:10). Paul uses the language of stewardship in regard to the "mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1) and uses it again to speak of church leaders being charged as "God's stewards" with overseeing the flock (Titus 1:7).

Certainly, everything good in our lives is a gift from God (James 1:17) and if God gave us our bodies and minds as gifts then yes, in a general sense, our sexuality is something we must steward. But we must steward it as God has made us—male and female—living in agreement with our God-given sex. We must also remember that biblical stewardship carries the idea of proper management and cultivation, as servants working for a master. The things entrusted to us as stewards are things that are not our own to define and do with as we please. We are beholden to the master's commands and wishes.

So we ask: is homosexual orientation a gift? Is it an investment? Is it something God has entrusted to men and women to cultivate, guard, and keep? Or is it the result of the Fall and a reflection of indwelling sin? The Revoice movement has already spoken on this—yet it immediately takes on the language of doublespeak when it discusses stewardship. This is because Side B proponents are committed to embracing unnatural sexuality as something normal, as something that can be carefully cultivated without being fully expressed in sexual consummation. This doublespeak only leads to further confusion and error.

### **Is Sexual Orientation a Legitimate Category?**

Revoice's FAQ about orientation begins by asking the wrong question at the outset: "What is 'sexual orientation' and is it a helpful category?" The question should be, "What is 'sexual orientation' and is it a *legitimate* category?" This may seem like a minor difference but it reveals what is truly being claimed in their statement.

When Christians want to know if they should think in terms of sexual orientation, they are really asking if it is biblical to do so—if it reflects reality as God explains it in Scripture. In other words, is it legitimate? But what we get from Revoice here is a subtle sleight-of-hand that turns the question away from *legitimacy* into one of *helpfulness*.

Helpfulness is squarely within the realm of subjectivity. If one person believes something is helpful it could be deemed helpful, whether or not it is true or right. Something might also be deemed unhelpful by a different person, without any direct implication as to whether that

thing is objectively true or false, right or wrong. “This mop was not helpful in cleaning the countertop” is answering a different question than whether I should be using a mop on the countertop at all. As should be evident, legitimacy gets to the heart of the matter.

Consider once again Greg Johnson’s words in *Christianity Today*:

Jesus hasn’t made me straight. But he covers over my shame. Jesus really loves gay people. The gospel doesn’t erase this part of my story so much as it redeems it. My sexual orientation doesn’t define me. It’s not the most important or most interesting thing about me. It is the backdrop for that, the backdrop for the story of Jesus who rescued me.<sup>28</sup>

Johnson legitimizes orientation as a valid category of Christian thinking multiple times in a few short statements. He says:

- The gospel doesn’t erase his homosexuality; instead, it redeems it.
- Jesus doesn’t make him straight; instead, Jesus covers the shame Johnson feels about being a homosexual.
- Johnson’s sexual orientation doesn’t define him; instead, it is the backdrop for Jesus saving him despite Jesus not making him straight.

The fact that Johnson is gay is deeply important to this narrative, despite his claims to the contrary. His words continually counter his claims. Furthermore, it doesn’t really matter the importance Johnson personally places on his orientation if the entire category of sexual orientation is illegitimate to begin with.

So we ask: Is sexual orientation a legitimate category? Does it accurately explain reality? We should realize that the concept of sexual orientation was developed for the specific political purpose of decriminalizing homosexual acts in society—seeking the removal of sodomy laws from European lawbooks. The point was to essentialize homosexual acts by reframing them—not as choices that a person made but as expressions of a mental condition that was called *homosexuality*.<sup>29</sup> In the growing climate of 19<sup>th</sup> century psychiatry, this led to attempts to treat homosexuality as a mental illness rather than a social problem. In this view, a person who engaged in sodomy wasn’t a criminal, they were sick; they didn’t need punishment, they needed treatment.

When homosexuality was no longer deemed a mental illness in 1973, this was not the result of a slowly matriculated scientific consensus—rather, it was the result of targeted and disruptive political pressure applied to medical professionals. Psychiatrist Ronald Bayer describes the political impetus behind the changing of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by the American Psychiatric Association in the 1970s:

The entire process, from the first confrontations organized by gay demonstrators at psychiatric conventions to the referendum demanded by orthodox psychiatrists, seemed to violate the most basic expectations about how questions of science should be resolved... The result was not a conclusion based on an approximation of the scientific truth as dictated by reason, but was instead an action demanded by the ideological temper of the times.<sup>30</sup>

Sexual orientation has been the central argument of gay rights activism—whether the issue was anti-sodomy laws, military service, hate crime legislation, AIDS research, gay marriage, or the banning of conversion therapy. As people in the younger generations become less dependent on those labels in order to secure political victories, the concept of a fixed and immutable orientation may fall away in the same way gender is now being seen as a social

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson, Greg. “I Used to Hide My Shame. Now I Take Shelter Under the Gospel.” May 20, 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/may-web-only/greg-johnson-hide-shame-shelter-gospel-gay-teenager.html>

<sup>29</sup> “The History of Psychiatry & Homosexuality.” *LGBT Mental Health Syllabus*. 2012, accessed April 5, 2021. [http://aglp.org/gap/1\\_history/](http://aglp.org/gap/1_history/)

<sup>30</sup> Bayer, Ronald. *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 3-4.

construct or as fluid and non-fixed.<sup>31</sup> There is already evidence of this in the growing number of people who identify as *bisexual* and *pansexual*.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, scientific research has repeatedly failed to find a biological cause for homosexuality. A massive 2019 study analyzed DNA samples and lifestyle information from 477,000 people (the largest such study to date) and found “no clear patterns among genetic variants that could be used to meaningfully predict or identify a person’s sexual behavior.”<sup>33</sup> This study indicates that “non-genetic factors—such as cultural environment, upbringing, personality, nurturing—are far more significant in influencing a person’s choice of sexual partner.”<sup>34</sup> Secular researchers still refuse to fully appreciate what this information is saying, but the data continually debunks the “born that way” myth.

There are gay activists who are honest enough to recognize that the “born that way” idea is purely speculative. Yet they also have no interest in refuting it because it is extremely helpful to their cause. This extended quote from gay activist and author John D’Emilio illustrates that point in detail:

The idea that people are born gay—or lesbian or bisexual—is appealing for lots of reasons. Many of us experience the direction of our sexual desires as something that we have no control over. We just are that way, it seems, so therefore we must be born gay. The people who are most overt in their hatred of queer folks, the religious conservatives, insist that being gay is something we choose, and we know we can’t agree with them. Hence, again, born gay. Liberal heterosexual allies love the idea. If gays are born that way, then of course they shouldn’t be punished for it. “Born gay” is also a relief to any of us who have some doubts about our sexuality or who feel ourselves sinking under the weight of the oppression. If we’re born gay, then it’s not our fault, and we’re certainly not choosing to be oppressed: we just can’t help it, so leave us alone. It also answers those who worry about the effect of too many out-of-the-closet gay men and lesbians: if people are born this way, then young people won’t be influenced by us.

I hope you see where I’m going with this: “born gay” is an idea with a large constituency, LGBT and otherwise. It’s an idea designed to allay the ingrained fears of a homophobic society and the internalized fears of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. What’s most amazing to me about the “born gay” phenomenon is that the scientific evidence for it is thin as a reed, yet it doesn’t matter. It’s an idea with such social utility that one doesn’t need much evidence in order to make it attractive and credible.<sup>35</sup>

The trump card that is typically held up in the discussion of Christians and sexual orientation is the perceived failure of “ex-gay” ministries—seen most notably in the closure of Exodus International Ministries in 2013. This was exemplified when Alan Chambers—the final executive director of Exodus International—famously said, “The majority of people that I have met—and I would say the majority meaning 99.9% of them—have not experienced a change in their orientation.”<sup>36</sup>

Chambers’s words have been oft-repeated in the media as a decimating blow to those who believe orientation change is possible. However, what is not often noted are the additional wrinkles to that scenario that Chambers himself admitted: such as former lesbians who have claimed to have had their desires for women totally eradicated,<sup>37</sup> or when Chambers (who once called himself gay) refused to call himself gay any longer, in light of the fact that he is attracted

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<sup>31</sup> Weiss, Suzannah. “4 Reasons I Don’t Label My Sexual Orientation—And You Don’t Have To Either.” *Bustle.com*, June 11, 2019. <https://www.bustle.com/p/why-sexual-orientation-labels-arent-for-me-you-dont-have-to-use-them-either-17990747>

<sup>32</sup> Storrs, Carina. “Bisexuality on the rise, says new U.S. survey.” *CNN*, January 7, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/07/health/bisexuality-on-the-rise/index.html>

<sup>33</sup> Kelland, Kate. “No ‘gay gene’, but study finds genetic links to sexual behavior.” *Reuters*, August 29, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-science-sex/no-gay-gene-but-study-finds-genetic-links-to-sexual-behavior-idUSKCN1VJ2C3>

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> D’Emilio, John (interviewed by Sherry Wolf). “LGBT liberation: Build a broad movement.” *International Socialist Review*. Issue #65, May-June 2009. <https://isreview.org/issue/65/lgbt-liberation-build-broad-movement>

<sup>36</sup> Josh Krueger. “Ex-gay Panel Discussion with Alan Chambers.” *YouTube*, January 12, 2012, timecode 1:09:43.

[https://youtu.be/TXgA7\\_QRvhg](https://youtu.be/TXgA7_QRvhg)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, timecode 1:10:09.

to his wife.<sup>38</sup> Years later, Chambers remains ambivalent on how he would label himself—claiming to have a homosexual orientation that never changed yet still refusing to outright call himself gay or bisexual in light of his marriage to his wife.<sup>39</sup>

The media depiction of a former “ex-gay” leader falling into sexual sin or publicly renouncing “conversion therapy” is always intended to show that orientation change is impossible and even these former “ex-gay” leaders prove it. But there is a consistent failure to acknowledge the compromises of life and doctrine that have happened behind the scenes in these cases. For instance, when Exodus International closed its doors in 2013, there had been acceptance of “hyper-grace” teaching among many high-level leaders of the ministry that emphasized God’s forgiveness at the expense of warning souls against the destructive and deceptive power of sin.<sup>40</sup> For Christians to present the closing of Exodus as purely about the “failure of orientation change” is to promote a deception perpetuated by Alan Chambers and others who are on a mission against any orientation change effort.

Consider also the studies that have found the possibility of changing sexual desires. A study by Mark A. Yarhouse and Stanton L. Jones, conducted in 2009 (while Exodus was still active), sought to answer the question of the legitimacy of orientation change efforts through Exodus International. Though their sample size of participants was small (61 participants in the final phase) and the lack of a consensus definition of sexual orientation noted, they concluded by saying:

The findings of this study would appear to contradict the commonly expressed view of the mental health establishment that sexual orientation is not changeable and that the attempt to change is highly likely to produce harm for those who make such an attempt.<sup>41</sup>

Regarding the specifics of their findings, Yarhouse and Stanton noted: 53% saw some version of success (change or celibacy), 16% were going to continue to seek treatment for a more definitive outcome, 7% were (as yet) nonresponsive to treatment, and 25% noted a failure (either confusion or embracing a gay identity). This outcome array “would be regarded as respectable in the mental health field applied to other phenomena. Interventions such as psychotherapy or drug treatments always have successes, improvers, nonresponders and some negative

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<sup>38</sup> In 2012, when directly asked, “Would you say you are heterosexual?” Chambers says: “I have to be honest and say, ‘of course I have temptations. Of course I have attractions related to the same sex.’ But for over fifteen years since I’ve been in relationship with Leslie, my attraction has been towards her. My devotion has been towards her... So, am I heterosexual? I don’t know. I’m not gay. I have Leslie attractions. I have opposite sex attractions towards my wife.”

OWN. “Extended Interview with Alan Chambers | Our America with Lisa Ling | Oprah Winfrey Network.” *YouTube*, August 21, 2012, timecode 1:47, <https://youtu.be/VkUrWDPJ-3Y>

<sup>39</sup> In 2019, Chambers told Justin Lee: “How do I identify? You know, that’s always been something that I’ve avoided, honestly, for a billion reasons. Because I think to say one thing invalidates the complexity of the fullness of who I am. I would say I have a gay orientation—it is my country of origin. It is the first language, sexually, that I spoke. It’s still as much there today as it ever has been. There’s more to my sexual, relational, and emotional mosaic than that. People say, ‘Well, are you bi?’ And I would say, ‘No, I’m not bi.’ I’m married. I love my wife. We have had an amazing relationship for 21 years, and yet gay is and will always be my first language. And so, what I’ve learned in my own story is you can’t put people in a box.”

Geeky Justin. “Former ‘ex-gay’ leader Alan Chambers: ‘No one changes their orientation. It doesn’t happen.’” *YouTube*, July 2, 2019, timecode 45:07, <https://youtu.be/lJQCO8c1cRk>

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Black, a former Exodus International executive director leader and chairman of the ministry council, highlights the corrosive influence of this “hyper-grace” teaching within Exodus that predates the official closure of the ministry. This influence changed the way that the gospel, sin, temptation, and God’s work of sanctification were discussed and taught by many connected with the ministry. Black, Stephen H. *Freedom Realized: Finding Freedom from Homosexuality and Living a Life Free from Labels* (Enumclaw, WA: Redemption Press, 2017), p. xxvi-xliii

<sup>41</sup> Jones, Stanton L. and Mark A. Yarhouse. “Ex Gays? An Extended Longitudinal Study of Attempted Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation.” APA Convention, Sexual Orientation and Faith Tradition Symposium, 2009, p. 11. <https://www.cedarville.edu/~media/Files/PDF/Student-Life-Programs/Critical-Concern/Ex-Gays/jones-and-yarhouse-2009.pdf>

outcomes.”<sup>42</sup> This is not the only such study<sup>43</sup> but it is noteworthy because Yarhouse has become a major advocate of “gay celibate Christianity” in the years since this research.

Stephen H. Black, Executive Director of First Stone Ministries, believes Christians need to resist using sexual orientation as an explanation for same-sex desire. He believes—along with the scientific evidence—that there are many developmental factors at work that give rise to homosexual feelings, causing someone to ascribe his desires to an innate and immutable orientation:

Homosexuality typically begins with same-sex attractions that start early in life. Most agree on this issue. But the question is, why? Is there something going on in early childhood that should be explored? I think so. It certainly was the case with my own history and the histories of several hundred men I have personally spent time with in pastoral care. The development of a person’s temperament, the way they view themselves, and their own perceptions can often cause insecurity in the development of their identity... Most of the people we serve had at least some kind of sexual distortions in their childhood histories before puberty.<sup>44</sup>

Black also believes that there are destructive spiritual implications in using orientation to define a “natural cause” for same-sex desire:

Homosexuality and same-sex attractions are unnatural desires and feelings that are a result of the sinful fall of humanity. Homosexuality or “gay Christianity” should never be recognized as a legitimate identity in the church or legitimate as an orientation; to do so only sows a cruel bondage of lowered sexual ethic for the next generation.<sup>45</sup>

It is significant that Stephen Black is not just a ministry leader working with those who are same-sex attracted; he is a man who himself was once gay-identified but has found freedom from his unnatural lust. In 2017, Black released a ministry effectiveness survey, documenting follow-up responses from those who had gone through First Stone counseling and pastoral care. According to Black’s data, 72% of those surveyed said they were able to find lasting freedom from their same-sex attraction.<sup>46</sup>

How is this kind of information treated by Side B proponents? Once again, the Revoice FAQ’s nuanced language speaks as if they perceive a very remote possibility of change by the phrase “enduring” and “likely to continue to be so.” This wording may seem like an admission that change is possible, yet the weight behind everything else they say on the subject indicates this is a mere orthodox formality. It is possible only as a technicality. As Gregory Coles put it, “I do believe orientation change is possible, just like I believe in parting seas and multiplying bread and water turned to wine. But it’s irresponsible for us to treat miracles like everyday occurrences.”<sup>47</sup>

At the Revoice 18 conference, pastor Greg Johnson disparaged Black’s data, calling its legitimacy into question by citing Kathy Baldock’s negative book review of the First Stone survey.<sup>48</sup> So we have Greg Johnson (a gay celibate minister) siding with Kathy Baldock (a progressive “gay Christian” activist, vehemently opposed to the biblical witness on sexuality) in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Sprigg of Family Research Council has compiled a list of several significant studies on the success and/or harm of orientation change. Sprigg, Peter. “Are Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) Effective? Are They Harmful? What the Evidence Shows.” Family Research Council, Issue Analysis IS18101, September 2018. <https://www.frc.org/issueanalysis/are-sexual-orientation-change-efforts-soce-effective-are-they-harmful-what-the-evidence-shows>

<sup>44</sup> Black, Stephen H. *Freedom Realized: Finding Freedom from Homosexuality & Living a Life Free from Labels* (Enumclaw, WA: Redemption Press, 2017), p. 66-67.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>46</sup> Black, Stephen H. *The Complete First Stone Ministries Effectiveness Survey Report for Freedom Realized* (Enumclaw, WA: Redemption Press, 2017), p. 109.

<sup>47</sup> Coles, Gregory. *Single, Gay, Christian: A Personal Journey of Faith and Sexual Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2017), p. 63.

<sup>48</sup> Warhorn Media includes full transcripts of most of the sessions from Revoice 18. Bayly, Tim, Andy Halsey & Joseph Bayly. “Revoice Reviewed: PCA Pastor Greg Johnson.” Warhorn Media, August 22, 2018. <https://warhornmedia.com/2018/08/22/revoice-reviewed-pca-pastor-greg-johnson/>

order to make Stephen Black's work with First Stone seem like a deception. Even if one were to take a more guarded position in order to avoid undiscerningly promoting all orientation change efforts, there is still enough compelling data in Black's survey (not to mention his own personal testimony) to demand a thoughtful Christian consider it rather than immediately write it off based on the biased review of a progressive activist.

The truth is there are many personal testimonies of men and women who once called themselves gay, lesbian, and bisexual who have overcome and are overcoming their prior lusts.<sup>49</sup> As Christians, this should not surprise us. After all, Paul himself said regarding effeminate and homosexuals, "Such were some of you" (1 Corinthians 6:11). But why is this message so offensive to the Revoice movement? Surely the reason is the way they essentialize homosexual desire as a unique category—as an inherent and immutable orientation. They don't want the expectation placed on them that there is some way in which they can or should change. Rather, the testimony of Side B leaders tends to be, as Wesley Hill put it in the Foreword to *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community* (2019), that "acknowledging the permanence of a same-sex sexual orientation didn't involve any shift in Christian moral convictions."<sup>50</sup> In other words, it is a self-justification of how they should be recognized as orthodox Christians.

In light of these various streams of evidence, can we still consider sexual orientation a legitimate category describing a biological fact of nature? The facts do not support this. The better explanation is that orientation is an ideological word construct. It was created to justify same-sex behavior, normalize the experience of homosexual lust, and push for gay political causes. Orientation now includes additional concepts within its scope—such as gay identity, effeminacy, and the coveting of marriage's emotional intimacy without the proper sphere for that fulfillment. This makes it hard to precisely define because the term will always be used and interpreted subjectively. Orientation may feel natural in a person's experience because our passions and desires typically do, but homosexuality has no biological origin and no way of being passed on as all other biological traits are. This further means that it is not outside of the possibility of change.

### **The Bible and Sexual Orientation**

The Bible does not speak of any condition that we could call sexual orientation. It speaks of passions, desires, and temptations. If we summarize the Bible's definition of our sexual lives, it would breakdown into the categories of nature, action, and lust:

- *Nature* in the sense that humans are born biologically male and female with the potential for sexual fulfillment within natural marriage.
- *Action* in the sense of the sexual union consummating natural marriage and committing acts of sexual immorality.
- *Lust* in the sense of wrongly desiring and coveting something that God explicitly forbids or has not given us.

Sexual complementarity is bound up in our biology as male and female. This is the stress of Scripture and it is further evidenced in the unique biological makeup we observe between men and women. When Christ is questioned about the legitimacy of divorce in Matthew 19, he answers the question by way of Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Likewise, when Paul is speaking about sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6, he references Genesis 2 in order to speak about the wickedness of fornicating with a prostitute. Jesus and Paul both see something basic

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<sup>49</sup> *Such Were Some of You* is a documentary that contains personal testimonies of many men and women who have been set free from homosexuality. *Such Were Some of You*. Directed by David Kyle Foster. Pure Passion Media, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Hill, Wesley. 2019. Foreword in: Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets. *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), p. 12-13.

and fundamental in the created order that has application to two different questions regarding sexual ethics.

Do we, likewise, see something basic and fundamental in the created order that helps us with the question of sexual orientation? Certainly, Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 6:13 is noteworthy: "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." This indicates that God does not create us to desire sexual immorality. If we do so, we are in sin. On this basis alone we can say that a homosexual or bisexual orientation is not given by God to anyone.

Yet, we also recognize that sexuality itself is not inherently wicked. God made the sexual union and blessed it—even making it part of fulfilling his mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:22). In this way, God created humans as sexual beings. What kind of sexuality does God create, bless, and honor? The answer is obvious—we must say heterosexuality. The point is to see God's design and purpose for our sexuality—how He made us and why. He did not make men to partner with men or women to partner with women. In light of this, heterosexual is a necessary description of the relationship in which sexual expression can rightly occur—according to nature and God's law.

I recognize that this is a distasteful statement to many in our day—and not just heathens who reject God's Word and God's intent. We have evangelicals like LivingOut cofounder Ed Shaw writing on The Gospel Coalition that "Godliness is Not Heterosexuality."<sup>51</sup> We have Desiring God contributor Jackie Hill Perry accusing conservative Christians of preaching "The Heterosexual Gospel."<sup>52</sup> We have Revoice president Nate Collins arguing that Christians "have been guilty of a baptized form of heteronormativity."<sup>53</sup> (*Heteronormativity* is a term developed by queer theorists to describe any worldview that sees heterosexuality as normal and good for mankind.)

Pastor Tim Bayly offers a pointed critique of this mentality:

The context [for "Godliness is Not Heterosexuality"] is our culture's hatred of the law of binary heterosexuality instituted by God in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall. Every law and every person in our culture who teaches the male and female heterosexuality Jesus proclaimed was "from the beginning" is under relentless attack and the battle has been going against us for decades, now. So we have to decide whether to continue to fight out of love for our neighbors, or to throw in the towel. The recent attack upon reparative therapy and heterosexuality is the new sweet spot where Christians weary of the battle are hiding, hoping to wait it out until the artillery shells are gone and the smoke over the battlefield has dispersed.<sup>54</sup>

Bayly's language is strong but his observation is pertinent. God makes absolutely no allowance for homosexuality and Christians need not be embarrassed by this reality. The Bible gives no caveat that says we should make allowances for homosexual orientation as an explanation and excuse for homosexual sin or temptation. The Bible gives no caveat that says as long as we say that someone claims his identity is "in Christ" and not in his sexual desires then he can call himself a "gay Christian" as an honest reflection of his experience. The Bible gives no caveat that says that there is a part of someone's desires that are untouched by the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Yet, all of these caveats are there in the teaching of the Revoice movement.

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<sup>51</sup> Shaw, Ed. "Godliness is Not Heterosexuality." *The Gospel Coalition*, December 3, 2015.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/godliness-is-not-heterosexuality/>

<sup>52</sup> Perry, Jackie Hill. "The Heterosexual Gospel." *DesiringGod.org*, September 4, 2018. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-heterosexual-gospel>

<sup>53</sup> Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 259.

<sup>54</sup> Bayly, Tim. "Gospel Coalition joins the gay celibate movement (6); uncertain notes always have a context..." *Baylyblog.com*, December 29, 2015. <http://baylyblog.com/blog/2015/12/gospel-coalition-joins-gay-celibate-movement-6-uncertain-notes-always-have-context>

How should Christians think about this fundamental challenge to the Scripture? R.C. Sproul said it quite well when he spoke about homosexuality early in his ministry:

At this point I think it's important that we take a somewhat radical position towards homosexuality. And this radical position—that is a position that goes to the *radix* (to the root of the problem)—that I would personally advocate and ask you to consider is, first of all, beginning with this fundamental thesis: biologically, essentially, and intrinsically, there is no such thing as a homosexual.<sup>55</sup>

Sproul's point, of course, was not to denigrate anyone's experience, acting as if a person claiming to be same-sex attracted were lying about his struggles or desires. Instead, it is an attempt to highlight that our thinking on this matter must be grounded in biblical revelation. We cannot begin by defining reality by how someone feels. Sproul recognized that a wrong *self-conception* (what a person believes about himself) was behind so much of the sexual confusion happening in our world, locking people into a way of seeing themselves that keeps them in bondage to their own sinful desires and behaviors. "God does not call men and women to heterosexual relationships when they are intrinsically, biologically, essentially incapable of it," Sproul said.<sup>56</sup>

It is this idea of *self-conception as a homosexual* that Side B proponents found so offensive about the Nashville Statement when it said in Article 7:

WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God's holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture.

WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption.<sup>57</sup>

Preston Sprinkle said it excluded his Side B friends "from the brand of evangelicalism demanded by this statement."<sup>58</sup> Nate Collins called the Nashville Statement "a form of spiritual abuse."<sup>59</sup> In "Testimony of a Unicorn," where Greg Johnson "came out" as gay to his congregation, his anger toward Article 7 was quite evident:

Article 7 states—slipping this in in the midst of all this true stuff around it—slips in a statement that it is a sin to adopt a homosexual self-conception. Did you hear that? It's a sin to not think of yourself as straight. Do we do that for any other group? Friends, do we forbid alcoholics from conceiving of themselves as alcoholics because drunkenness is a sin? Do we tell paraplegics that they're unfaithful for adopting a self-conception of being paraplegic? Do we tell them that they should think of themselves as able-bodied because that is God's ideal? You know, 700,000 gay people went through conversion therapy, and 700,000 gay people came out still gay. Because it didn't work for the vast majority of people. And yet we forbid people to be honest about the effects of the Fall in their life. And that, frankly, is in line with a larger pattern in Christian writing about sexuality. When I read between the lines of a lot of evangelical discourse on sexuality what I often hear is an angry insistence that stories like mine be invisible. I'm not allowed to be the big, shameful sinner clothed in the righteousness of Jesus. I can be an ex-sinner, a former sinner, a used-to-be-a-sinner, a sinner emeritus, a chief of ex-sinners even, but the Gospel isn't for people who are currently defective. For any other group of people we quickly shout "Jesus loves you!" Only gay people hear, "Jesus loves you—but..."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Sproul, R.C. "Homosexuality." *Ligonier Ministries*, accessed April 29, 2021.

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/homosexuality/>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Council for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood. "Nashville Statement: A Coalition for Biblical Sexuality," accessed April 29, 2021. <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>

<sup>58</sup> Sprinkle, Preston. "My Nashville Statement." *PrestonSprinkle.com*, September 3, 2017.

<https://www.prestonsprinkle.com/blog/2017/9/3/my-nashville-statement>

<sup>59</sup> Beaty, Katelyn. "Why celibate LGBTQ Christians stir controversy on right and left alike." *Religion News Service*, August 16, 2018. <https://religionnews.com/2018/08/16/beaty-oped-2/>

<sup>60</sup> Memorial Presbyterian Church. "Testimony of a Unicorn." *YouTube*, presentation by Greg Johnson. July 31, 2019, timecode 30:47. [https://youtu.be/ljAcjA\\_xMeU](https://youtu.be/ljAcjA_xMeU)

Here Johnson appeals to the trope of *LGBT invisibility*—an idea that there is a concerted effort to keep gay people from being seen in prominent positions in society.<sup>61</sup> “Gay Christians” have recently begun to take this idea and apply it to the church in their critique. The Revoice movement sees visibility and representation in the church as an essential outcome of their movement—where someone confessing his homosexuality elicits no more than a yawn from the church, as Preston Sprinkle put it.<sup>62</sup>

Johnson further says the effect of the Fall in his life is that he was born with an orientation toward dishonorable passions. Yet Christians don’t want him to say this because they only want him to be an “ex-sinner” and not a present-tense “chief of sinners” by way of his experience. Johnson insists that his subjective experience as a sinner must dominate the way he thinks of himself now as he confesses Christ.

In this sad display, Johnson deceptively conflates justification (being made right with God) and sanctification (on-going growth in godliness), thereby overlooking the language Paul uses to describe this distinction in Romans 6. Johnson says, “I’m not allowed to be the big shameful sinner clothed in the righteousness of Christ.” The Apostle Paul says, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). Johnson says, “I can be an ex-sinner, a former sinner, a used-to-be-a-sinner, a sinner emeritus, a chief of ex-sinners even, but the Gospel isn’t for people who are currently defective.” But Paul says:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:12–14)

How does Johnson see homosexual orientation? He says, “You can’t just ‘repent of being same-sex-attracted and then go and be same-sex-attracted no more.’”<sup>63</sup> Clearly, for Johnson, orientation is set and may only be altered in the most miraculous of circumstances.

Whether it is defined biologically or theologically, sexual orientation creates an essential, biological category of personhood out of someone’s sexual and romantic desires. To Side B proponents, being gay is as innate as being male or female—which is ironic since gender is now seen by our society as a fluid psychological category based on someone’s feelings. How long before the Revoice movement adjusts some of their thinking on male and female in order to accommodate “trans Christians” or “non-binary Christians?” Indeed, Preston Sprinkle’s book *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible has to Say* (2021) already makes several accommodations in that direction.

“Heterosexuality” is not an “orientation”—it is simply part of being made male and female. Because heterosexuality is God’s design, Paul can describe homosexual behavior as “against nature” and “exchanging the natural function” of the opposite sex:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26–27).

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<sup>61</sup> O’Brien, Jennifer. “Why Visibility Matters: The impact of the rise of LGBTQ+ representation in media.” *Psychology Today*, November 14, 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/all-things-lgbtq/201711/why-visibility-matters>

<sup>62</sup> “I long for the day when gay people can come out to their small group and everyone would yawn. ‘You’re a sinner too? Welcome to the club. You want to grab my hand as we cling to the cross together?’” Sprinkle, Preston. “My Nashville Statement.” *PrestonSprinkle.com*, September 3, 2017. <https://www.prestonsprinkle.com/blog/2017/9/3/my-nashville-statement>

<sup>63</sup> “Missouri Presbytery Ad Hoc Committee to Respond to Memorial Presbyterian Church Report of Its BCO 31-2 Investigation of TE Greg Johnson.” Missouri Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), July 21, 2020, p. 16. <https://1ar.s3.amazonaws.com/2020/08/2020.07.21-MOP-BCO-31-2-investigation-of-TE-Greg-Johnson-CRM.pdf>

Does this passage have nothing to say to us except that homosexual intercourse is wrong? Is there nothing in the tone of Paul's words, the forcefulness of his rebuke, the context of his statements, and the worldview that he is speaking from that inform us of anything more than men and women should not have sexual relations with their own sex? Does Paul not assume here that heterosexuality is normal and good?

If orientation (according to Revoice's definition, as a pattern of sexual/romantic attractions) is mentioned at all in Scripture, surely it is in verse 26 in the statement "dishonorable passions" (ESV)—alternately translated as "vile affections" (KJV) or "degrading passions" (NASB95). Should Bible-believing Christians discard this language that speaks to both the moral nature of the passion as well as its persuasive hold upon a person in order to take on a less clear, psychologically-subjective phrase concocted by godless academics in order to normalize sodomy? Certainly not!

Surely Presbyterian theologian John Murray was right when he highlighted the "unnatural" character of homosexuality in Paul's epistle:

The stress falls upon the *unnatural* character of the vice and in that, as also in verse 27, consists the peculiar gravity of the abomination. The implication is that however grievous is fornication or adultery the desecration involved in homosexuality is on a lower plane of degeneracy; it is unnatural and therefore evinces a perversion more basic.<sup>64</sup>

To speak of an innate and immutable homosexual orientation is to remove the "perversion more basic" idea stressed in Paul's righteous language—inspired by the Holy Spirit. To argue a basic "moral equivalency" between homosexual sin and heterosexual sin is to undermine the way the Bible speaks of the fundamental perversion of God's created order that homosexuality is. It may be uncomfortable to say this in a world as sexually decadent and defiant as our own, but that is where the weight of Scripture's language lands.

When we concede sexual orientation as legitimate, it can and does open a person up to vain speculation—seeking out an amoral cause for his condition. At that point, it is quite easy to attempt to reconcile one's perceived orientation with God as Creator. Granted, Side B proponents cannot come right out and say "God made me gay" the way affirming theologians do, but they can nuance their language, hide behind vague inferences, and offer their speculative hypotheticals that move us in that direction.

This is what we see with Revoice speaker Gregory Coles, whose book *Single, Gay, Christian* offers this thought:

Is it too dangerous, too unorthodox, to believe that I am uniquely designed to reflect the glory of God? That my orientation, before the fall, was meant to be a gift in appreciating the beauty of my own sex as I celebrated the friendship of the opposite sex? That perhaps within God's flawless original design there might have been eunuchs, people called to lives of holy singleness? We in the church recoil from the word gay, from the very notion of same-sex orientation, because we know what it looks like only outside of Eden, where everything has gone wrong. But what if there's goodness hiding within the ruins? What if the calling to gay Christian celibacy is more than just a failure of straightness? What if God dreamed it for me, wove it into the fabric of my being as he knit me together and sang life into me. Is it possible for me to continue pursuing wholeness in Christ even if I stop praying to be straight?<sup>65</sup>

Although Coles does end up scaling back his language—ultimately claiming that his point is not to claim that God made him gay—yet, he ends even that caveat with this statement: "What I want to say, more than anything else, is that I don't know."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Murray, John. *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959. One-Volume edition reprint, 1982), p. 47.

<sup>65</sup> Coles, Gregory. *Single, Gay, Christian: A Personal Journey of Faith and Sexual Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2017), p. 46-47.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Cole's speculative thinking here logically follows from his commitment to the inherence and immutability of his orientation. Few within the Revoice movement have been willing to publicly speculate in the way Gregory Coles does here. Coles is unwilling to define his orientation negatively, such as a disease, mental disorder, or disability. But he is inclined to see it as potentially good—perhaps even part of being “fearfully and wonderfully made.” And if his thoughts seem too scandalous to the reader, they can be mitigated by merely saying “I don't know.”

But Coles' self-acknowledged ignorance begs the question of why is he so intent to speak at all—and to speak in terms potentially blasphemous of the God he claims to love? After all, to imply that God makes people gay and then gives them no legitimate way to fulfill their desires is to speak in a way the Apostle James warns against:

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 (James 1:13-15).

### **Overcoming Temptations and Besetting Sins**

The Bible presents every sin as something that can be repented of and every temptation as something for which there is a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). In contrast to this, Nate Collins presents “the desire for sexual intimacy” as “either a problem or a possibility. It can be an occasion for either temptation and sin, on one hand, or flourishing [on the other hand].”<sup>67</sup> He says the way by which flourishing is possible is not by finding an opposite sex spouse but by a psychological concept called *sublimation*. What he means by this is that when a person experiences a sexual impulse toward the same sex, this desire is to be “sublimated” into a desire for closer (non-physical) relationship with a same-sex friend rather than for (physical) intercourse.

This is not the same as the biblical concept of self-denial, which trains us to “renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:12). Notice how Collins has delicately separated “the desire for sexual intimacy” from “temptation” itself, as if a man's desire to sodomize another man is morally neutral and can simply be transferred into a conversation with a male friend instead. In this, there is no real means of escape because the temptation is imbedded through the orientation.

These ideas are foreign to the Bible. Rather Scripture says: “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22). And again: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:2). Or once more: “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24).

How does the sexual orientation concept square against the idea that the seed or potential for every sin is within all of us by nature? How can Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:14, say that the temptations we face are common to all people? How can he then encourage us in our fight against sin to remember that God is protecting the believer even when temptation comes by providing a way of escape? This idea of sublimation is not resisting temptation or escaping it. Surely anyone, if they have enough will-power or are under enough social pressure, can find a way to keep a lid on his internal passions. There is no faith necessary to sublimate one's desires—no Holy Spirit needed to aid in that purely psychological task.

This point should now be well-worn: Scripture does not speak of anything like a sexual orientation—an inborn and immutable bent that leads us into specific temptations that is somehow separate from original sin. That is what is being argued by Side B proponents.

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<sup>67</sup> Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 90.

Christians might, at times, use phrases like “sin patterns” or “bad habits” or even “recurring temptations” or “besetting sins,” but we should be careful even with this kind of experiential language so as not to normalize or excuse these things as right, good, or normal. Sin is never something to treat carelessly. Rather the Lord warned Cain:

Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it. (Genesis 4:6–7)

Pastor and counselor Martin Blocki warns that we should be careful with thinking that the phrase “besetting sin” is a distinct category of sin that we will always struggle with and never overcome:

In popular Christian usage, the term “besetting sin” seems to have come to mean the “chief” or “really big” or “exceptionally powerful” sin that a person struggles with and just can’t quite seem to overcome. This particular sin is thought to be in a “different” category, it exerts dominion over you in a different way than “other sins”. This is erroneous! The Greek word: *euperistatos* means: “cleverly placing itself around, to exert tight control; hence easily entangling.” There are plenty of places in the New Testament that speak of sin as a “principle” operating within us or as a specific violation of the law of God, but we cannot find any other support for the idea that there is a unique sin in each believer’s life that is somehow more powerful than other sins.<sup>68</sup>

By embracing the language of sexual orientation, are we not doing spiritual damage to sexual sinners by saying they have a unique sexual condition that they must “steward” rather than a temptation they must flee? Are we not emphasizing the failure of the flesh rather than the overcoming we expect in the Holy Spirit? These kinds of warnings are absent in the works of Revoice teachers and other Side B proponents. This is exactly why conservative commentators, such as Janet Mefferd, referred to the Revoice conference as a “Trojan horse,”<sup>69</sup> because destructive, worldly ideologies were being imported under the guise of being loving and “missionally sensitive.”

Agreeing to the concept of sexual orientation may seem like a small concession to give to secular psychology in order to make the Christian message seem slightly more palatable to the world. But there is no way to do so without compromising the truth. Furthermore, the world doesn’t care how much we nuance our position if we still refuse to affirm the fullest and freest expression of sexual deviancy.

But the deeper concern for any pastor who wants to see the lost won to Christ and the Christian built up in his faith is this: to tell a lost soul or a struggling believer to look inward toward himself for answers rather than calling him to look to the One who made him and can rescue him is not to love the sinner at all. The Christian pastor should be more than an empathizer—commiserating with someone’s feeling of helplessness—but a lifeline to reality and to living in God’s will. There are times to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15) but we should never compromise the truth in order to be more agreeable to someone’s feelings.

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<sup>68</sup> Blocki, Martin B. “Sanctification: Besetting Sins.” *Reformation21.org*, October 4, 2019. <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/sanctification-besetting-sins>

<sup>69</sup> Littleton, Thomas. “Upcoming ‘Revoice’ Conference Exposes LGBT Compromise Among ‘Conservative’ Evangelical Leadership.” *Christian New Wire*, July 17, 2018. <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/3662581387.html>

## ❖❖ PART II ❖❖

### Same-Sex Attraction

Having considered *homosexual orientation*, we now consider the experience of *same-sex attraction* itself. Although it is linked to homosexual orientation in common parlance (perhaps even acting as a synonym at times), it is describing the individual experience of being attracted to the same sex. As we shall see, this term has its own complications and ambiguities—ultimately because it is rooted in personal feelings.

It should be acknowledged that there is no objective definition of what same-sex attraction means. It is so closely linked to orientation—which itself is closely linked to sexual identity and gay self-identification. Because of this, attraction easily gets conflated with both orientation and identity. Understanding how this experience of attraction is described is important to seeing where the conflict emerges as these terms make their way into the debate.

#### The Feeling of Same-Sex Attraction

We should recognize that same-sex attraction does characterize a personal experience of some people. My intention with highlighting the illegitimacy of sexual orientation in the prior chapter was not to say that people are not truly feeling this or that their experience is purely something they are choosing to have. But I do believe it is spiritually reckless to insist that this experience arises from an innate and immutable condition described for us by secular psychology—a concept which is utterly foreign to the pages of Scripture. Yet, considering that there are people who claim this experience of same-sex attraction as a persistent feeling, let us consider honestly what is meant by it.

As the various definitions of orientation indicate, a person might experience “sexual and/or romantic attractions” to persons of the same sex. While the concept of sexual attraction is well understood as a desire for sexual intimacy and sexual intercourse, the term *romantic* is potentially more ambiguous. In common use, romantic attractions would indicate desiring to be with someone in an intimate way that goes beyond friendship. This could include non-sexual aspects such as quality time and conversation, but romance indicates an intimate relationship moving toward fuller physical intimacy. Within romantic attraction, there might also be areas where the lines between sexual and nonsexual blur—such as appreciating someone’s bodily appearance. But there is a different character to a romantic relationship than we find in friendship or among family members. We would not describe a parent’s relationship with his child as romantic, for instance, despite the physical and emotional intimacy of the relationship.

Nate Collins gives us a sense of what is meant by the idea of same-sex attraction when he says:

Beneath the erotic desires that characterize how I experience my sexuality, beneath the attractions I may feel to this or that individual, beneath the skipped heartbeat when a specific guy enters a room, or looks at me, or touches my arm—beneath all these things that we usually associate with sexuality—is the simple perception and appreciation of the beauty of another bearer of the divine image.<sup>70</sup>

This image of a “skipped heartbeat” when a man that Collins finds attractive enters the room or touches his arm is enough to give us insight that something more is going on here than simply being appreciative of male beauty. He downplays his bodily response while wanting us to think that at the root is actually a God-given response to beauty.

In the book *Costly Obedience*, the authors give a number of anecdotes from “gay celibate Christians.” For instance, a man named Liam describes an experience he had at thirteen, when

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<sup>70</sup> Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 304.

he snuck downstairs to the family computer to pull up images of naked men. “It wasn’t until I did that that I had articulated to myself that I wanted to see that. So, I sort of came out to myself and [eventually] got addicted to porn.”<sup>71</sup> A man named Lucas talks about becoming aware of his same-sex attractions:

I think I was fifteen when I first experienced attractions I recognized as wanting to have sex with another man. I didn’t have a similar desire to have sex with a woman. The meaning I attributed to it was that I was gay.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, a man named Ben describes his attraction developing into “a broader curiosity” toward men.<sup>73</sup> These men are clearly describing a sexual awareness—a desire to see sexual images and engage in sexual behavior with men.

Grant Hartley, a Revoice conference speaker and gay celibate student at Covenant Theological Seminary, gives a more detailed description of what he means by the terms *gay* and *same-sex attraction* as descriptions of his experience. Although Hartley’s words describe his own personal experience, if they are describing a real phenomenon at all, then they are surely representative of some common experiences of others too. In this way, it is helpful in putting forward some real-world examples of what is meant when Side B proponents speak of same-sex attraction. (This is an extended thread he posted to his Twitter account, reprinted in its entirety for the sake of clarity and context):

I get the feeling many Christians imagine attraction to the same sex as a constant barrage of temptation to sexual fantasy or behavior, and well, that is just not true. Here is what happens in my own heart and head whenever I find myself attracted to a man (in order): Upon first seeing him, aesthetic attraction. I notice a good haircut, a sweet smile, a nice body, a flattering outfit, etc. This is followed by a kind of nondescript longing: butterflies in my stomach. I want to be close to him, to be noticed by him, to get to know him better. I ask myself several questions: does he notice me too? Is he also attracted to men? I often look for hints of Christian faith and wonder if he loves Jesus. Sometimes, if I am especially reflective, I ask: what about him do I find attractive, and what does that say about me?

I know I don’t owe this to y’all, but at this point my body is rarely “turned on”. I would not describe my attraction at this stage as “sexual,” except maybe in that I am a sexed being (a man) attracted to another sexed being (a man). I am then faced with a decision: I can choose to begin to obsess or fantasize (which are both lust). Or, I can intentionally turn my attention elsewhere. At my very best moments, I take the advice of a wise friend who has suggested I thank God for his beauty.

After getting to know him, I usually find myself drawn to him in more relational ways. I admire character traits like kindness or gentleness, or feel a sense of comradery with him based on shared interests. I also begin to experience a more physical (but still non-sexual) attraction to him. I long to enjoy appropriate physical intimacy: sitting next to him on a sofa, hugging him, having my arm around his shoulder or his arm around mine, etc. The aesthetic attraction, nondescript longing, and questions often remain, as well as the opportunity to lust. My temptation to lust for men I know usually takes the form of temptation to obsession, not fantasy, but I admit I have struggled with both.

I know many of you won’t believe me, but a lot of the time my mind truly never goes into sexual fantasy about him. I continue to want appropriate physical touch, to spend time with him, know and be known, to belong with him and for him to belong with me. I guess one might call some of those desires “romantic,” but I’m not sure its the most helpful word; no one has ever really given me a clear definition of “romance”, and most people experience many of these desires in friendship. After significant time together, I find myself drawn more and more to things like his quirks, his passions, and his faith (as you might expect, a man who loves and follows Jesus passionately is incredibly attractive to me).

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<sup>71</sup> Yarhouse, Mark and Olya Zaporozhets. *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), p. 119.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

Most of this attraction leads, with some intentionality and a lot of help of the Holy Spirit, to a healthy friendship. In fact, a lot of my attraction actually \*equips\* me for friendship. I'm not perfect; I still fall victim to sexual temptation, and I am open to seeing my sin more and more clearly every day. There are other arenas in which I am called to do battle with sexual temptation through the power of the Holy Spirit besides what I have described. But I hope you can see that my attraction to men is not just a swirling vortex of temptation to lust or sexual behavior. A lot of my experience in being attracted to other men is actually good, or at least morally neutral.

So when I use words like “gay” or “same-sex attraction,” \*this\* is what I am referring to: a human experience, a mix of good, bad, and neutral. This is why saying things like “same-sex attraction/being gay is sinful” strikes me as dishonest at best, and deceitful at worst.<sup>74</sup>

Here we find that same-sex attraction includes many components, perhaps not necessarily clearly differentiated in feeling yet differentiated here in order to discuss them. Hartley notes *aesthetic attraction*—noticing a man’s personal appearance and styled presentation. He comments on what he likes—the haircut is good, the smile is sweet, the body is nice, the outfit is flattering.

He follows this by mentioning the feeling of *nondescript longing*—a kind of “butterflies in the stomach” feeling which is further defined by desiring something specific from the man: to be close, to be noticed, to know him better. He wonders to himself whether the man notices him, whether the man is potentially attracted to him, and whether the man is a Christian. This has moved beyond noticing the appearance and now desires a relationship and deeper knowledge of the man. It is at this point that Hartley says that he is tempted to obsess over the man or sexually fantasize about the man. He notes that he is rarely aroused by the man but he is apparently tempted to sexually fantasize about him.

Hartley also notes that in his best moments he can turn his occasion for lust into a thanksgiving prayer to God for the man’s beauty. This is similar to how Ed Shaw—cofounder of *LivingOut.org* and gay celibate author—recommends dealing with same-sex attraction. Shaw says he has “literally lived in fear of beautiful men—as you would fear a loaded pistol pointed straight at you” because he’s afraid of falling into sin.<sup>75</sup> Yet, he insists that through his kind of spiritual sublimation, he has found a way to no longer feel ashamed for enjoying the beauty of attractive men. Shaw says:

I could acknowledge that all true beauty in creation—including physical beauty in other human beings—is a God-given gift. And I could seek to thank him for the beauty I see, and let it point me to the greater beauty of God himself. To let the experience be an occasion of praise and worship of God—rather than shame or sin that drives me away from him.<sup>76</sup>

The next stage of attraction that Hartley describes is a deepening *relational attraction* as he learns more about the man and sees his character more clearly expressed. As admiration and comradery are felt, he confesses to having a deepened *physical attraction* to the man. Hartley says this is still a nonsexual attraction, expressed in “appropriate physical intimacy” such as hugs, sitting close on the couch, putting arms around each other. He admits this is another point when he is commonly tempted to fantasize or obsess over the man.

The “etc.” Hartley mentions at the end of the list is curious, and opens up some speculation as to whether hand-holding, prolonged snuggling, and spooning might be considered acceptable. This does happen among some Side B adherents. For instance, Thomas Mark Zuniga (member of the gay celibate blog community *Your Other Brothers*) speaks of the time he played

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<sup>74</sup> This series of tweets were “unrolled” by the Thread Reader app and is available through their website. The only thing changed in the quotation above is the formatting into larger paragraphs rather than individual tweets. All typos and grammar belong to the original author. Hartley, Grant (@TheGrantHartley). “February 28, 2020, 15 tweets, 3 min read.” *Thread reader*. <https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1233387241742970881.html>

<sup>75</sup> Shaw, Ed. “How Do You Cope with On-Going Same-Sex Attraction?” *LivingOut.org*, January 1, 2021. <https://www.livingout.org/resources/articles/33/how-do-you-cope-with-ongoing-same-sex-attraction>

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*.

“footsie” with a gay celibate friend. He justified the interaction by the fact that genitals were not fondled:

“I feel weird about last night,” I told Cody the next morning, and he assured me we were fine. That nothing was wrong. That I was making a big deal out of a little thing. It took me a few days of processing, but eventually I came around. No definitive physical lines had been crossed. No touching of private parts or anything like that. Yes, there was raging arousal. But is it a sin to be aroused? Certainly not. But still. Why did the lingering touch of my friend cause me such a sexual reaction? And was this a problem for our friendship and shared faith journeys since we were both attracted to men?<sup>77</sup>

To be fair to Hartley, this may not be something that he considers morally acceptable. But it is worth noting that pent-up sexual tension and “touch starvation” are recurring talking points among Side B proponents. When the lines are already blurry between what is and isn’t morally acceptable, it is quite easy to fall into further sin. One comment on Zuniga’s blog by a user named “Malcolm” warns that seeking physical touch can be dangerous. Malcolm says it led him to eventually indulge in hookups with male prostitutes he was encountering at massage parlors:

I was so naive. Not all male massage therapists are sex workers, but in my experience, the majority are. Even ones that are in legitimate settings. This has led me down the road of full-blown sexual addiction and hookups. I wish that I had never gotten that first massage. So if anyone out there is thinking that they should try to fulfill this touch deficit by getting a massage from a guy, I would say don’t do it. It’s just too dangerous. If you truly have a friend that you can cuddle with, perhaps it would be ok. But I think that you both need to keep your clothes on.<sup>78</sup>

Hartley’s last point is that as the relationship with the man continues, this blossoms into a *romantic attraction*. Hartley hesitates with the term “romantic,” finding it vague and ill-defined. Nevertheless, if he were describing the stages of courtship with a woman, we would certainly be seeing the desire for continued physical touch, time spent together, knowing and being known by one another, as well as belonging to one another as romantic desires. They are those desires of a young couple heading, hopefully, toward marriage. Yet what Hartley is describing is not courtship with a prospective spouse but rather a relationship with a man that cannot lead to godly sexual consummation. He assures us this usually leads to a healthy friendship—presumably where these feelings of romantic attraction and physical desire persist.

### **Covetousness and Emotional Idolatry**

We can understand that for someone who sees himself as gay, same-sex attraction has a lot of various feelings associated with it. Not all of those feelings are sexual which would obviously mean they aren’t all sexual fantasizing. However, this is not unique to same-sex attracted people; rather, it is true for every person in every relationship they have throughout their lives. But this “swirling vortex of temptation” idea is the straw man that Grant Hartley has decided to debunk in his Twitter thread. This is misdirection—intended to minimize Hartley’s concerning revelations about his same-sex attraction while also downplaying the sexual and romantic desires that make his “attraction” something different than a normal friendship. And yet, Hartley constantly wants us to hold a concept of “normal friendship” in our minds as we read about his interactions with and desires for another man. Many of his statements play into an assumption that the reader will envision an average masculine friendship—simply with extra levels of physical touching.

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<sup>77</sup> Zuniga, Thomas Mark. “The First Guy I Ever Cuddled With.” *Your Other Brother*, November 11, 2020. <https://www.yourotherbrothers.com/2020/11/11/the-first-guy-i-ever-cuddled-with/>

<sup>78</sup> Malcolm. Comment on “The First Guy I Ever Cuddled With.” *Your Other Brother*, November 13, 2020, 3:56 PM. <https://www.yourotherbrothers.com/2020/11/11/the-first-guy-i-ever-cuddled-with/#comment-5150790536>

There are many problematic attitudes on display in the Hartley thread. First of all, the whole thread is a self-justification. This isn't a confession, nor is it presented as a personal struggle. There is no shame. But it isn't merely a statement of fact either. These feelings are justified as being common to friendship, as being mostly non-sexual (which, in Hartley's view, seems to imply they are non-sinful), and frequently resulting in a good outcome (which he sees as "a healthy friendship"). He further says that his attraction to the same sex specially equips him for this friendship.

While he admits to not being perfect and that he "still fall[s] victim to sexual temptation," he is "open" to seeing his sin more clearly. But he rejects the notion that these thoughts and feelings of attraction are sinful in themselves—and thereby accuses anyone who says such a thing as being "dishonest at best, and deceitful at worst." In other words, to say that same-sex attraction is sinful is in itself sinful. And the reason this is sinful is because Grant Hartley says that his desires for men are not primarily sexual. Implicit within this is the assertion that he should not feel ashamed for any of this; rather, anyone who calls same-sex attraction sinful should be ashamed for being dishonest.

Why should we believe Grant Hartley when he says there is very little sexual desire imbedded within his attraction? After all, if he were describing his attraction to another man's wife in this way, would we see these items as nonsexual? Would they simply be a reflection of a desire for healthy friendship? Could we call them morally neutral or morally good? Certainly not. "Adulterous desire" may very well include aspects common to friendship but they are being sought of a person and in a way that is wrong. The entire object of desire is wrong. Adulterous desire should be repented of and fled from when a person feels it in himself. It should never be coddled, justified, and celebrated in this way. It is abominable wickedness.

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, how much more is this homosexual desire abominable? It is unnatural and has no God-given fulfillment. It is sinful through-and-through; it can only lead toward further sin. Yet, Hartley assures us that "a lot of the time my mind truly never goes into sexual fantasy." Lust, for Grant Hartley, has been cleverly redefined as being either *sexual fantasy* or *obsession*. Grant is certainly right to include *obsession* within the broader meaning of lust—but he is wrong to minimize the sexual component of lust merely to "fantasizing." Surely when Proverbs 6:25 warns the young man about the adulteress by saying, "Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes," there is more here than sexual fantasizing. There is a longing and yearning that the young man must guard his heart against. There is even the enticement through "eyelashes," which are non-erogenous yet, in this case, meant to attract attention and elicit desire.

When Christ says, "but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28), Christ certainly has a bigger concept of lust than simply sexual fantasizing. Why else would the Greek word *epithymēō* (ἐπιθυμέω) be used—a word which has a fairly broad meaning that can include more generally "to set one's heart upon" as well as to "desire," "covet," or "long for" forbidden things?<sup>79</sup> It's a word that doesn't always have a negative meaning—although Christ clearly uses it negatively in Matthew 5:28. The entire category of lust here fits squarely within the bigger concept of *covetousness*.

If we take Paul's comment in Colossians 3:5 to heart—"covetousness, which is idolatry"—we get into even graver spiritual peril by minimizing the implication of lust, acting as if covetousness is somehow not as dangerous or damaging because it can be nonsexual. Hartley's appeal "to obsession, not fantasy" as his primary temptation struggle works to minimize his desire in this way by highlighting its non-sexual nature.

What Grant Hartley has described in detail throughout this thread is covetousness. It is idolatry. It certainly includes sexual components, but the fact that he sees these desires as non-

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<sup>79</sup> Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. "Lexicon :: Strong's G1937 - epithymēō." *Biblesoft Inc.*

sexual does not make them safe, or as he says, “morally neutral.” In fact, it makes them that much more deceptive because they hide behind a level of respectability that can be justified as a natural part of friendship formation. But Hartley is not describing what friendship looks like. There is a different character to it—otherwise there would be no need to call it same-sex attraction. It sounds like Hartley’s homosexual desires have deceived him to the point of blindness.

Where are the concerned believers in Hartley’s life warning him of this grave danger? Have they indeed gone to him and yet they have been summarily rejected for being “dishonest at best, and deceitful at worst?” Who can know this but Hartley and his Christian friends but it seems that this should be the kind of danger frequently and vocally warned against by those involved in Revoice and the broader Side B movement if they truly desire to see those who struggle with same-sex attraction be sanctified and not be overcome by their own temptations. Yet these notes are decidedly missing across Side B literature.

It should go without saying that anyone who forgoes the physical expression of sexual immorality is to be commended. But it is not a license for emotionally idolatrous attitudes to reign in a person’s thoughts, feelings, and affections. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the Lord cares about our desires. It is worth reflecting on the words from Paul to the Corinthians:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. (1 Corinthians 10:6–15)

### **Aesthetic Orientation**

We have seen that the desire for relational intimacy is not morally neutral by mere fact that it is non-sexual. Nevertheless, there is a tremendous push by secular activists as well as every stripe of “gay Christian” to make homosexuality seem either not predominately sexual or even to be seen as mostly non-sexual. There are social and political reasons for this, of course, and it is, in fact, part of the reason why many activists vehemently oppose the terms *homosexual* and *homosexuality* continuing in mainstream use.<sup>80</sup> However, because sexual orientation is a term explicitly tied to sexual desire and behavior, it is a significant challenge to fully separate the sexual and non-sexual components.

One attempt to deal with it is to simply downplay the sexual aspects of being gay. Julie Rodgers, a former chaplain at Wheaton College and former contributor to *SpiritualFriendship.org*, expresses this idea well when she says:

A gay orientation can be understood as an overall draw toward someone of the same sex, which is usually a desire for a deeper level [of] intimacy with those of the same sex. Just like a heterosexual orientation

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<sup>80</sup> From the *New York Times*: “The early gay-rights movement was called the homophile movement because its founders explicitly rejected the word homosexual; they did not want to be identified as exclusively sexual beings. Franklin E. Kameny, a gay rights pioneer, coined the phrase ‘Gay is Good’ in 1968 as a way to help strip away some of the negative association. By then, gay had become the preferred term among gays and lesbians. But it would take decades for the rest of the country to catch on.” Peters, Jeremy W. “The Decline and Fall of the ‘H’ Word.” *New York Times*, March 21, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/fashion/gays-lesbians-the-term-homosexual.html>

Also: “GLAAD Media Reference Guide.” *GLAAD*, October 2016, p. 7-9. <https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD-Media-Reference-Guide-Tenth-Edition.pdf>

can't be reduced to a desire for straight sex, a gay orientation can't be reduced to a desire for gay sex. This longing for intimacy is usually experienced as a desire for nearness, for partnership, for close friendship, rich conversation, and an overall appreciation of beauty.<sup>81</sup>

Even though Rodgers no longer holds to a conservative view of marriage (she denounced it in 2015 before marrying her female partner in 2017), her description of orientation (and the attraction that undergirds it) articulates a view on homosexuality that tries to soften the sexual edges of the degrading passion. This is a view likewise promoted by Revoice proponents.

Another attempt is to innovate a new theological understanding of orientation. This is the path taken by Nate Collins in his book *All but Invisible*.<sup>82</sup> Collins seems to have coined the term and concept of *aesthetic orientation* as a redefinition of sexual orientation centered primarily around a person's appreciation for masculine or feminine beauty. He believes that doing so frees homosexuality from the "Freudian errors we saw latent within the term sexual orientation"—meaning that the real problem with *sexual orientation* is that it makes too much of sexual urges.<sup>83</sup> Collins says:

If we are to speak of an aesthetic orientation and use it to differentiate between gay and straight, we would say that both gay men and straight women are, for example, less aware (in general) of the beauty of feminine personhood than straight men or lesbian women. These general patterns that we discern in the way people experience the beauty of others are now the basis for distinguishing between straight and nonstraight orientations, rather than an impulse toward sexual activity.<sup>84</sup>

Under this definition, oriented attraction is not primarily sexual, though it might express itself that way. Collins' point is that sexual attraction is secondary to a more general "perception and admiration of beauty"<sup>85</sup>—hence his frustration at conservatives conflating same-sex attraction with *lust* or a *desire for sexual activity*. This is Collins' way of explaining that same-sex attraction is not sinful in and of itself:

The desire to admire beauty is a deeply human, and therefore personal, urge that God set within the human heart the moment he created the first man and woman. Before sexuality even entered the picture, the creation of humankind in the image of God guaranteed that men and women would perceive personhood as beautiful in itself.<sup>86</sup>

The point being made is that God made us to love beauty—which creates the possibility that homosexuality is not fundamentally disordered but merely excessive. Its practice is against God's law but it is not really against nature. When Collins discusses sexual arousal as "a passionate apprehension of the personal beauty of a specific person," he wants us to remember that sexual arousal is not always the response our bodies give to beauty and that sometimes sexual arousal is disconnected from apprehending personal beauty altogether (as in the cases of being aroused by fetish objects or being aroused while being sexually abused).<sup>87</sup>

The point Collins wants us to take away is not clarity about how these things work but simply a recognition that "sexuality is not as monolithic as some might think. The world simply

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<sup>81</sup> Rodgers, Julie. "Can the Gay be a Good?" *Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships*. SpiritualFriendship.org, October 23, 2014. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2014/10/23/can-the-gay-be-a-good/>

<sup>82</sup> Nate Collins speaks of theological innovation regarding orientation: "I want to suggest, however, that the course correction we need [regarding our understanding of homosexual orientation] involves a degree of theological innovation and is not simply a return to the way things were [before Mark Yarhouse made allowances for orientation within the Christian conversation]." (context added)

Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 142.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

isn't divided into straight people and sexual deviants."<sup>88</sup> Ironically, with this view, it is hard to envision how bisexuals—a group Revoice specifically says they are intending to reach—would fit within this binary structure of “gay” and “straight.” In this way, Collins’ work has a striking similarity to Gregory Coles’ comment we saw earlier: “What I want to say, more than anything else, is that I don’t know.”<sup>89</sup>

Why the constant equivocation? Why the finely nuanced distinctions that put supposed faithfulness on a razor’s edge? It should not be surprising to any discerning Christian that the entire idea of *aesthetic orientation* is concocted out of Nate Collins’ imagination. There is no scriptural basis for this philosophical nonsense. The best he can offer to spiritualize it is a C.S. Lewis quote about the beauty of friendship.<sup>90</sup> Even Ed Shaw and Rachel Gilson, in their otherwise appreciative review of Collins’ book, have to admit there are some “mild problems” with his theory:

[The theory of aesthetic orientation] relies heavily on the subjective experience of each person’s attraction, and may overemphasize the difference between straight and gay responses to beauty on this basis... Beauty itself doesn’t seem to be able to hold the key to what it means to be gay, because deep same-gender appreciation and draw exists across orientations. Though Collins has excellent reasons for wanting to disassociate the center of being gay from sexual and romantic feelings, those feelings are precisely the difference between those who are identified as gay and those who are not.<sup>91</sup>

Same-sex attracted pastor Ed Shaw and Revoice speaker Rachel Gilson have their own problems on this issue, but they are right to critique Collins for completely removing all sexual and romantic implications from homosexuality. Otherwise, we are simply talking about friendship and there is no need to differentiate non-sexual attraction as a unique part of being gay. Homosexuality, in this view, isn’t so much a desire for sex as it is a “passionate apprehension of personal beauty.” This most elaborate of equivocations is the theological innovation Collins has thrust upon the church—seeking desperately to carve out a space where same-sex attraction is not simply morally neutral, but innately good—a reflection of God’s design. It should be rejected.

### **Same-Sex Attraction and the Fall**

The question of aesthetic orientation is trying to nuance some kind of explanation for same-sex desires as fundamentally good while still maintaining that there are negative aspects to them that are the result of the Fall. In this idea, if we separate the good (common, relational) desires from the bad (uncommon, lustful) then we have to recognize that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with same-sex attraction. This is the basic argument given by Side B proponents—whether they develop a theory of aesthetic orientation or not.

But desires are not as clearly demarcated as this which means that lines between good and bad frequently get blurred—and the place they get blurred is in the use of language. The question will inevitably return to that of origin: where did these desires come from? Did God give them to us as part of his natural world or are they the result of sin’s influence and reign in us? The official line given by most Side B proponents is that homosexual desires are the result of the Fall. But even that statement can be loaded with additional nuance so we should be careful to understand what is being meant by it.

Revoice’s Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience officially states what they believe (as an organization) concerning God’s design for marriage. But it also serves as an example of studied ambiguity regarding the true nature of same-sex attraction:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>91</sup> Shaw, Ed and Rachel Gilson. “Figuring Out Faithfulness with Same-Sex Attraction.” *The Gospel Coalition*, December 13, 2017. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/all-but-invisible-identity-gender-sexuality-nate-collins/>

We believe that sin entered the world as a result of the rebellion of Adam and Eve and now permeates every aspect of creation, including human sexuality. Along with every form of sexual desire apart from the one-flesh bond between husband and wife, we believe that same-sex sexual desire experienced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other same-sex-attracted people is a product of the Fall; that same-sex sexual desire was not a pre-Fall reality; and that same-sex sexual desire will not exist in the new creation, after the return of Christ.<sup>92</sup>

On the surface, the Statement is a denunciation of homosexuality because it acknowledges the primacy of natural marriage while also describing that homosexual desires are “a product of the Fall” and “not a pre-Fall reality.” But the words Revoice chose to delimit are not “homosexual desire” or “same-sex attraction”; instead, the phrase being discussed is “same-sex *sexual* desire.” While many readers may assume that “same-sex sexual desire” and “same-sex attraction” are synonyms, as we have already seen, they are not. Revoice does not use or define the phrase “same-sex attraction” at any point in their Statement, however the phrase “same-sex attracted” is used three times as a description of people.<sup>93</sup>

The word *sexual* tells us exactly what kind of same-sex desires Revoice sees as categorically wrong while obscuring from us what kind of desires might not be wrong. Of course, there’s no indication in the Bible that *any* sexual desire will exist in the new heavens so when Revoice tells us that “same-sex sexual desire will not exist” after the return of Christ, this is no great confession on their part. But there is biblical indication that God created sexuality in the Garden of Eden and embodied it within men and women. We have historically understood this as being made male and female. It is expressed in differing sexual functions, biological traits, physical characteristics, personalities, social relating, and aptitudes, as well as differing roles within the home, church, and society with differing expressions in dress, manner, and conduct. Sexual intercourse is part of it but not the whole picture. In this way, there is innate significance placed by God on being born male or female. Our sex providentially guides our life in a particular way.

In contrast to this, Revoice promotes ambiguity—where there is no inherent, God-given significance in being born male or female in ordering our sexual lives. Instead, sexuality is just an amorphous category that gets loosely brought into the discussion at different points—either emphasizing wrongful thoughts/behaviors or sometimes as a general catch-all term referring to everything implied by sexual orientation. As Grant Hartley says, it can be “a mix of good, bad, and neutral”.

For instance, in contrasting the opposition she receives from liberal Side A “gay Christians” with the opposition she gets from those who oppose her Side B form of “gay Christianity,” Revoice speaker Bekah Mason gives us this statement:

For the one side, they will only be pleased if everyone either becomes like them or affirms them. On the other, they will only be pleased by a solely heterosexual world. If your goal is for someone to either actively express or suppress their sexuality, you are far too easily pleased.

Both are simplistic and hurtful desires that would lead to a significant population of people who both desire to be faithful to an orthodox sexual ethic while still maintaining that, as they grow in holiness, they are not simultaneously moving toward an increasing heterosexuality. To be attacked by both ends of the theological and ethical spectrums concerning anthropology and sexuality makes for an inevitable defeat in a two front war.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> “Our Beliefs – Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience.” *Revoice*, accessed April 29, 2021. <https://revoice.us/about/our-beliefs/statements-of-conviction/statement-on-sexual-ethics-and-christian-obedience/>

<sup>93</sup> The Revoice Statement speaks of “gay, lesbian, bisexual, and **other** same-sex attracted people” [emphasis mine] which would indicate some additional sexual orientation categories that Revoice would summarize under that phrase. It remains unclear exactly what is meant by this but perhaps it is speaking of people who identify as “non-straight” but not as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. If so, this once again highlights the elusiveness of sexual orientation as an essential category, where it relates more to a person’s willingness to self-identify with a term than any objective measurement.

<sup>94</sup> Mason, Bekah. “Trading Up.” *BekahMason.com*, March 4, 2018. <https://bekahmason.com/2018/03/04/trading-up/>

Mason says there is a middle ground between “expressing” and “suppressing” one’s sexuality and—alluding to C.S. Lewis’ famous quote about “mud pies in the slum”—she says the problem is we are too easily pleased with these simplistic and hurtful dichotomies. At first, Mason seems to view sexuality as a synonym for sexual desires. Yet, she considers suppressing her sexuality to be hurtful. While discerning Christians would resist the psychological language of “suppressing” sexual desires, we would certainly agree with the idea of “resisting” or “fleeing” or “putting to death” wrongful sexual desires.

Nevertheless, she gets to the heart of the matter when she says that a person should be able to hold to the orthodox sexual ethic and not be “moving toward an increasing heterosexuality.” In other words, Mason sees sexuality as a man’s sexual orientation and not his sexual desires. Yet, this is an impossible nuance because, as we have already seen, a man’s orientation is necessarily defined by his sexual desires.

She handily knocks down the straw man of the conservative church that will “only be pleased by a solely heterosexual world.” But what happens when we ask the inevitable question that Mason dares not ask: would God be pleased by a solely heterosexual world? Or, to take the question a step further: did God create a solely heterosexual world? We know what we can rightfully infer from Scripture on this topic—but those are not the same answers being offered by the Revoice movement.

It is crystal clear in Mason’s statements that homosexuality is her sexuality. It is not a set of temptations she faces or a struggle against her passions she is seeking to overcome—it is a foundational aspect of who she is and, therefore, it will never be changed. She might say her sexuality inclines her toward certain temptations and might even be a “product of the Fall,” yet she sees sexuality as an utterly separate concern from personal holiness. Because of all this, we find her making utterly incoherent statements like: “Our sexuality is not our identity, but it does, to an extent, serve to express our embodied existence in a particular manner.”<sup>95</sup>

So someone can have a sexuality that should not be *expressed* because the Bible says it would be evil to do so but it likewise should not be *suppressed* because it is “simplistic and hurtful” to do so—meaning, it is inauthentic to who that person perceives himself to be. In other words, Mason distances herself from identifying with homosexuality, yet homosexuality expresses her embodied existence as a homosexual—although this sexuality should not be expressed sexually. At what point does the house of cards tumble to the ground?

If she were defining sexuality the way the Bible discusses it, she would see that our sexuality is part of our identity because it is rooted in male and female. However, sexuality is not an expression of our deepest desires and urges—which are fickle and malleable and marred by sin—but an expression of God’s providence in creating us either as men or as women. The reason Side B proponents must tie themselves into such semantic knots is because they are not convinced of or not content with how God made them in their masculinity or femininity. This leads to all kinds of expressions of gay identity in dress, speech, and manner that are championed by Revoice participants as authentic and needed for greater LGBT representation and visibility in the church.

Our job as believers is not to decipher our feelings to learn who we truly are—God has already defined us. We should wish to rejoice with Bekah Mason when she describes Jesus as “more than enough.” We should wish to sympathize with her when she says:

So to those who say we shouldn’t acknowledge gayness or same sex attraction and also claim Christ, I challenge you to consider that this: This aspect of my life is the one God uses most consistently to draw me to Himself, to point out my weaknesses and my need for Him.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

If this were merely a confession of temptations and struggles and a record of the Lord's tender mercy through the midst of it, any biblical Christian could happily lend his "amen." But sadly, when it comes to the Revoice movement, there is always something more.

In Mason's case, after her appeal stated above, she ends her blog with a startling admission: "Why in the world would He be so cruel as to take away the thing that most deeply presses me into himself?"<sup>97</sup> In a statement, the heart has been revealed and the dangerous ideology of Side B thinking is on full display. This isn't really about honesty. This isn't really about confessing a struggle. This isn't really about being close to the Lord. This is idolatry—clinging to the flesh, impugning God's character, and defying anyone to say otherwise. In this, Christians simply cannot follow her.

### Same-Sex Attraction and the Resurrection

Is same-sex attraction a product of the Fall? Ask a Side B proponent and you are unlikely to get a simple yes-or-no answer because for them it is not a simple yes-or-no question. It is a question full of complexity and nuance. Will people be gay in the resurrection? This question, likewise, has not been met with a clear and certain answer.

In a 2016 blog post on *SpiritualFriendship.org*, Wesley Hill asked this very question. He began by considering *disability theology* as a workable model for thinking about his own potential experience of resurrected life. Disability theology is a branch of liberation theology that seeks to re-imagine an inclusive theology and corresponding social advocacy that centers around disabled or impaired people. As Hill considers it, disability theology says that a man is so shaped by his limitations and experiences as a disabled person that he would cease to be himself if he were completely healed in the resurrection. There must be something of his "disabled" experience in this world that continues with him in glory.

In his 2010 book *Washed and Waiting*, Hill thought he might be healed from his homosexuality in heaven. But, in a blog post five years later, he seems to have changed his mind:

In my chapter on Nouwen [from *Washed and Waiting*], I wrote, "I expect to stand with Henri Nouwen at the resurrection and marvel that neither of us is homosexual anymore." But as time goes on, I feel less sure that that's quite the right way to put it. Certainly those behavioral aspects of my gay experience that are sinful—lust, for example, and pride—won't be true of me at all in the kingdom of God. I don't believe that I will desire sexual intimacy with men in heaven because I believe that that attraction is a result of the fall. And just as certainly, I know I won't be cordoned off from all the rest of the redeemed by any political identity label. I feel confident that "gay" won't be a descriptor I'll want to hold onto (nor, presumably, will it be around much longer in this life, well before the End arrives). And yet, as I've said many times here at *[SpiritualFriendship.org]*, "being gay" feels much bigger and multilayered and richer than an attraction to bodies, than the sin of lust or the proclivity to identify with an in-group. It is a sensibility—that's the word I keep landing on—and one that somehow seems to pervade my personality, shaping the friendships I form, inclining me to certain kinds of reading, drawing me to specific types of conversations and hobbies and artistic pursuits. Maybe I'm too much a child of my age, letting Freud affect my thinking about the all-pervasiveness of sexuality more than I should, but I still like the way I put it in my *Spiritual Friendship* book:

"In my experience, at least, being gay colors everything about me, even though I'm celibate. It's less a separable piece of my experience, like a shelf in my office, distinguishable from the other shelves, and more like the proverbial drop of ink in a glass of water: not identical with the water, but also not entirely distinct from it either."

But if that's true, and if it's also true that Christ's return means I'm to be "healed" of my homosexuality, then will my entire personality undergo a complete overhaul? To go back to [disability theologian Frances] Young's language above, if I'm to be "perfected"—meaning, if I won't be gay anymore—well, I can't imagine that that wouldn't make me into someone who is almost completely different than the person I am now, and that thought isn't exactly a hopeful one.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Hill, Wesley. "Will I Be Gay in the Resurrection?" *Spiritual Friendship.org*, March 10, 2016. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2016/03/10/will-i-be-gay-in-the-resurrection/>

For Hill, homosexuality is beyond romantic and sexual desires. It is, perhaps, even beyond an aesthetic orientation. It has been elevated to a sensibility—embedded so deeply within his personality that it is like ink mixed in a glass of water. Obviously at this point, we are talking about identity at a fundamental level. There simply is no way around it. “In some way, my disability—if that’s the right metaphor for it—will be glorified,” he finally says.<sup>99</sup>

Does this thought have any implications on other aspects of Christian teaching? We don’t have to look far before we find an answer. Indeed, the first comment underneath Hill’s blog is from Nate Collins, who says this: “LOVE these thoughts, Wes. I can’t help but think of the stigmata of Christ. Possessing a perfected, resurrection body didn’t preclude his personhood from bearing testimony to prior experiences of fallenness.”<sup>100</sup>

Lest we think this was simply a random comment, Collins presents the same idea toward the end of *All but Invisible*:

It’s hard to imagine how the effects of our aesthetic orientation will not influence the shape of new-creation personhood, when they shape so much of the way we experience our personhood in the first creation. The disciples of Jesus recognized him when he appeared to them after his resurrection, even though he clearly had a different body that was able to move through walls, a body that also bore the scars of his crucifixion on his hands, feet, and side. These marks of his first-creation identity continued to serve as identifying features of his new-creation personhood.<sup>101</sup>

Yes, the nail-pierced hands of Christ that perpetually point back to the redemption Christ accomplished for his people are likened to having an attraction toward men. Because Christ had these marks in his resurrected body, Nate Collins says we can anticipate the influences of our dishonorable passions will still be with us in glory too. According to Wesley Hill, this makes the thought of heaven more hopeful because, God forbid, we wouldn’t be recognizable as ourselves. This kind of blasphemy needs rebuke, rather than endorsement.

### Same-Sex Attraction and Pedophilia

It will seem incendiary to many that I would even draw a parallel to pedophilia. However, I must point out that the arguments that the Revoice movement uses regarding their same-sex attraction are identical to those that pedophiles make regarding their pedophilic attractions. Indeed, there is an entire website and online support group titled *Virtuous Pedophiles*—where those who desire to sexually molest children can go in order to find community and support while they seek to live celibate lives. They insist that they are not a threat to children because they love them and have no desire to harm them. Notice the language used to describe the condition—or, we could say, the orientation—of pedophilia:

We do not choose to be attracted to children, and we cannot make that attraction go away. But we can resist the temptation to abuse children sexually, and many of us present no danger to children whatsoever. Yet we are despised for having a sexual attraction that we did not choose, cannot change, and successfully resist.<sup>102</sup>

How is this not identical to what Revoice says about their own unnatural attractions?<sup>103</sup> Yet, gay celibate pastor Greg Johnson rejects the comparison to pedophilia. Johnson admits that

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Collins, Nathan. Comment on “Will I Be Gay in the Resurrection?” March 10, 2016 at 10:23 AM. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2016/03/10/will-i-be-gay-in-the-resurrection/#comment-30085>

<sup>101</sup> Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 304.

<sup>102</sup> “Welcome to Virtuous Pedophiles.” *VirPed.org*, accessed April 30, 2021. <https://www.virped.org/>

<sup>103</sup> For a fuller treatment that applies the logic of Side B ideology to a number of other “paraphilic desires” (that is, the psychiatric designation for desires and behaviors still considered by many to be sexual perversions, such as pedophilia,

“same-sex attraction, like pedophilia, is a disordering of God’s good design for sexuality,” but he ultimately believes comparing homosexuality to pedophilia is insensitive. He says, “Pedophilia has an inherent power differential. No child can give consent. Pedophilia is always rape. Raping a defenseless child.”<sup>104</sup> How did Johnson determine that pedophilia is always rape? This is not what “virtuous pedophiles” say about their own experience of pedophilia:

We use “*pedophilia*” to mean a strong and persistent sexual attraction to prepubescent children or those in the early stages of puberty. (Some scientists separate out attraction to children who have begun puberty under the separate term “*hebephilia*”.) Note what we did **not** say. We do not use *pedophile* to refer to people who have sexual *contact* with children; we use the term to refer to people who have a strong sexual *attraction* to children.<sup>105</sup>

These pedophiles clearly see their attractions as inherent and they are very clear on marking a distinction between their *attraction toward* children and *sexual contact with* children. *Virtuous Pedophiles* is not a Christian group so there is little talk of the morality of any of these desires—and certainly no attempt to find a scriptural basis for justifying the chaste expression of them. But they do find one central point of agreement with Johnson: consent seems to be the central problem with pedophilia. As *VirPed.org* says, in comparing homosexuality with pedophilia:

There are no suitable consenting partners for us pedophiles, so we can never ethically express our sexuality with the people we are attracted to. Gay men and lesbians can find adult partners and form consensual relationships. That difference is all-important.<sup>106</sup>

We wonder: how might a pedophile’s sexuality be stewarded to God’s glory? Are there ways that pedophilia can be expressed in morally good ways—such as appreciating the imagination or sweetness of children? Would it be appropriate for a pedophile to have close physical (yet still non-sexual) contact with a child? Does aesthetic orientation have anything to do with pedophilia? Should Christians expect that a pedophile who comes to Christ might be able to overcome his unnatural desires—or is this not how God normally works?

The only reason any of these questions sound outlandish is because society has not been on the move to fully legalize, endorse, and celebrate pedophilia in the same way it has homosexuality. But what if it did? What if the consent laws were lowered? What answers would the Revoice movement be able to offer besides simply that “there is a power differential” and therefore “pedophilia is always rape?” If their own discussion of homosexuality is any indication, their empathetic nuance would likely offer unclear biblical guidance apart from a general disapproval of the act itself. And if Side B proponents happened to see pedophilic attractions as an inherent problem that might be able to be overcome, then why not see homosexuality in the same way?

### **Scriptural Guidance on Same-Sex Attraction**

The very legitimate question remains: is same-sex attraction sinful in and of itself? It is at this point where concerned Christians feel as if they are being uniquely pressured by the testimonies of “gay Christians” to redefine sin—not only the sin of homosexuality, but even the sins of lust, covetousness, idolatry, and pride. Under these various Side B descriptions, to be attracted to the same sex is natural and benign. There is no shame in it. It is an expression of

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voyeurism, fetishism, frotteurism, and transvestitism), see: Moore, Jared. “Applying Revoice’s Logic to All Sin – Part 1.” *Founders Ministries*, June 17, 2020. <https://founders.org/2020/06/17/applying-revoices-logic-to-all-sin-part-1/>

<sup>104</sup> “Missouri Presbytery Ad Hoc Committee to Respond to Memorial Presbyterian Church Report of Its BCO 31-2 Investigation of TE Greg Johnson.” Missouri Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), July 21, 2020, p. 27. <https://lar.s3.amazonaws.com/2020/08/2020.07.21-MOP-BCO-31-2-investigation-of-TE-Greg-Johnson-CRM.pdf>

<sup>105</sup> “FAQ: What is pedophilia?” *VirPed.org*, accessed April 30, 2021. <https://www.virped.org/f-a-q.html>

<sup>106</sup> “FAQ: Aren’t you trying to follow the same path homosexuals have taken to have your desires accepted?” *VirPed.org*, accessed April 30, 2021. <https://www.virped.org/f-a-q.html>

how God made us to appreciate beauty or to desire friendship, though one should refrain from seeking the full expression of it sexually because of God's revealed moral law.

Though homosexuality may be more than sexual desire, it certainly includes that desire within its necessary implications. If these same-sex desires are truly innocent and non-sexual, why is there a need to constantly stipulate that they should be expressed non-sexually? If the desire is simply one for friendship, then there is no need to accept a "gay Christian" moniker. Why the persistent project to reframe homosexuality non-sexually? As one anonymous *SpiritualFriendship.org* author put it:

Scripture tells me that God does not want people to be alone. Not only does he give spouses, he gives friends. To King David, Jonathan's love was better than that of women. Their friendship was held in high regard by the Author himself. Jesus himself placed a high value on intimate friendship, the 'disciple whom he loved' even seemed to occupy the inside of the king of the universe's space bubble. Repent? Not of this. My desire for male companionship has fueled my desire for real connection with my friends. I wouldn't wish that away for anything because it doesn't come between me and Jesus or anyone else. Instead, I thank God for my close, true friends.<sup>107</sup>

We do not have to carefully stipulate and define our interactions in the home among family members because the relationship between parents and children is non-sexual. Furthermore, if there were a known desire for sexual interaction between parents and children, it would be immediately recognized by a Christian as sinful, impure, and dangerous—not something to nuance, as if one might be able to carefully shepherd this inherently good desire for familial companionship into more healthy expressions in line with biblical teaching. No, even the attraction toward incest and pedophilia would be rightfully seen as wicked. But, this kind of thinking—when it relates to homosexuality—is seen by the Revoice movement as unhelpful, uncharitable, unloving, untrue, and even sinful.

I believe it is noteworthy that, in the 10 Commandments, God Himself speaks to sins of the heart and mind. The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," goes well beyond the stipulation of the graven image law of the second commandment. It is not merely redundancy but a deepening of the stipulation so as to avoid the subtle temptation in humanity to fashion God according to something more easily tangible or relatable for us. The second commandment adds specificity to what was implied within the first.

In other words, the second commandment reveals that there is an idolatrous bent in fallen humanity and the Lord is concerned that we not give in to the temptation to fashion something He has made and worship it as god (regardless of what we might call it). I think it could be rightly inferred that *to desire God to be different than He is* would be a breaking of the first commandment. Christians throughout the history of the church have recognized this. The desire in itself is something counter to God's person and in its very existence displays rebellion against who He is.

In the seventh and tenth commandments, there are similar implications toward sins of the heart. "You shall not commit adultery," is obviously dealing with the activity of adultery (although Christ himself reminds us in Matthew 5:27-28 that the implications of it have always included lust in the heart and would, by continued implication, include all sexual immorality). But what about the command not to covet your neighbor's wife? The tenth commandment clearly shows us that there is an arena beyond the sexual realm in which one can have an improper desire for another person. Acting out "covetousness" may look any number of ways—from excessive living, to theft, to adultery, and beyond—but there is a problem in our relationship to these things. They are not ours; God has not given them to us.

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<sup>107</sup> Anonymous ("Dave"). "Just Repent." *SpiritualFriendship.org*, March 12, 2017. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2017/03/12/just-repent/>

This, I believe, is an essential point in the argument against the biblical legitimacy of same-sex attraction. Though God has certainly given us the gift of fellowship and friendship with other believers, he has also set certain limits on those relationships. All our relationships must maintain a proper order and place within God's design for the family. There is something in the "holding fast to one's wife" aspect of marriage that must be recognized, preserved, and protected within the bounds of chaste, godly friendship, not simply the admiration of natural marriage as an ideal worth preserving.

It is about more than adhering to the historic Christian sexual ethic in profession: we must consider why God designed it this way, why it is good and even necessary, and why to rebel against it in action or desire is to resist his wisdom and sovereign design. If same-sex *sexual* desire is a product of the Fall, how can the broader category of same-sex attraction be a benign and neutral part of the Christian experience?

We have already considered Romans 1:26–27 in regards to sexual orientation, but it is worth applying to the question of same-sex attraction as well:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27)

This is a central passage in the Christian understanding of homosexuality but many evangelicals who say they believe it seem to be embarrassed by it. While it clearly describes the sinfulness of homosexual behavior and should not need that teaching elaborated here, the phrase "dishonorable passions" is of particular interest to this discussion of same-sex attraction. It indicates that homosexual attraction is sinful in itself. The words speak to the particular degradation of the desire.

The word *atimia* (ἀτιμία) means "dishonor, ignominy, disgrace."<sup>108</sup> It could be rendered "vile" or "shameful." Yet "gay celibate Christians" will frequently say, as Greg Johnson does, that Christ covers over our shame. Gay evangelical David Gill says, "Shame is not a grace; shame is, instead, something that Jesus died to take from us."<sup>109</sup> Is that what the Bible says? The holiness required by the law shames us. The righteousness of God shames us. Christ covers our shame when we are truly repentant, not making excuses as we hold on to our sinfulness.

One of the condemnations against Jerusalem given by Jeremiah was that they were not ashamed at their actions. Emphasizing the hardness of their heart, he said further, "They did not know how to blush" (Jeremiah 6:15). Shame is a mercy of God that should lead us to godly sorrow and repentance. Paul thought as much in his admonition to the Thessalonians, "If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:14–15). Have evangelicals become more ashamed of the words of Scripture than by the softened acceptance of these attractions?

The word *pathos* (πάθος) means "a feeling which the mind suffers, an affection of the mind, emotion, passion; passionate desire."<sup>110</sup> This certainly sounds like a mental disposition that can go deeper than "lustful fantasizing." Perhaps we could even call it feelings. We can grant that homosexual feelings may not be chosen by an individual in the first instance—though it is cultivated more deeply through certain behaviors and thoughts—but we cannot grant that this passion is morally neutral because Paul does not give us that leniency in the text. Paul's description of the mental state as "dishonorable" or "shameful" gives this disposition a uniquely

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<sup>108</sup> Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. "Lexicon :: Strong's G819 — atimia." *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>109</sup> Gill, David L. "Gay Celibacy and Relational Capital." *Gay & Evangelical*, August 27, 2019. <https://gayandevangelical.com/2019/08/27/gay-celibacy-and-relational-capital/>

<sup>110</sup> Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. "Lexicon :: Strong's G3806 — pathos." *Biblesoft Inc.*

negative character, indicating that feeling shame because of it is the proper response (we might say, even the “natural” response in light of God’s general revelation) and the first step toward repentance from it.

When it comes to the question of temptation’s origin, the Apostle James speaks in this way:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. 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. (James 1:12–15)

This passage is important because of the way it emphasizes persevering under trial and also the nature of temptation. On the surface, it seems to be making a clarifying distinction between what “counts” as sin versus what is either temptation or desire—but the point of the passage is to prove that God is not the author of anyone’s temptation.

The word translated “desire” is the Greek word *epithymia* (ἐπιθυμία), which can also be translated as “lust” (as the ESV does in Romans 1:24, 1 Thessalonians 4:5, or 2 Peter 2:10).<sup>111</sup> Thayer’s mentions also “craving, longing” and “desire for what is forbidden.” Though we tend to read “lust” and “desire” as similar terms, we also tend to read something innocent into “desire” and something inherently sinful into “lust.” But this passage is not speaking in such a way. “Desire” in James 1:14 is not innocent and benign because it is against God and would lead to our destruction if we follow it. Sinfulness, in its essence, already resides within us and the temptation appeals to our sinful appetite, drawing out sinful responses. This pattern has its end in death—not just physically but spiritually. Matthew Henry says:

Neither the devil nor any other person or thing is to be blamed so as to excuse ourselves; for the true original of evil and temptation is in our own hearts. The combustible matter is in us, though the flame may be blown up by some outward causes. And therefore, if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it, Proverbs 9:12.<sup>112</sup>

It is true that *epithymia* does not always mean a desire that is unholy (such as Christ’s words in Luke 22:15, “I have earnestly *desired* (epithymeō) to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”) but the point is that in James, desire is not neutral. Denny Burk highlights that an important factor of the wrongness or goodness of the desire is the object of desire:

The only time ἐπιθυμία is good is when it is directed toward something morally praiseworthy. Ἐπιθυμία is always evil when it is directed toward something morally blameworthy. Thus, ‘desire’ is not neutral anywhere in this text. It is a ‘desire’ that ‘lures’ and ‘entices.’ In short, it is a desire that is directed toward evil. Thus the desires themselves are sinful. When such illicit desire conceives, it inevitably gives birth to sin because it is sin.<sup>113</sup>

The last passage we will consider is found in Colossians:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. (Colossians 3:5–7)

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<sup>111</sup> “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves” (Romans 1:24). // “Not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thessalonians 4:5). // “And especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones” (2 Peter 2:10).

<sup>112</sup> Henry, Matthew. “James 1,” from *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706). *Bible Study Tools*. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/james/1.html>

<sup>113</sup> Burk, Denny. “Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?” *JETS* 58/1 (2015), *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, p. 106.

If there is a place where it is crystal clear that God wants to eradicate every vestige of impurity within his people it is Colossians 3:5. It is so obvious that it serves as a warning that the wrath of God is coming—not just generally because of the people’s general, undefined sin—but because of these specific things. It is quite obvious from the emphatic language (“put to death what is earthly within you”) and the subsequent list of every possible implication of the fruits and roots of sexual sin that Paul is not speaking merely in terms of improper sexual behavior. This is getting to the level of desire, unchecked attitudes, affections, and heart inclinations. Here are each of the words listed as things we must mortify (or, “deprive of power” or “destroy the strength of”)<sup>114</sup> within us:

**Sexual immorality** – *porneia* (πορνεία): illicit sexual intercourse; a broad category of sexual immorality that includes adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, incest, and any other conceivable illicit sexual behavior. Anything that would have been forbidden in Leviticus 18 is included under this term.<sup>115</sup>

**Impurity** – *akatharsia* (ἀκαθαρσία): uncleanness, either in a physical law code sense (Matthew 23:27) or in an internal, moral sense; particularly the uncleanness of lustful, reckless, extravagant living. It has clear ties to sexuality as it is paired with sexual immorality (*porneia*) in Galatians 5:19 and Ephesians 5:3, pointing to the broader implications and inherent uncleanness of sexual immorality.<sup>116</sup>

**Passion** – *pathos* (πάθος): a feeling which the mind suffers, an affection of the mind, emotion, passion, passionate desire. This gets at the roots of desire, as was mentioned above.<sup>117</sup>

**Evil desire** – *kakos epithymia* (κακός ἐπιθυμία): *kakos* – of a bad nature, not as it ought to be; base, wrong, wicked, harmful, destructive<sup>118</sup>; *epithymia* – desire, craving, longing, desire for what is forbidden.<sup>119</sup> The fact that Paul combines *evil* with the word for *lust* testifies to just how seriously the sin of lust is viewed and just how easy seemingly benign desire can lead to wickedness.

**Covetousness** – *pleonexia* (πλεονεξία): greedy desire for more, covetousness. While it may sometimes be used as a general covetousness for material gain (Luke 12:15, 2 Peter 2:3), the word is used within a sexual context in Ephesians 4:19 and 5:3 and has that context grounding it here.<sup>120</sup>

We see the same idea presented in Galatians when Paul says that the believer is someone who is no longer bound by the flesh: “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24). Past tense. The objective reality of Christ’s work has crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

These are expansive assaults on every hint of wrongful inclination, desire, attraction, so-called “orientation,” or any other way a person might describe their experience of sin. There is absolutely no room for God’s children to cling to such things or make excuses for them. We want to deprive these sins of power. By faith, we can deprive these sins of power.

It is clear from the words used in these passages that this is more than the outward and intentional behavior of sexual immorality. Much of this is internal, the inclination of the heart toward evil, the way lust is born out of the sinful soil of covetousn cravings. The word translated as “passions” in Galatians 5 is a derivative of *pathos* and can even mean “affection” or “affliction.”<sup>121</sup> And, to put a very clear spiritual point on it, in Colossians 3:5, Paul links

<sup>114</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G3499 – nekroō.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>115</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G4202 – porneia.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>116</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G167 – akatharsia.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>117</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G3806 – pathos.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>118</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G2556 – kakos.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>119</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G1939 – epithymia.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>120</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G4124 – pleonexia.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

<sup>121</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. “Lexicon :: Strong’s G3804 – pathēma.” *Biblesoft Inc.*

covetousness with idolatry. There are some things in Scripture that we might be able to finesse our way around but the full intentions of this passage speak loud and clear: our desires, inclinations, and attractions are not morally neutral in the sight of God.

## ❖❖ PART III ❖❖

### Sexual Identity and Labels

A major point of contention in the gay celibate controversy is the use of language—especially the use of labels like “gay Christian,” “same-sex attracted Christian,” “non-straight Christian,” “queer Christian,” and the more generic category, “sexual minorities.” Are these phrases honest recognitions of personal experience? Or are they forms of identification?

#### Sexual Identity Labels

It should be understood upfront that the terms “gay,” “queer,” “same-sex attracted,” etc. are all words technically considered to be *sexual identity labels*. The term *sexual identity labels* may not have a high use outside of academic literature, but it is used when psychologists or sociologists seek to discuss people’s specific use of these terms. The definition offered by *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies* says this:

Sexual-identity labels are terms people use to describe themselves and others that are intended to categorize individuals according to their sexual identities. Sexual identity—in both common usage and scholarship—typically refers to self-categorization as gay or lesbian, bisexual, or straight (i.e., heterosexual), based on *self-perceived sexual orientation*.<sup>122</sup> [emphasis in original]

It is noteworthy to see the explicit tie between language and identity. In order to identify oneself, words are necessary. It is obvious that the purpose of self-identification is to draw a contrast between oneself and others who might seem similar on the surface and, at the same time, to emphasize a similarity with others who are perceived to be truly similar. Yet, even here, it is recognized that these labels are not objective—a person is free to no longer identify a certain way if his level of personal identification with a label or group changes.

Furthermore, these words are ways of self-identification based on “self-perceived sexual orientation.” Researchers recognize that sexual orientation is unknowable apart from someone’s words and, because of that, a person may not be identifying himself or living consistent with his “true” orientation. This is the kind of uncertainty we should expect from elevating personal psychology to some kind of objective standard. Nevertheless, a person’s sexual identity is based on his perception of sexual orientation—which makes the link between sexual identity and a person’s perception of his own sexual identity completely inseparable. In other words, there is no objective measurement of sexual identity. It is purely self-identified and self-fulfilled. At this point we must ask, is “gay” a *description* or a *definition*?

#### Gay Celibacy and Sexual Identity

The Revoice movement insist that the use of these sexual identity labels is purely a way to describe personal experience and should be patiently allowed by all Christians on those grounds. Concerning this issue, the Revoice organization officially states:

While discussions about terminology can be fruitful, we believe they can also cause unnecessary division within the family of God and needless pain for many non-straight Christians. Whether individuals choose “gay” or “same-sex-attracted” to describe their orientation and experience is a matter of wisdom and liberty, and should not divide believers who otherwise share a commitment to historic Christian teaching about marriage and sexuality. (2 Tim. 2:14)<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Stief, Matthew C., Sarah M. Merrill, and Ritch C. Savin-Williams. “Sexual-Identity Labels.” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies*, edited by Goldberg, Abbie E. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016), p. 1076-1078. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483371283.n379>

<sup>123</sup> “Our Beliefs – Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience.” *Revoice*, accessed April 29, 2021.

<https://revoice.us/about/our-beliefs/statements-of-conviction/statement-on-sexual-ethics-and-christian-obedience/>

Preston Sprinkle—Revoice advisor and prominent Christian speaker on sexuality—argues this way:

For many people today, the term gay is basically a synonym for same-sex attraction. “Gay” doesn’t mean gay sex, or gay lust, nor does it have to refer to one’s core identity or fundamental essence as a person. “Gay” simply means that someone is attracted to the same sex and not to the opposite sex. Some people, of course, might use the term “gay” as a central identity ahead of all others. Others might also use the term gay to imply that they are hungry for a gay lover... But no one at *Revoice* uses the term gay this way.<sup>124</sup>

Despite Sprinkle’s attempt to say otherwise, sexuality, identity, and the language of self-identification are not so easily disentangled. He cannot wish them away simply by saying “that’s not what many people believe.”

Gay celibate speaker Ron Belgau (years before the first Revoice conference) made the same point, “I do not think that ‘gay’ describes any deep fact about who I am in Christ. But because of the culture we all grow up in, it is an important part of how my experiences were organized growing up.”<sup>125</sup> Belgau has additionally written at length about what he sees as the problem of Side B critics confusing ontology (who someone is) with phenomenology (what someone experiences). He asserts that this is what conservative opponents are doing when they react to the terminology of “gay Christians.”<sup>126</sup> In reality, it is not the critics of Side B who are confused on this question for it is the Revoice movement that conflates the *language of being* with the *language of experience*.

As we have already seen by the very definitions of *sexual orientation* and *same-sex attraction*, the question of *sexual identity* is hard to fully extract from those other aspects of homosexuality. Nevertheless, Side B proponents believe it is essential to make this differentiation. This framework was first presented to conservative Christians by psychologist Mark Yarhouse in the mid-2000s in what he called a “three-tier distinction” where he distinguished between attraction, orientation, and identity.<sup>127</sup> It is a distinction that Yarhouse believes creates the “intellectual space” necessary for a Christian who deals with same-sex attraction to “sort out their own sense of identity.”<sup>128</sup>

In a 2010 paper intended to help guide Christian colleges to reconsider the validity of sexual identity, Yarhouse says Side B Christians are not creating “a sense of identity around the common meanings or connotations associated with ‘gay’ as an identity label.” He continues:

To some, this might mean that these gay Christians are changing the common meaning of the word “gay” in that they reject behavioral expression of their attraction for religious reasons. But to these Christian sexual minorities, they share a common sense of experience with members of the gay community, and the use of the word “gay” (as a self-defining attribution) is an honest account of their sexual attractions and reflects the resonance they feel with the gay community *at that level*.<sup>129</sup>

As evidenced by his own terminology, Yarhouse has already decided the point. He freely admits that there is potential for identity to be shaped by language when he says, “I encourage people to carefully examine the language that they use to describe themselves and their

<sup>124</sup> Sprinkle, Preston. “Why I Support the Revoice Conference.” *The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender*, June 26, 2018. <https://centerforfaith.com/blog/why-i-support-the-revoice-conference>

<sup>125</sup> Belgau, Ron. “What is ‘Gay?’” *Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships*. SpiritualFriendship.org, December 19, 2014. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2014/12/19/what-is-gay/>

<sup>126</sup> Belgau, Ron. “Ontology vs. Phenomenology.” *Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships*. SpiritualFriendship.org, January 18, 2014. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2014/01/28/ontology-vs-phenomenology/>

<sup>127</sup> Yarhouse, Mark A. “Same-Sex Attraction, Homosexual Orientation, and Gay Identity: A Three-Tier Distinction for Counseling and Pastoral Care.” *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, Fall 2005, Vol. 59, No. 3, p. 201-211. [http://sexualwholeness.com/attachments/category/50/Yarhouse%202005\\_Three%20Tier%20Distinction.pdf](http://sexualwholeness.com/attachments/category/50/Yarhouse%202005_Three%20Tier%20Distinction.pdf)

<sup>128</sup> Yarhouse, Mark A. *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2010), p. 41-43.

<sup>129</sup> Yarhouse, Mark A. “A Christian Perspective on Sexual Identity.” *Carl F.H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding | TEDS*, January 1, 2010, p. 25. <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/a-christian-perspective-on-sexual-identity/>

experiences since I believe language can shape a person's sense of identity."<sup>130</sup> It is not clear what should motivate a person to exercise carefulness over their language choice besides a personal sense of authenticity. That is because Yarhouse sees identity labels as a purely personal choice and not something that the Bible should guide. Essentially, he lands exactly where Revoice does in their Statement: it is "a matter of wisdom and liberty."

This begs the question: is it true that "gay" when paired with "Christian" is merely describing a person's individual experience? While that may be what is intended by some, it is hard to consistently argue that point. The reason for this is that the term "Christian" itself (when applied biblically) is describing a position, an identity, and an experience of life. Notice how Paul connects these points:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

What is our position as Christians? "Crucified with Christ." What is our identity? "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." What is our experience of life? "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God."

Christian identity is something that encompasses position, identification, and experience—and, in the common understanding, gay identity is something that does the same thing. As pastor Kevin DeYoung highlights in his critique of the Revoice 18 conference:

I agree with Rosaria Butterfield (among others) who find the term ["gay Christian"] deeply problematic in that (1) it makes sexual orientation an accurate and essential category of personhood, and (2) it undermines the biblical notion that a desire for something illegitimate is in itself an illegitimate desire in need of repentance and grace.<sup>131</sup>

Andrew T. Walker notes a similar issue in a critique of Side B author David Bennett's book *A War of Loves*:

We don't attach other modifiers to our Christian faith when the modifier in question originates with sin or natures that are the product of the fall. We should no more endorse 'gay Christianity' or 'gay identity' than we should alcoholic Christianity, racist Christianity, or slanderous Christianity. We ought not modify our Christian walk with attributes born of fallen desires.<sup>132</sup>

Walker is right. No other sinful proclivity is partitioned off in quite the same way as homosexuality. Interestingly, in contrast to homosexuality, scientists do have some evidence that alcoholism could be considered a "complex genetic disease."<sup>133</sup> Yet the church is not seeking to accommodate alcoholism as a legitimate desire so long as it is not physically enacted. Further, God's Word to drunkards still stands: "drunkards... will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Where is the "alcoholic Christian" or "drunkard Christian," seeking to name his innate and immutable experience of being drawn toward excessive drinking? Are we being insensitive to those who struggle with alcoholism by not letting them define their experience with their own language?

It is telling that Wesley Hill reacts strongly to Walker's correlation. Hill says:

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>131</sup> DeYoung, Kevin. "Words, Labels, and 'Sexual Minorities.'" *The Gospel Coalition*, June 1, 2018. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/words-labels-sexual-minorities/>

<sup>132</sup> Walker, Andrew T. "When a Gay Activist Comes to Jesus." *The Gospel Coalition*. TGC.org, November 16, 2018. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/war-loves/>

<sup>133</sup> Edenberg, Howard J. and Tatiana Foroud. "Genetics and Alcoholism." *Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, 10, May 28, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrgastro.2013.86>

It shows no awareness of the ways that, even in traditional Christian theology that views same-sex sexual behavior as sinful, being gay is crucially different than being an alcoholic, a racist, or a slanderer... It's not that I'm unwilling to consider thoughtful misgivings about or arguments for avoiding the "gay" label.<sup>134</sup>

Hill—a self-proclaimed “gay Christian”—bristles at the comparison of “gay Christian” with “racist Christian” and “alcoholic Christian” because there is some sense in which he believes homosexuality is enriching and good for the human race. He says being gay is “crucially different” than being a racist or an alcoholic. His evidence for this is the memoir of gay English professor Richard Giannone:

You can't read a memoir like Giannone's and easily draw evidence that having a long-time sexual partner of the same-sex diminishes one's life. On the contrary, Giannone's partnership with Frank was precisely what enabled him to care for his dying mother and sister, and what sustained him when they were lost. And this is the reason comparisons of homosexuality to other sinful behaviors often ring so false. Homosexuality is like racism? If that's the case, then why are the fruits—hatred and alienation in the latter case, humanizing care and love in the former—so obviously different?<sup>135</sup>

Of course, this is a subjective argument. Surely even hardened racists display love and care for those closest to them—the difference is that Wesley Hill hasn't just finished reading a memoir by someone talking about his enriching life as an out-of-the-closet racist.<sup>136</sup> The bigger issue, however, is that Hill is not guided by Scripture in his assessment of the sin of homosexuality—rather, he is so committed to finding homosexuality life-giving that he cannot help but bend himself into knots as he seeks to nuance an orthodox-sounding accommodation for it.

Thankfully, not all Side B proponents are nearly so equivocating. Gay celibate Catholic Chris Damien is honest enough to recognize that “gay” is not merely a descriptive term:

To adopt the term “gay” is to adopt a certain kind of identity, with political, religious, philosophical, and social implications. This is part of why I use the word. To say “I am gay” is to say that I am adopting some part of this community, and that I am in some part responsible for it. This is also my answer when people ask me why, despite the clerical abuse and discrimination and historical injustices by Church leaders, I remain Catholic. Because I am choosing to take partial responsibility for these things. Because if I don't claim them, and take responsibility for them, who will? When I say I am “gay,” I am saying, in part, “These people (who also identify as gay) are my people. Between them and me, there is a *we*. They are mine, and I am theirs, and we must be responsible for one another. We must challenge and change and encourage one another.”<sup>137</sup>

In contrast to that, Rachel Gilson—Revoice speaker and author of *Born Again This Way* (2020)—believes the terms *gay* or *lesbian Christian* miscommunicate. “Lesbian seemed to carry much more with it than just romantic and sexual attraction. It felt more like a whole outlook, a label that included certain political and social leanings that just didn't feel like me.”<sup>138</sup> Likewise, gay celibate pastor Sam Allberry also recognizes the problematic nature of a Christian calling himself *gay*:

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<sup>134</sup> Hill, Wesley. “Weariness.” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, November 16, 2018. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2018/11/16/weariness/>

<sup>135</sup> Hill, Wesley. “On Reading Richard Giannone.” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, April 23, 2013. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2013/04/23/on-reading-richard-giannone/>

<sup>136</sup> When it comes to health, alcohol abuse certainly takes a toll on someone's body over time, but the health risks associated with homosexual behavior are quite severe as well.

Family Research Council. *Getting It Straight: What the Research Shows About Homosexuality*, co-editors Peter Sprigg and Timothy Dailey. (Washington, DC: Family Research Council, 2004), p.69–93. <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF08L44.pdf>

<sup>137</sup> Damien, Chris. “Why I Call Myself a ‘Gay Catholic.’” *ChrisDamian.net*, January 5, 2018. <https://chrisdamian.net/2018/01/05/why-i-call-myself-a-gay-catholic/>

<sup>138</sup> Gilson, Rachel. “Why I Started Calling Myself Same-Sex Attracted.” *The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender*, February 15, 2019. <https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/why-i-started-calling-myself-same-sex-attracted>

In our secular culture, the language people would typically and obviously use would be to say, ‘Well, I’m gay.’ But in my own experience that kind of language tends to be used to express, not just a description of what kind of sexual feelings you have, but it tends (to me) to be someone’s identity. It’s an indication of who you are.<sup>139</sup>

This is why Rachel Gilson and Sam Allberry refer to themselves as “same-sex attracted Christians,” even though the nuance is slight and the new term still poses similar problems as “gay Christian.”

Gilson, in particular, gives a very detailed account of her own struggles with finding the “right fit” for her self-descriptive language. But her story is not unique—sexual identity labels can be confusing and unfulfilling even for those who do not profess faith in Christ. Indeed, there are some LGBT people who are doing away with sexual identity labels altogether because the labels seem too constraining. For instance, a 2019 Bustle editorial listed four reasons why someone might choose to avoid sexual identity labels: “1) sexual orientation is a social construct, 2) sexual orientation is not clear-cut, 3) these labels are hard to apply to me as a non-binary person, 4) you never know who you’ll be attracted to.”<sup>140</sup>

The reality is it is impossible to separate the use of personal terminology from the bigger question of sexual identity. And it is impossible to separate sexual identity from self-perceived sexual orientation. This is exactly why Gregory Coles, responding to Rachel Gilson’s blog, says:

[Same-sex attraction] language fits comfortably within church systems where singleness is treated as inferior to marriage. It fits comfortably within church systems that revolve around the nuclear family and leave unmarried people starving for intimacy. It fits comfortably within church systems where same-sex-oriented people will be urged to pursue sexual orientation change efforts, and where their success or failure in these efforts will be used to measure the depth of their love for Jesus... “Gay” declares without apology the likely permanence of my state during this lifetime and the need for Christian churches to seriously reckon with the presence of people like me in their midst.<sup>141</sup>

By his own admission Coles announces that the term “gay Christian” is more than simply an accurate description of his same-sex desire. It clearly has associative power that he thinks is needed in the broader evangelical church. For him, it is a term of reckoning.

### **Biblical Response to Sexual Identity Labels**

It is hard to escape the fundamental problem of language. How will we define ourselves, our beliefs, and our experiences? No one denies that human language can sometimes be a frustratingly incomplete and even a fluid thing—but that does not negate the clear communicative power of it. Indeed, it is no secret that part of the cultural legacy of the LGBT movement has been a push toward fundamentally altering language use—not only with the introduction of words like “gay” but now with the revision of words like “male” and “female.” As one LGBT activist argues, “Being aware of the language we use and the impact that it can have on people in the LGBTQ community is key to creating inclusive and identity affirming spaces.”<sup>142</sup>

The Bible does not treat our use of language lightly, nor does it seem to indicate that our language is merely a neutral form of personal expression. Take this passage from the epistle of James, for instance: “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives

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<sup>139</sup> Allberry, Sam. “The Christian Debate over Sexual Identity.” *Desiring God*, July 13, 2018.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/the-christian-debate-over-sexual-identity>

<sup>140</sup> Weiss, Suzannah. “4 Reasons I Don’t Label My Sexual Orientation—And You Don’t Have To Either.” *Bustle.com*, June 11, 2019. <https://www.bustle.com/p/why-sexual-orientation-labels-arent-for-me-you-dont-have-to-use-them-either-17990747>

<sup>141</sup> Coles, Greg. “Three Concerns with the Term ‘Same-Sex Attracted.’” *The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender*, February 19, 2019. <https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/three-concerns-with-the-term-same-sex-attracted>

<sup>142</sup> Murray, Katie (posted as Center on Halstead). “Speaking of Identities: The Importance of Inclusive Language and the LGBTQ Community.” *Medium*, August 13, 2018. <https://medium.com/@centeronhalsted/speaking-of-identities-the-importance-of-inclusive-language-and-the-lgbtq-community-b6efac3f2dcc>

his heart, this person's religion is worthless" (James 1:26). Or this one: "And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). As Christians, our language should be centrally shaped by biblical language and categories of thought. Our thinking and communication should not be defined primarily for some sort of psychologically congruent authenticity but according to the "pattern of sound words" received in Scripture (2 Timothy 1:13).

Few would argue that this means we should only use words that have a biblical precedent. The term "Christian" itself, for example, is not widely used in Scripture; but it effectively communicates an intended association with Christ *and* his people.<sup>143</sup> It is impossible to miss that by calling oneself a Christian, a person is drawing a clear association with Christ and others who also call themselves Christian. Surely if we ran across someone who claimed to believe in Jesus yet refused to call himself a Christian, we would have serious concerns for the validity of his claim to belong to Christ. Calling oneself a Christian does not make someone a Christian, spiritually speaking. But it does indicate a very base level association with Christ and His people.

*Gay*, likewise, places one's identity somewhere—with an attraction that is unnatural, with an expression that is unbiblical, with a behavior that is degrading, and with a people who embrace the attraction, expression, and behavior of homosexuality and seek to build a community around that shared experience. If one is truly concerned about consistency with historic Christian sexual ethics, it is difficult to justify the use of "gay Christian" terminology. Even the alternatives "same-sex attracted Christian" or "non-straight Christian" or "queer Christian" offer different versions of the same problem. As Kevin DeYoung said, it makes orientation an essential category of personhood.

The question of terminology may be understandable for a new Christian or an immature believer trying to understand the Spirit's work in them and the old ways they once identified when they lived by the flesh. But this is part of what is so striking—most of the leaders in the Revoice movement are not coming from lifestyles of open debauchery—having been radically set free from sexual sin by Christ. Instead, these are men and women who frequently grew up in the church, internalized their sense of orientation while in Christian homes, and claim to have been Christians most of their lives. Yet, these are the ones arguing that they should be called "gay Christians" and "queer Christians" so that their beliefs will make more sense to the secular world. Some, like Greg Coles, try to argue that there are great missional and evangelistic gains to be had by highlighting this affiliation.<sup>144</sup>

Remember how Revoice frames the entire discussion: "While discussions about terminology can be fruitful, we believe they can also cause unnecessary division within the family of God and needless pain for many non-straight Christians."<sup>145</sup> In other words, discussion of sexual identity labels is more likely to be harmful and divisive rather than fruitful. Even the fruitfulness they believe is possible seems to be theoretical—as in, the discussions might be fruitful so long as there is no strident opposition to using any label one determines most accurate. When personal authenticity is so cherished, this is the result.

It is worth asking: why would a person supposedly indwelt by the Holy Spirit so deeply associate with his sexual identity that he is proud to call himself a "gay Christian?" Though the term "gay" may seem to accurately describe one's personal experience of same-sex attraction, it ultimately builds an allegiance and identity with homosexuality. That is its purpose. Regardless of how nuanced one's idea of homosexuality, it is impossible to fully separate it from something that God specifically calls an abomination (Leviticus 18:22) and uses as an illustration of the

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<sup>143</sup> The origin of the term "Christian" is described in Acts 11:26 and is used by Agrippa in Acts 26:28, but it only shows up in the epistles once—1 Peter 4:16.

<sup>144</sup> Coles, Greg. "Three Concerns with the Term 'Same-Sex Attracted.'" *The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender*, February 19, 2019. <https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/three-concerns-with-the-term-same-sex-attracted>

<sup>145</sup> "Our Beliefs - Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience." *Revoice*, accessed April 29, 2021. <https://revoice.us/about/our-beliefs/statements-of-conviction/statement-on-sexual-ethics-and-christian-obedience/>

twistedness of sin (Romans 1:26). It is a dangerous compromise that leads people astray and normalizes thoughts and behaviors that are dishonoring to Christ. Any Christian concerned about his own soul and the souls of others should warn against such labelling.

## ❖❖ PART IV ❖❖

### Victimhood and the Local Church

Living in an age of identity politics and perpetual victimhood, it is not surprising to learn that the target of LGBT activism might be directed at the evangelical church for its biblical teaching on human sexuality and marriage. Additional complaints have been leveled against evangelical churches for everything from insensitivity in discussing homosexuality, to the outright ostracization and derision received at the hands of Christians, to the funding of culture war efforts to diminish LGBT influence in media and politics, to the encouragement of reparative therapy in an attempt to alter same-sex attraction.

Few would argue that all these criticisms are unfounded or that the church has been blameless in its approach to the LGBT issue or the people who identify with that label. But the troubling development of the Revoice movement is that it tends to foster the same sense of LGBT victimhood among its adherents as that found in secular circles. It does this while laying constant, vocal blame for the problem of LGBT suffering at the doors of evangelical churches.

#### A New Community or Safe Space?

Part of this sense of victimization is reflected in professing Christians adopting the term “gender and sexual minorities” as a group description—a phrase that carries inherent political/civil rights connotations. On the surface this may seem like a convenient way of categorizing a group. It is a shift in language that has occurred in many academic and professional corridors and is partially reflective of a desire to move beyond the “not fully inclusive” LGBTQIA acronym to a term that is more reflective of “all non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered people.”<sup>146</sup> Unlike the terms “gay” or “same-sex attracted,” “sexual minorities” is not as indicative of personal experience and is a term of broader corporate identity and association. It is frequently used by Revoice proponents.

One of the stated missions for the first Revoice conference was the formation of a “New Community” where participants were encouraged to “gather together with other gender and sexual minorities and those who love them and experience a new kind of gospel community.”<sup>147</sup> What were the primary marks of this new community? A shared identity of being “gender and sexual minorities” or being “those who love them.” This language immediately calls to mind concepts of privilege and oppression often utilized in social justice debates, and the social theoretical categories of oppressors, oppressed, and allies.<sup>148</sup>

Indeed, this is very much in-line with the broader secular push for “minority-only safe spaces” currently being championed on college campuses across the U.S.—space intended to give an atmosphere free from fear, a space where the context of particular experiences is understood, and a space intended to serve as a source of empowerment.<sup>149</sup> The biggest difference here is that Revoice 18 also called this safe space a “gospel community.”

This “safe space” idea was made strikingly evident when the Revoice 18 conference registrations of several ministry leaders were revoked and refunded. Steve Camp, Peter LaBarbara, and Stephen Black—completely independent of each other—had each paid the registration fee and planned to attend the conference in order to directly observe the proceedings. Following a series of pointed questions from pastor Steve Camp on Twitter about Revoice’s public

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<sup>146</sup> Lattimer, Julia. “GSM acronym better than LGBT alphabet soup.” *Collegiate Times*, October 23, 2014. [http://www.collegiatetimes.com/opinion/gsm-acronym-better-than-lgbt-alphabet-soup/article\\_f7a325a4-5acd-11e4-bf0d-001a4bcf6878.html](http://www.collegiatetimes.com/opinion/gsm-acronym-better-than-lgbt-alphabet-soup/article_f7a325a4-5acd-11e4-bf0d-001a4bcf6878.html)

<sup>147</sup> *Revoice 2018*. Web archive snapshot, June 29, 2018. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180629052224/http://www.revoice.us/>

<sup>148</sup> Wilkins, Nick. “Speak With Us, Not For Us: Privilege, Oppression and Allyship.” *GLSEN blog*, GLSEN.org, October 14, 2014. <https://www.glsen.org/blog/speak-us-not-us-privilege-oppression-and-allyship>

<sup>149</sup> Aly. “You Can’t Sit With Us: The Importance of Minority-Only Safe Spaces.” *Affinity Magazine*, January 10, 2017. <http://affinitymagazine.us/2017/01/10/you-cant-sit-with-us-the-importance-of-minority-only-safe-spaces/>

statements, Revoice founder Nate Collins revoked Camp’s registration and decided to “actively identify those who register with the intention to criticize instead of learn, and communicate to them that their presence at Revoice will not be permitted because it is incompatible with our mission.”<sup>150</sup> This interaction also prompted Greg Johnson, pastor of Memorial Presbyterian that was hosting the conference, to announce that anyone—and particularly Steve Camp—who might still show up at the Revoice event would not be permitted on the church grounds and the police would be called if any resistance was shown.<sup>151</sup>

Later that month, both Peter LaBarbara and Stephen Black received emails directly from Collins that read:

Based on publicly available information, we believe that your presence at the inaugural Revoice conference would work against the stated mission and purpose of Revoice. We are refunding your registration fee in full, and would be happy to answer any further questions you might have.<sup>152</sup>

According to LaBarbara, the promise by Collins to answer further questions went completely unfulfilled.

If these men hold to the same historic Christian sexual ethic that Revoice claims to uphold, why should their presence at the conference be seen as a threat? If the Revoice conference was intended to promote a new community where fellowship and support for those who struggle with same-sex attraction is the stated goal, then why should men who have long ministered to that community be barred from attending? Is it because there was a personal offense against Steve Camp? Is it because Peter LaBarbara is a vocal opponent of LGBT political causes? Is it because Stephen Black is a former homosexual? Was this move a reflection of Christian priorities or social priorities?

Theologian Robert Gagnon, in his brief critique of the Revoice 18 conference, noted that among the Revoice/Spiritual Friendship group there seemed to be a deeper affinity for Side A gay Christians than those who—like Stephen Black and Rosaria Butterfield—shared their conservative convictions but with differing emphases of ministry application. Gagnon pointedly asked of Revoice: “Does this show that their ‘gay’ identity means more to them than their Christian identity? That they really do feel a deeper partnership (koinonia) with those violating Scripture’s teaching on homosexual practice?”<sup>153</sup> Though conservative evangelicals are often blamed for causing division on this issue by being too rigid in their views, the division can go both ways.

The removal of isolation felt by “gay Christians” in their local churches is one of the frequently stated desires of Side B proponents and it is something participants of Revoice say they have found at the conference.<sup>154</sup> But it is curious how this isolation is defined. Some have described the isolation as a lack of opportunities for service in the church. Some describe it as a general sense of not belonging among a church full of nuclear families. Some claim to have experienced “spiritual abuse” by church leaders.

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<sup>150</sup> Collins, Nate (@NateCollins). “Thank you, and you’re exactly right. We will actively identify those who register with the intention to criticize instead of learn, and communicate to them that their presence at Revoice will not be permitted because it is incompatible with our mission.” June 5, 2018, 8:36 AM. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/NateCollins/status/1003993951068672000>

<sup>151</sup> Johnson, Greg (@PresbyterianStl). “On behalf of Memorial Presbyterian Church, anyone seeking to harrass LGBT people will not be permitted on our grounds. Should anyone seek to disrupt this conference, we will ask them to leave. Should they refuse, St. Louis’s Finest will facilitate their departure @PastorSJCamp.” June 5, 2018, 8:25 AM. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/PresbyterianStl/status/1003991220086038529>

<sup>152</sup> LaBarbara, Peter. “AFTA’s LaBarbera Banned from ‘Gay Christian’ Revoice Conference — His Questions For Founder Nate Collins Go Unanswered.” *Americans for the Truth About Homosexuality (AFTA)*, June 23, 2018. <https://americansfortruth.com/2018/06/23/aftahs-labarbera-banned-from-gay-christian-revoice-conference-his-questions-for-founder-nate-collins-go-unanswered/>

<sup>153</sup> Gagnon, Robert A.J. (blog posted by Douglas Wilson). “The Facebook Penalty Box.” *dougwils.com*, July 21, 2018. <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/the-facebook-penalty-box.html>

<sup>154</sup> Revoice. “Why Revoice?” *YouTube*, December 6, 2018. <https://youtu.be/fwaNQPkYXQ>

Gay celibate youth pastor Ray Low recounts how his conservative church treated him when controversy arose about his homosexuality:

This particular church asked me if I could stop using certain words. If I would delete some of my posts. They even went as far as to ask if I would consider—if I would consider—going to counseling for my attractions. And I just couldn't do it. Like, I couldn't agree to it. I couldn't compromise myself.<sup>155</sup>

As Revoice participant Clay Allen shares in his personal testimony of returning to church, “I felt betrayed by a church that was, that did not understand who I was and did not make a considerable effort to do so.”<sup>156</sup> Some, like Greg Johnson, say, that many people are leaving their conservative faith “because of the way their church treated sexual minorities. Jesus loves gay people and churches just can never say that! It seems too dangerous—too risky.”<sup>157</sup> The problem is always that the church is wrong, the church is insensitive, the church needs to embrace their LGBT brethren without any questions asked.

### Gay Celibate Pastors and Ordination

Ray Low's testimony at Revoice 18 is another story of victimhood at the hands of the conservative church. Low speaks of a personal call to the ministry and recounts the numerous youth pastor jobs he did not get because he was open about being gay. His story is given as a lament—as a witness to the foolish, backwards, and bigoted responses of church leaders to his personal testimony of faith in God and same-sex attracted celibacy (which he said he was clear and open about). Low says:

They say that the greatest sorrow of an LGBT Christian committed to celibacy is not being able to experience the joy of a marriage. But I think that, for me, the greatest sorrow of an LGBT Christian is seeing the continued mistreatment of the LGBT community at the hands of the church.<sup>158</sup>

Who can say what exactly happened in Low's case because of how he frames himself as the victim—the perfectly qualified pastoral candidate who just so happens to be gay and gets harshly judged for it? Perhaps there was legitimate mistreatment in Low's story but that is actually beside the point. What Low assumes is that his admitted homosexual attractions should not disqualify him from church leadership at all or hinder him from ordination in the slightest. Ray Low, like the other participants in the Revoice movement, claims a unique homosexual condition that makes him susceptible to homosexual temptation and sin but that he has masterful control over in his life because he has chosen to adhere to the hard road of gay celibacy. In short, he justifies himself by his works.

The problem is both one of identity and one of disqualification. Paul calls homosexuality a “dishonorable passion.” Men like Ray Low or Greg Johnson who are claiming to be “same-sex attracted Christians” are not defining a persistent struggle the way others would say they struggle against anger or arrogance or any number of heart sins. That may be how charitable Christians want to characterize it but that's not the justification that is used by Side B apologists.

What is this condition they call homosexual orientation? It isn't a physical condition. It isn't genetic. Following their logic (which means granting them, for the moment, that sexual orientation is a legitimate condition), orientation could only be considered a mental or moral condition. So according to their meaning (but not their exact words), we are left to think of

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<sup>155</sup> Revoice. “Revoice 18 – General Session 2: Lament | Nate Collins & Ray.” *YouTube*, presentation by Ray Low. August 2, 2018, timecode 8:47. <https://youtu.be/SHe2y2SVjIc>

<sup>156</sup> Revoice. “Kent Bateman & Clay Allen Testimony.” *YouTube*, February 22, 2021, timecode: 1:22. <https://youtu.be/c31VJ4zCM9w>

<sup>157</sup> Memorial Presbyterian Church. “Testimony of a Unicorn.” *YouTube*, presentation by Greg Johnson. July 31, 2019, timecode 23:33. [https://youtu.be/ljAcjA\\_xMeU](https://youtu.be/ljAcjA_xMeU)

<sup>158</sup> Revoice. “Revoice 18 – General Session 2: Lament | Nate Collins & Ray.” *YouTube*, presentation by Ray Low. August 2, 2018, timecode 9:43. <https://youtu.be/SHe2y2SVjIc>

homosexual orientation as a mental condition that leads someone persistently and consistently into “dishonorable passions.”

If a man were to argue this kind of justification for his anger or pride—as a unique condition that leads directly into those sins—we might pity him and seek to help him but we shouldn’t ordain him as a minister because a minister’s life is to be a pattern for the church to follow. Frankness about the struggle isn’t an automatic consolation that no sin needs to be dealt with or that a pass is given because “we’re all sinners who struggle against the flesh.” Would we even tolerate this discussion with someone who claimed to be a celibate “child-attracted Christian” who has never touched a child inappropriately in his life? Certainly not. How could we if we are seeking to guard the church? The problem is the deep-seated disordered desire—a desire they say has not and will not change at all.

Pastors and elders are to be “above reproach.” Yet the same-sex attracted label is a constant reproach—it will constantly call attention to itself—calling for additional clarification, explanation, scrutiny, and justification. The label demands that homosexuals be seen as essentially different by way of their orientation while, at the same time, it claims that calling oneself gay is like recognizing a struggle against any sin. It is doublespeak. It is a distraction from the work of the ministry, a reproach to the transforming gospel that we are claiming changes lives, a stumbling block to both the pastor and his people, a destruction of hope to the struggler wanting freedom from sin’s grip, and an emboldening to sinners who would love to justify their own dishonorable passions.

The care with which churches call and ordain their leaders is such a crucial matter. The scriptural qualifications for ministers should be examined with solemn reverence by the church itself as well as the candidate for office. Some churches have been careless and have not treated all sexual sin with the same level of seriousness that Scripture demands. The call to be sober-minded and watchful (1 Peter 5:8) has been too often neglected in order to keep the peace, not offend, or to avoid prying too deeply. The answer to gay celibate ordination is not a lowered standard—it should be a higher standard that cleanses the church of disqualified men from poisoning the flock through their wicked hidden sin.

### **Costly Obedience**

In his recap of the Revoice 18 conference, Kyle Keating described why the event—in his estimation—was a true movement of God:

Only the Spirit could empower so many to remain in traditions where they have been so grievously wounded by those who were supposed to be the shepherds protecting them. The stories of pain, rejection, and shame inflicted in the name of Christ upon those in attendance should be more than enough to have sent us packing. So many at Revoice could echo the story of Ray Low, who spoke movingly about checking every box his tradition required for pastoral ministry, only to find regular rejection because of simply being a single man attracted to the same sex. There are those who would scoff at the idea that my brothers and sisters have experienced trauma at the hands of their church traditions, but they can only do so because they have not listened to the heartrending stories.<sup>159</sup>

According to Keating, the very existence of Side B Christians should be its own evidence of legitimacy to anyone who remains skeptical. Likewise, the only thing that stands in the way of progress are the Christians unwilling to hear the heartrending stories of gay “brothers and sisters.”

This refrain of the uniquely hard road for “celibate gay Christians” is something that seems intended to protect the Revoice movement from any serious interrogation from concerned Christians. The idea gets expressed most frequently in the phrase “costly obedience”—a phrase

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<sup>159</sup> Keating, Kyle. “Where Else Could We Go? Reflections on #Revoice18.” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, August 1, 2018. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2018/08/01/where-else-could-we-go-reflections-on-revoice18/>

which appears so frequently in Side B writing that it became the title of Mark Yarhouse & Olya Zaporozhets' 2019 book: *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community*.

For instance, when defending his decision to host the first Revoice conference at his church, Greg Johnson said, "These are sisters and brothers who are paying a lot more than a tithe to follow Jesus."<sup>160</sup> Johnson arrogantly implies that the call to "gay celibacy" imposes a uniquely heavy cost to a sexual minority. But the "call" to forgo marriage and family is actually self-imposed. No one has said a person with same-sex attraction cannot marry. The command for chastity in marriage and celibacy in singleness is true for all Christ followers.

How different does this sound from the Apostle John when he says, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3)? But Side B proponents insist on pushing an "us vs. them" dynamic within Christian churches—where the experience of gay celibacy is uniquely costly, because it calls someone to give up an essential aspect of who one is, and does all this without the universal praise of the church. It is shocking that a pastor who professes an orthodox Presbyterianism would speak this way.

Gay celibate blogger Gregg Webb paints this hard road very vividly:

I don't need to be reminded that the path my heart most naturally is inclined towards, that of pursuing a husband and a family in a same-sex partnership, is not available to me. I don't need to be reminded that I am called daily towards chastity and celibacy.<sup>161</sup>

On the one hand, his frustration is understandable because the Christian life should be more than simply emphasizing our self-denial. But it is not simply that the thing Webb wants is "not available" to him—it is that the desire he has is unnatural and needs to be dealt with at its root. Instead of dealing with the fundamental problem, Webb believes the problem is a deficiency in Christians to recognize and learn from his unique experience:

We need priests, theologians, and friends who are willing to come alongside those of us struggling within the Church to know our lives and to be both challenged by and influenced by our lives... It becomes difficult for me to trust in any advice I've received that isn't both aware of and challenged by my heartbreak, my love, and my circumstances.<sup>162</sup>

This is not Christian humility. It is arrogant defiance that claims personal rights. Where is the patience and bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2)? It is the identity politics of this world that says we should claim our personal rights and hold others accountable for failing to meet our felt needs. By Webb's own admission, his primary qualifications for being able to receive godly counsel or discipleship is for a person to be adequately versed in Webb's story and uniquely moved by it. But the Scriptures do not speak in this way. This isn't godly rebuke—it is narcissism.

The scriptural test of godly leadership is not empathy but character:

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. (1 Timothy 2:7-8).

We might expect godly character to present itself as being sympathetic to a person's weakness and struggle but not at the expense of coddling someone's narcissism and arrogance. What Side B proponents are frequently proposing is church on their own terms.

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<sup>160</sup> Johnson, Greg. "A Reply to 'Queer Culture in the PCA?'" *The Aquila Report*, May 28, 2018.

<https://www.theaquilareport.com/a-reply-to-queer-culture-in-the-pca/>

<sup>161</sup> Webb, Gregg. "How Should We Then Live?" *SpiritualFriendship.org*, May 23, 2017.

<https://spiritualfriendship.org/2017/05/23/how-should-we-then-live>

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

## **Prophetic Witness**

Nate Collins has a grander vision than simply having church leaders sympathize with LGBT people. He considers “sexual minorities” to be a prophetic voice of repentance against the church itself:

Is it possible 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, to shed light on contemporary false teachings and even idolatries, not just the false teaching of the progressive sexual ethic, but other more subtle forms of false teaching? Is it possible that gender and sexual minorities who’ve lived lives of costly obedience are themselves a prophetic call to the church to abandon idolatrous attitudes toward the nuclear family? Toward sexual pleasure? If so, then we are prophets.<sup>163</sup>

In Collins’ mind, this linking of Jeremiah’s call and the “call to gay celibacy” means that the suffering Jeremiah faced is comparable to any suffering gay Christians feel—which elevates victimhood to near sainthood status:

If we want to follow Christ in the same path that he took, then we have to understand that deliverance only comes when we can trust God in our own experiences of unjust suffering because Jesus also trusted his Father perfectly during the unjust suffering that he experienced.<sup>164</sup>

Apart from being a highly sentimentalized understanding of trusting God, it is nearly blasphemous in taking Christ’s propitiatory “becoming sin” as comparable to being slighted, misunderstood, or not allowed to be a youth pastor because you were kept from a job for identifying with a sin that God explicitly hates. Not only are these not apt comparisons, they are a testament to the grave theological error and misapplication that the Revoice movement is happy to toy with to try and identify with the marginalized feelings of “sexual minorities.” The language is incendiary and confrontational and a direct outworking of the identity politics Side B thinking traffics in.

As much as Nate Collins may feel that the “nuclear family” is too heavily emphasized by Christians, he cannot escape the fact that families are a central facet of God’s design and intention for the spread of his gospel and the building of his church. And because it is both normal and good for men and women to be married and bring forth children, it is natural and good that families be provided for and celebrated in the local church. While many Christians may struggle with how they prioritize family life at the expense of other Christian duties, it would be problematic to describe the concept of the family itself as something to be mortified as sinful. Yet accusations like this are haphazardly employed.

## **Singleness and the Christian Call**

Do Christians value singleness? Certainly not in the way the world values it—nor should we value it in that way. “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Hebrews 13:4). Perhaps it is at this point that we should be honest that much of what twenty-and-thirtysomethings typically want to hear about singleness is that it is right and good for them to forgo marriage and family. They want to pursue careers or educational degrees or to enjoy the freedom to travel and live their lives without being tied down to bigger familial commitments. They don’t want the pressure or expectation to “settle down.” Indeed, this is true of Revoice speaker Meg Baatz, who admitted she stopped pursuing marriage with a man because it would disrupt her life of singleness. She said:

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<sup>163</sup> Revoice. “Revoice 18 – General Session 2: Lament | Nate Collins & Ray.” *YouTube*, presentation by Nate Collins. August 2, 2018, timecode 36:31. <https://youtu.be/SHe2y2SVjIc>

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, timecode 37:47.

During the first year of living with this family, I dated a guy from church. We got along great but when I thought about settling down with him, waking up next to him, coming home from work to him, raising children with him, a sense of excitement and certainty was just not there. I believe God can make something of a life like this but, as I sought God's direction, I recalled my vision of a life like Paul's. There was still something about singleness that felt so freeing. And purposeful.<sup>165</sup>

But is this really the vision of singleness that Paul has in mind when he commends the practice in 1 Corinthians 7—a lack of excitement about marriage because singleness feels more freeing? Is this kind of worldly thinking really what Christ would call being a “eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” in Matthew 19?

The church emphasizing marriage over singleness is not without biblical precedent. Indeed, there are only two main passages that teach directly on singleness (Matthew 19:10-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:6-9) whereas there are dozens of passages that teach directly on marriage and parenting. Even in 1 Corinthians 7, much of the instruction seems to assume that singleness is temporary until fulfilled in marriage, which places an emphasis on marriage even in singleness.

The truth is that all Christians—regardless of inclinations or temptations—are called to a hard road of resisting temptation, self-denial, and mortifying the deeds of the flesh. Yet, all Christians are equally called to the joyous duty of looking unto Jesus, growing in grace, making disciples, and serving selflessly the needs of the church. To only highlight and belabor a distinction of experience is to separate what God has joined together (if it truly be joined in union with Christ); to only highlight and belabor the challenge of following Christ is to be in danger of considering him a harsh and unfair master (Matthew 25:24-26), only interested in burdening his children with millstones. There may be some unique challenges faced by those who have a history of sexual addiction, abuse, homosexual self-identification, and same-sex attraction. But the difficult road of submitting oneself to the Lord is not unique to same-sex attracted Christians. It is an inference that fits very neatly within a “social gospel” understanding of essentialized experience forming our identity—but it is counter to how the church is described biblically.

When Paul describes the church in the book of Ephesians, he uses the word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) which carries the idea of an assembly of “called out” ones (Jews and Gentiles) who have been united together in Christ. The Christian identity is central to the concept of the church. But it goes beyond the similarity of professed identity (the visible church) and goes to the very root of someone's spiritual being (the invisible church): Christ's church is made up of individuals who are IN CHRIST. If the church is made up of those who are in Christ then the basis of unity among Christians is the foundation of the prophets and apostles (the Scriptures), the shared citizenship of heaven, the shared membership in the household of God, and the shared purpose of being joined together, growing into a dwelling place for God by his Spirit. This is the basis of Christian identity:

But you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Ephesians 2:19-21)

For the church to unite around any identifying trait beyond Christ is to counter the unity the gospel proclaims. It is why Paul is so explicit:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:28-29)

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<sup>165</sup> Revoice. “Meg Baatz Testimony.” *YouTube*, February 22, 2021, timecode 11:20–11:56. <https://youtu.be/ARmLyA3ASTc>

It is for this reason that the constant refrains of victimization and blaming of the local church is divisive—because it puts the emphasis once again on individual experience. If the church is going to be clear about truth and error, right and wrong, it has to stand on a more firm foundation than what people think and feel—it must be built upon the testimony of the Scriptures. There must be an authority higher than human experience—however sad or troubled a person’s suffering may be. If the Christian life is one of denying self and taking up a cross, then should we not also deny ourselves the rights of victimhood?

## ❖❖ PART V ❖❖

### Sanctification and the Power of the Gospel

Many “gay celibate Christians” have shared their stories of wanting to have their desires changed but say they have found it impossible. Prayers for change go unanswered. Reparative therapy only increases feelings of guilt and shame. Natural marriage is utterly unthinkable. Pastors and church leaders are inept at offering care. Other Christians have an unspoken expectation that a gay person can “overcome homosexuality,” which burdens the struggler with false hope and depression—further alienating them from the life of the church. These are not insignificant objections but a question remains: What do the Scriptures tell us we have the reasonable right to expect of a Christian seeking to overcome sin?

#### Born Again?

There are any number of things we could say about what it means to be a Christian but one of the most basic definitions given by Jesus is in John 3:3, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus clarifies in John 3:6–8 that this new birth is not the result of a person’s self-identification as a believer but a result of the Holy Spirit’s work. The Apostle Peter highlights that we are born again by an imperishable seed—that is “through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). Theologian Wayne Grudem describes the new birth this way: “Regeneration is a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us. This is sometimes called ‘being born again.’”<sup>166</sup>

It would be easy to skip over this fundamental truth on the assumption that everyone who claims the name of Christ and says they want to follow orthodox teaching truly belongs to Him. “For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many” (Matthew 7:13). But the Bible indicates that there are many under a false pretense of salvation:

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” (Matthew 7:21–23)

There may be some mystery surrounding the particulars of exactly how and at what moment God makes us *alive to Christ*. After all, Christ Himself describes the Holy Spirit’s work as being like the wind that we can perceive but cannot see where it begins and ends (John 3:8). As the Anglican minister J.C. Ryle said:

[The operations of the Holy Spirit in the new birth] may be mysterious, sovereign, and incomprehensible to us in many ways, but it is foolish to stumble at them because there is much we cannot explain. Whatever mystery there may be about the wind, its presence may always be known by its sound and effects... Marvelous and incomprehensible as His work may be, it is work that can always be seen and known. The new birth is a thing that “cannot be hidden.” There will always be visible “fruits of the Spirit” in every one that is born of the Spirit.<sup>167</sup>

Scripture says that the new birth is a supernatural event that affects the whole person and is evident in the fruit of a changed life. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Because of this *new creation affecting the whole person*, it is reasonable to expect that the change in a person as a

<sup>166</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), p. 699.

<sup>167</sup> Ryle, J.C. “A Conversation with Nicodemus.” *The J.C. Ryle Archive*, July 3, 2015. <https://www.jcryle.info/2015/07/a-conversation-with-nicodemus.html>

result of the new birth “will *become evident* in patterns of behavior and desires that are pleasing to God,” as Grudem says.<sup>168</sup> It is clear that justification (being declared righteous legally before God) and sanctification (the ongoing work of the Christian being conformed to the likeness of Christ) are closely linked together. They both have objective, biblical criteria by which they should be understood.

The new birth changes us and does so in profound ways. It sets the course for our sanctification because the Holy Spirit now indwells the believer. As the Baptist minister Geoffrey Thomas describes it:

The Christian cannot blame the Lord for failing to do the will of God in his life. Not one believer may successfully argue that “My resources were inadequate. The divine provision let me down.” For God will say, “Did I not give you the Holy Spirit? Did you not have free access to his grace and power?” There is no part of our lives that has been neglected or ignored by God. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Whether in caring for the senile widow or the handicapped child, handling a broken heart, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, speaking a word for the Lord Jesus, resisting temptation, enduring affliction, or completing one’s duties, every Christian can say, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).<sup>169</sup>

## Side B Sanctification

In their Statement of Faith provided on their website, the Revoice organization speaks about the necessity of the Holy Spirit’s work in a believer:

The work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for the individual’s new birth and growth to maturity. The Holy Spirit empowers and indwells the church, enabling its constant renewal in truth, wisdom, faith, holiness, love, ministry, power and mission.<sup>170</sup>

However, this teaching, though clear on the website, is basically nonexistent in the writing and speaking of those associated with Revoice or the Side B movement. For example, a quick search through the *SpiritualFriendship.org* website gave no hits to the phrases “born again,” “new birth,” “made alive,” “death to life,” “saving faith,” or “true repentance.” The word “regeneration” comes up only in the transcript from a John Piper message about singleness and as the name of an ecumenical magazine. “Conversion” was used multiple times but either in the context of “conversion therapy” or of a personal testimony. The Revoice organization itself mentions the work of the Holy Spirit but basically as an orthodox formality.

When Side B advocates mention sanctification, it is usually found with very particular caveats for why it applies only to “lust” or “sexual behavior” but not to same-sex attraction, desires, or orientation. For example, one of Revoice’s FAQ questions is, “How does God bring about change and sanctification in the lives of Christians attracted to their own sex?” Revoice says:

We believe God can do anything that he pleases, yet we also believe that it is important to recognize how God typically works. While it seems clear that some people experience a degree of spontaneous fluidity in their orientation, none of the methods of pursuing a change in orientation which we know of, whether psychological or spiritual, have proven effective. Thus, while there is nothing wrong with desiring or praying for such a transformation, we instead want to highlight the sorts of change and sanctification which do seem to be part of how God regularly works in the lives of gay/same-sex-attracted believers who surrender their sexuality to Him.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), p. 701.

<sup>169</sup> Thomas, Geoffrey. *Philip and the Revival in Samaria* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>170</sup> “Statement of Faith.” *Revoice*, accessed April 29, 2021. <https://revoice.us/about/our-beliefs/statement-of-faith/>

<sup>171</sup> “How does God bring about change and sanctification in the lives of Christians attracted to their own sex?” *Revoice*, March 16, 2020, accessed February 4, 2021. <https://revoice.us/uFAQs/how-does-god-bring-about-change-and-sanctification-in-the-lives-of-christians-attracted-to-their-own-sex/>

Revoice says that God can do whatever He wants but He does not “typically” change our sexual desires. Any change that people might experience in that way is “spontaneous fluidity in their orientation” and is, therefore, not the result of fruitful efforts in sanctification.

While every Christian acknowledges that there is a frustrating and burdensome remnant of sin in us, we also acknowledge our culpability for it and our desire to overcome and remove it—even in this life. And while every Christian should likewise recognize that God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s power are essential to our growth in sanctification, such work is not effortless on our part. Sanctification is worked through the means of confession, repentance, broken-heartedness, faith in God’s promises, trust in the finished work of Christ, fleeing youthful lust, consciously avoiding opportunities for temptation, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, dealing with sins of the heart and mind, accountability, and a true desire to see sin removed and killed. But if something is not recognized as sin then it will not be repented of and the resolve in overcoming the sin is stunted.

As Revoice says:

True sanctification and change require repentance from actual sin, where that has been engaged in, whether in sexual acts, inappropriate relationships, or willfully entertained lust or fantasy. We believe that God calls His children to turn from all such sin and that He will give them the power to do so. We exhort gay/same-sex attracted Christians to take all sin seriously and get the support and accountability they need to resist and overcome.<sup>172</sup>

Revoice is clear about what they consider “actual sin” to be: “sexual acts, inappropriate relationships, or willfully entertained lust or fantasy.” The phrase “actual sin” may strike some Christians as problematic. Although no allusion to the Westminster Confession of Faith is properly given by Revoice here, knowing the number of Presbyterians involved in shaping Revoice doctrine (particularly Greg Johnson), “actual sin” is most likely a phrase borrowed directly from the Westminster Confession of Faith—chapter 6, section 6. After all, that section of the Confession distinguishes between “original sin” (meaning, our sinful nature, which is itself “and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin” according to chapter 6, section 5) and “actual sin” (meaning, acts of sin that we participate in—sinful thoughts, words, or deeds).<sup>173</sup>

Lest someone think this distinction between “actual sin” and “original sin” is unique to Presbyterians or to the Calvinistic theology presented in the Westminster Confession, the same distinction is made in the Church of the Nazarene’s Articles of Faith<sup>174</sup> as well as in the Articles of Religion of the United Methodist Church<sup>175</sup>—both Wesleyan-Holiness denominations that are stridently non-Calvinistic.

Revoice distinguishes “actual sin” from “sinfulness in our hearts” which “we trust that God is sanctifying.” Like Grant Hartley’s description of same-sex attraction that makes room for the draw of the heart and the covetousness of wishing such relationships were his, Revoice presents a picture of sin that only acknowledges sexual desires. Same-sex attraction is not sinful, they would say, for it is too general a category with too many good things connected to it. “Same-sex sexual desires” are sinful because they are toward sexual expression and fulfillment which is sinful.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), p. 28. <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/WCFScriptureProofs.pdf>

<sup>174</sup> Nazarene Article 5.2, in particular, speaks to this distinction. “We believe that original sin differs from actual sin in that it constitutes an inherited propensity to actual sin for which no one is accountable until its divinely provided remedy is neglected or rejected.” Church of the Nazarene. “Articles of Faith, 2017–2021 Manual of the Church of the Nazarene.” *Nazarene.org*. <https://nazarene.org/id/node/49>

<sup>175</sup> UMC Article II speaks of Christ’s death being a sacrifice “not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men.” Article VII further defines what it calls “original sin or birth sin.” United Methodist Church. “Articles of Religion: The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016.” *UMC.org*, July 3, 2019. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/articles-of-religion>

But even this can be a vexed category when it is ensconced in the rhetorical ambiguity of a Side B apologist. Take gay celibate pastor Greg Johnson's attempt to explain what is and isn't "actual sin":

For example, when I feel my heart melting because someone good-looking just walked by—even though no lustful thought has surfaced—at that point I am already praying, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." It's not morbid introspection. I am looking outward to my savior Jesus who loves me. Confessing to God my internal corruption is a basic Christian freedom. I can be honest with God about how I am damaged.<sup>176</sup>

Johnson says he is free to confess his "internal corruption" and is able to be honest with God about how he is "damaged." At first, this statement sounds commendable. But then we realize that Johnson insists on making himself a victim of original sin rather than a participant in it. He must simply be honest that he has this tendency, even though he feels his "heart melting" over a man walking by. He admits he isn't perfect. He's damaged. He is a victim of his orientation. But we remember that because Jesus has not made him straight but has simply removed his shame, this must be how "no shame" plays out practically.

The refusal to acknowledge homosexuality as not just a general corruption due to one's fallen nature but an actual sin to be mortified is paralyzing to sanctification. If this is the best advice that Side B proponents can offer to the sexual struggler then no wonder overcoming homosexuality is seen as impossible. If a pornography user treated the desire to view pornography (not lustful fantasizing, but merely the general *desire to* lustfully fantasize) as a normal part of internal corruption that will never be overcome in this life—a desire that, it could be argued using Revoice's logic, isn't even particularly sinful in itself—then what hope could he have that he would ever overcome his sinful passions? Whether those passions are defined as lust or covetousness (which is idolatry), they are an affront to the Lord's holiness and a snare to the man's soul.

Yes, honesty about our sin is important. And temptation sometimes hits us unawares. But we should make no mistake of assuming that a man's heart "melting" over a good-looking man (when no lustful fantasizing has happened yet) is not sinful in itself, deserving of no more repentance than a hat tip toward the unlearned tax collector in the Luke 18 parable. In fact, the generality of Johnson's prayer is evidence of the fact that he seems blind to the deception of sin that is already enticing him to overlook his covetousness. He offers categorical protection for his unnatural lust by flying it under the masthead of "sexual orientation." If Johnson were a young believer who needed to mature in his thinking, the comments would still be wrong but far more understandable. But considering that Johnson has been an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America since 2003, he should most certainly know better than this.

How much do Side B proponents truly desire to see change in their lives? We are told of their earnest prayers and dashed hopes. We are told of the "ex-gay" ministries that didn't make them straight but did make them feel ashamed for being homosexuals. But what about now? Where is the sincere and determined desire to see God's grace manifest in their lives by the taking of strongholds? The desire to see the roots of bitterness, covetousness, pride, arrogance, and unnatural lust being deeply diminished and even conquered? Greg Coles answers this question forthrightly:

I've stopped praying to be straight. In fact, most of the time, I've stopped wanting to be straight. If you offered me a choice today between a Wonder-Pill-that-Makes-Gay-People-Straight and a Tylenol, I'd take the Tylenol. What changed, exactly? There are plenty of ways I could answer this question, and perhaps I'll write about a few more of them in the coming weeks. But for now, I'll focus on just one of the reasons

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<sup>176</sup> "Missouri Presbytery Ad Hoc Committee to Respond to Memorial Presbyterian Church Report of Its BCO 31-2 Investigation of TE Greg Johnson." Missouri Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), July 21, 2020, p. 12. <https://1ar.s3.amazonaws.com/2020/08/2020.07.21-MOP-BCO-31-2-investigation-of-TE-Greg-Johnson-CRM.pdf>

I've stopped praying to be straight: It's possible to be heterosexual without honoring God, and it's also possible to honor God without being heterosexual.<sup>177</sup>

In other words, there's nothing wrong with being gay. He can still be just as faithful without seeing his desires change as he could be without them because we're all broken and fallen creatures. Coles' can't help but define himself by his passions. After all, his logical syllogism only works to prove anything if homosexuality is a fixed, morally neutral biological category. It is another sad reflection of sin's deceptive power.

Contrast this kind of language with the robust encouragement and exhortation found in 2 Peter 1. Christians are "partakers of the divine nature" and have "escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (verse 4). If that is true then a Christian must "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love" (verses 5–6). If these qualities are in us and growing, it keeps us from being ineffective and unfruitful (verse 7).

But we should not be lax in our efforts because God has graciously done a work in us. We are expected to grow in all these qualities—and exhorted to strive in this effort. If we do not grow, it is a danger to us. As Peter warns:

For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:9–11)

## Fellowship with Side A

A troubling aspect of the Revoice movement is that fellowship is more readily extended to those who share their detailed views on gay experience rather than those who share their orthodox Christian faith. This may mean sharing the stage with affirming Side A authors for dialogue (rather than debate)—as Ron Belgau and Justin Lee have done many times.<sup>178</sup> It may mean speaking of gay marriage as a political essential and social good,<sup>179</sup> promoting LGBT art and queer culture,<sup>180</sup> and celebrating "coming out of the closet."<sup>181</sup> Some hold this cultural partnership more strongly—such as Bridget Eileen Rivera and Grant Hartley—while others hold this partnership more loosely. Nevertheless, this partnership does come with a blurring of lines between what is understood as definitional of Christian faith and what is not. This includes a stark break from historic views that would have seen the acceptance and promotion of homosexual behavior as an unfruitful work of darkness rather than a point of Christian liberty and acceptable doctrinal difference. While many words may take up their pages to describe in detail what they mean by being gay, the definition of a Christian is often left barely described or wholly undefined.

For instance, Wesley Hill (Side B) and Justin Lee (Side A) have clearly stated their different understandings of Christian faithfulness as gay men and have frequently engaged in "dialogues" on university campuses where these differing viewpoints can be charitably

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<sup>177</sup> Coles, Gregory. "You Don't Need to Pray that God Makes Me Straight." *The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender*. September 15, 2017. <https://centerforfaith.com/blog/you-don-t-need-to-pray-that-god-makes-me-straight>

<sup>178</sup> Belgau, Ron and Justin Lee. "Let's Talk About [Hom]osexuality." *Seattle Pacific University*, April 13, 2014. [https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/av\\_events/1795/](https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/av_events/1795/)

<sup>179</sup> Hartley, Grant (@TheGrantHartley). "Spicy take: the more time passes after Obergefell v. Hodges, the more I am convinced that opposing legalizing civil same-sex marriage was a serious mistake by Christians who subscribe to the traditional sexual ethic." April 21, 2020, 10:01 AM. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/TheGrantHartley/status/1252613419762671616>

<sup>180</sup> Hill, Wesley. "About Revoice's 'Queer Treasure'" *SpiritualFriendship.org*, February 19, 2019. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2019/02/19/about-revoices-queer-treasure/>

<sup>181</sup> Rivera, Bridget Eileen (@TravelingNun). "The more we tell our stories, the less they can ignore us. Happy Coming Out Day fam. Be proud, be loud, be queer." October 11, 2019, 6:58 AM. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/TravelingNun/status/1182626580021088257>

articulated. Hill holds that male/female marriage is God's design and that all homosexual behavior and lustful fantasizing is sinful; Lee believes that homosexual behavior is only "appropriate within the confines of a committed, loving, monogamous, lifelong, Christ-centered relationship."<sup>182</sup> It is safe to say that—in this instance—there is a fundamental disagreement between them on what classifies as sinful behavior and biblical marriage. Yet, this disagreement is not seen to be particularly concerning to Hill.

Here is how Wesley Hill describes Justin Lee:

Justin is "family." We're both baptized in the same Triune Name. We both confess the same creed. We both believe the weirdest thing is the deepest truth of the universe: that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord. I think Justin's Side A view is wrong and that it is wrong in a way that touches on first-order Christian claims about creation, Christology, and redemption; I also think that when family members hold views you think are that wrong, you keep on loving them and talking with them and seeking to bear witness to what you believe is true and life-giving.<sup>183</sup>

This language of "family members" indicates that there is no question in Hill's mind—both he and Justin Lee worship the same God, through the same Mediator, and have the same Holy Spirit indwelling them. It's just that Lee also believes that homosexual marriage is acceptable before God and that homosexual behavior is acceptable within that context. Whatever "first-order Christian claims" are touched by Lee's position, they are apparently not enough of a reason to break fellowship or question the legitimacy of Lee's faith claims.

Problematically, this clear declaration of brotherhood seems to imply that homosexual behavior is merely a matter of personal conviction—one where Hill is being more consistent with biblical teaching, perhaps, but one where there is nothing fundamentally different about the two men or their relationship with the Lord. This, by extension, implies that the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit has no role to play here.

Conservative theologian and author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (2000), Robert Gagnon, commented on Hill's approach to Lee:

They disagree about whether they as "gay Christians" are permitted by Scripture to enter into a homosexual union but this comes across as only one piece in a much larger matrix of continuity. Contrast Paul's approach to the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5-6 and his frequent warnings that self-styled Christians who engage in egregious, unrepentant sin, especially sexual sin, will not inherit God's kingdom. The overall impression that one receives (an impression at odds with Scripture) is that, for Dr. Hill, Mr. Lee's stance is relatively insignificant for the health of his Christian faith and for continued fellowship between them. They could just as well be talking about alternate views of eschatology within the pale of acceptable Christian differences.<sup>184</sup>

In a different example, celibate lesbian Bridget Eileen Rivera is very frank about how she thinks about "gay Christians." Regardless of how they live, whether celibate or sexually active, she sees them as brothers and sisters who being led by the Holy Spirit:

For me, it was my choice to follow Jesus that empowered me to live a Christian life, defined not by my allegiance to a sexual ethic or a moral code but by my allegiance to Jesus Christ and him alone. As a result, I've arrived at a place of commitment to empowering LGBTQ Christians to walk in faith with Jesus Christ

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<sup>182</sup> Lee, Justin. "The Great Debate: Justin's View." *Geeky Justin: Justin Lee on faith, culture, and nuance*. <http://geekyjustin.com/great-debate/>

<sup>183</sup> Hill, Wesley. "Why Do We Think the Bible is Against Same-Sex Marriage." *SpiritualFriendship.org*, May 8, 2017. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2017/05/08/why-do-we-think-the-bible-is-against-same-sex-marriage/>

<sup>184</sup> This comment by Robert Gagnon was originally posted on the Facebook page of the Restored Hope Network. In October 2020, Facebook deleted the RHN page and all its contents. This quote and any additional context are now lost except for what appears here. (Originally retrieved by M.D. Perkins in May 2019 for an earlier draft of this paper.) Restored Hope Network (@RestoredHopeNetwork). [posted by Anne Paulk on behalf of Robert A.J. Gagnon] "I appreciate Dr. Gagnon's response to the Baker Book House "dialogue" on homosexuality that included Wesley Hill and Justin Lee..." *Facebook* update, August 26, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/RestoredHopeNetwork/posts/843249522352095>

as opposed to dictating ethical codes for them to follow. This has meant affirming the varied stories of my queer siblings and celebrating the ways in which Christ is made manifest in their lives, whether he shows up in a life that follows progressive ethics or traditional. It's meant respecting the agency of all Christians, queer and straight, to come to a Spirit-led understanding of what the Bible says about human sexuality, instead of forcing my own convictions onto those who don't want them. It's also meant challenging the church to better support LGBTQ Christians as they traverse the often-terrifying journey of following Jesus.<sup>185</sup>

Although she talks about being Spirit-led, she says it is her choice to follow Jesus that has empowered her to live a Christian life. Her commitment here isn't primarily to Scripture or to the God she claims to worship. It is to "empowering LGBTQ Christians." It is to progressive jargon about "respecting agency" rather than seeing God's Word as true for all people. Faith is left undefined and therefore faithfulness to the Lord is also a free-for-all. Whatever she means by "Spirit-led," it is certainly not how the apostles considered it. The only clear sin in this scenario is the lack of support provided by the church.

Where is the mindfulness to Paul's exhortation not to keep company with any so-called Christian who embraces sexual immorality? As he says in 1 Corinthians:

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. (1 Corinthians 5:11)

The same idea gets expressed in Ephesians 5:7, where Christians are warned not to become partners with the iniquitous. Paul is careful not to be misunderstood—the work of evangelism and hospitality should still happen with unbelievers. But warm fellowship must be withheld from those who claim Christ yet defiantly deny Him by their deeds. Yet this is an exhortation that many Revoice proponents seem quite willing to flaunt for a greater solidarity among so-called "LGBTQ Christians."

### **The Fruit in Keeping with Repentance**

Because regeneration is a secret work, we cannot objectively see if it has taken place in a person or when; but the secrecy of the work does not mean the effects of it are completely hidden or that we are unable to speak to the fruit of a person's life in terms of his professed doctrine and outward practice. We can point to the inconsistency of his thinking with Scripture and the damage done to Christ's reputation if he legitimizes his own sin. In Gagnon's above critique, he does not presume Justin Lee's internal relation to Christ, but he does warn that Lee's view is not right, acceptable, or safe and that anyone who embraces sexual immorality will not inherit the kingdom of God. Some may think this kind of judgment uncharitable and unchristian, but it is the clear application of the apostolic example, brought with similar emphasis and loving admonition.

If avoiding homosexual behavior is considered as merely a matter of personal belief (and not external evidence of the Holy Spirit's internal work in conviction, repentance, and sanctifying renewal of the heart and mind), then what is really keeping someone from embracing the full expression of homosexuality? This question has sadly been answered many times over by Side B proponents who switch to Side A.

Julie Rodgers is a notable example of this. Rodgers was involved with Exodus International in the early 2010s. After Exodus closed in 2013, she dismissed "ex-gay" ministry altogether saying that it had failed to make her straight.<sup>186</sup> She maintained her position that

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<sup>185</sup> Rivera, Bridget Eileen. "Christian, Lesbian, Sojourner: Keeping the Gospel in Focus." *Meditations of a Traveling Nun*, 2021. <https://www.meditationsofatravelingnun.com/christian-lesbian-sojourner-keeping-the-gospel-in-focus/>

<sup>186</sup> Phoenix Ministry (@PhoenixMinistry). "So proud of Julie Rodgers! Last night we got to hear her share her journey with us as well as present some of her dreams for the future in repairing the breach between the Church and our LGBT friends and

homosexual behavior was sinful but adopted the “celibate gay Christian” moniker alongside her friends Wesley Hill and Ron Belgau.<sup>187</sup> She began working as a chaplain and counselor at Wheaton College in June 2014, with an emphasis on providing spiritual care to students who struggled with same-sex attraction.

Her controversial resignation from Wheaton in July 2015 sent shockwaves through many facets of the watching world,<sup>188</sup> especially when it became clear that her views on same-sex marriage had changed from those she had earlier professed.<sup>189</sup> In light of the theological shift, perhaps it is not surprising that only two years later Julie Rodgers announced her marriage engagement to her female partner, Amanda Hite.<sup>190</sup>

As an articulate “gay Christian” committed to celibacy, Rodgers had several blog posts published on *SpiritualFriendship.org* prior to her 2015 Wheaton resignation. Her change of heart necessitated a response from Ron Belgau where he wanted to be clear that her position change was not evidence of the failure of Side B thinking, but rather a result of the “brutality of modern-day Pharisees” (ie. conservative evangelicals) who “bind heavy burdens on LGBT people.”<sup>191</sup> Side B supporter Matthew Lee Anderson, picking up on a similar theme, tweeted around the same time as Rodgers’ resignation: “Conservative evangelicals who reject celibate gay Christians shouldn’t act surprised when they run into the arms of progressives.”<sup>192</sup>

This is more than simple blame-shifting—it is a failure to consider the spiritual implications of rejecting orthodox sexual ethics. Indeed, for Belgau, Anderson, Hill, Rivera, and many others in the Revoice movement, to reject orthodox teaching on sexuality does not seem to be of primary importance because it is not a creedal “essential” of the faith. In other words, the Apostles Creed doesn’t say anything about sexuality. But, spiritually speaking, is Rodger’s position change anything but resistance and refusal to submit herself to the lordship of Christ and the authority of God’s Word? Does Romans 1 and “being given over” not speak to what happens as someone untethers oneself from God’s Word and seeks autonomous self-fulfillment?

Another Side B proponent, Nick Roen, offered some serious exegetical pushback to these kinds of vague and untested assumptions of broad Christian fellowship regardless of how one defines sexual ethics:

Are disagreements about same-sex sexual activity (notice I’m speaking of activity, not an orientation) really so important that as pastors we must hedge the ecclesial fence with this issue? In my estimation, the biblical answer is yes. I don’t say this flippantly, or in a way that rejoices in division. I wish there were no division!... James chapter 2 is ringing loudly in my head that affirming the creeds (“You believe that God is one!”) isn’t enough to have confidence your faith is alive and not dead. And it isn’t just James 2. I cannot wriggle out from underneath the biblical severity with which the authors of scripture speak on matters of unrepentant sexual immorality.<sup>193</sup>

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family members...” *Facebook* update, May 12, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/PhoenixMinistry/posts/so-proud-of-julie-rodgers-last-night-we-got-to-hear-her-share-her-journey-with-u/946274745471090/>

<sup>187</sup> Belgau, Ron. “Spiritual Friendship and Julie Rodgers.” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, July 16, 2015.

<https://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/07/16/spiritual-friendship-and-julie-rodgers/>

<sup>188</sup> Devine, Daniel James. “Wheaton’s ‘celibate gay’ counselor resigns.” *World Magazine*, July 14, 2015.

[https://world.wng.org/2015/07/wheatons\\_celibate\\_gay\\_counselor\\_resigns](https://world.wng.org/2015/07/wheatons_celibate_gay_counselor_resigns)

<sup>189</sup> Rodgers, Julie. “An Update on the Gay Debate: evolving ideas, untidy stories, and hopes for the church.” *Julie Rodgers*, July 13, 2015. <https://julierodgers.wordpress.com/2015/07/13/an-update-on-the-gay-debate-evolving-ideas-untidy-stories-and-hopes-for-the-church/>

<sup>190</sup> Rodgers, Julie (@Julie\_rodgers). “I have news! I’m officially engaged to @amandahite! She’s generous, hospitable, brilliant, and full of grace. I’m overwhelmed with joy.” June 6, 2017, 3:25 PM. Tweet.

[https://twitter.com/Julie\\_rodgers/status/872187681480093699](https://twitter.com/Julie_rodgers/status/872187681480093699)

<sup>191</sup> Belgau, Ron. “Spiritual Friendship and Julie Rodgers.” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, July 16, 2015.

<https://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/07/16/spiritual-friendship-and-julie-rodgers/>

<sup>192</sup> Anderson, Matthew (@mattleeanderson). “Conservative evangelicals who reject celibate gay Christians shouldn’t act surprised when they run into the arms of progressives.” July 13, 2015, 9:28 PM. Tweet.

<https://twitter.com/mattleeanderson/status/620781773929099264>

<sup>193</sup> Roen, Nick. “Peace, Peace? Further Thoughts on Staying Put.” *SpiritualFriendship.org*, December 4, 2017.

<https://spiritualfriendship.org/2017/12/04/peace-peace-further-thoughts-on-church-clarity/>

Roen is absolutely correct here. Building on the example of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, he further added:

*“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” [1 Corinthians 6:9–11]*

We see right away that for Paul, inheritance of the kingdom of God is at stake in our response to sin. He knows this is not an easy truth, so he even adds ‘Do not be deceived’ as an additional warning, knowing that there will be those who try to skirt his meaning here. Paul then goes on to list a number of sins that, if continued in unrepentantly, will result in forfeiture of the kingdom. But he does not leave us without hope. The glorious words, ‘And such were some of you’ are a balm to every sinner looking for hope in Jesus. These Corinthians were those who regularly lived in these sinful patterns, and now they do not. They are repentant... Justifying faith is always sanctifying faith, and in this passage the justified are those who do not continue in sin as if everything is fine.<sup>194</sup>

As Roen illustrates, the message of the apostolic gospel comes with warning and severity as well as mercy and grace. It includes the expectation of what new life gives to us while warning of the eternal loss of rejecting Christ by living for ourselves.

Galatians 5:16-24 is particularly pertinent:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

According to Paul, the implication is clear: those who are justified by faith in Christ are those who fight sin. Fighting sin does not make someone right with God; fighting sin is evidence that justification has truly taken place. In Christ’s parable of the sower, he too recognizes a category of people who seem to belong to God who eventually turn away:

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. (Mark 4:16-17)

This is a difficult thing to see, especially in people we love and had once confidently believed were united to Christ, but it is a necessary distinction to make. Otherwise, the Scripture would not be full of warnings to faithfully persevere to the end.<sup>195</sup> If we lose this sense of the definitive nature of God’s work in a soul, then we weaken the preaching of God’s power, thereby weakening the very gospel message itself—the gospel that calls men and women to repentance and faith, that enables them to fight sin and grow in godliness, and strengthens them to endure to the end.

Who we embrace as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ matters. Obviously, discernment and charity are needed and the fruit of false belief or hidden sin may not be immediately apparent. But when *it* becomes clear, *we* should become clear: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (Ephesians 5:11). Paul also warns Timothy of people

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Matthew 7:21-23, 1 Corinthians 9:27, Hebrews 3:12, Hebrews 10:26-31, James 1:12, 2 Peter 3:17, and Revelation 3:11 are just a few of the New Testament passages that give this warning.

who have “the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people” (2 Timothy 3:5).

## ❖❖ CONCLUSION ❖❖

### A Little Leaven and the Revoice Movement

Revoice ideology is the way that the “gay debate” in the church has evolved to fit the current milieu. The mainline churches that began to weaken in their posture toward homosexuality in the 1970s eventually became gay affirming. It didn’t happen overnight but by the early 2010s, the formal doctrine of the church was being brought into harmony with the practical doctrine of the church that had been tacitly accepted for years. It began with a little leaven mixed in—small accommodations that seemed harmless or even needed in order to maintain the church’s witness in the modern world.

There are many differences between then and now—yet, it should be no surprise that in our postmodern context a newer movement to rethink homosexuality and the church’s response to it would emerge within evangelical churches. It has begun small—with questions about the church’s posture and tone, distinctions between same-sex attraction and homosexual practice, apologies to “sexual minorities” over so-called homophobia and heteronormativity, and the preference for sociological data and lived experience to “fill out” our doctrines of sin and sanctification, to name only a handful of the items covered in this paper. It begins, once again, with a little leaven mixed in—small accommodations we are told are necessary in order to maintain the church’s witness in the postmodern world.

In 1 Corinthians 5, the Apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for allowing blatant sexual immorality within their body. The immorality was “of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans” (vs. 1), which recognizes a distinctly degrading character to it. Paul chastises them for their arrogance (vs. 2) and their boasting (vs. 6) and warns them, not only of the corrosive influence of the immoral actions themselves, but also for their attitude toward it. He likens it to leaven—where only a small amount mixed in is able to affect the entire lump of dough. In other words, the whole body is being defiled by the church’s tolerance of sexual sin.

Many Revoice defenders and Side B promoters would scoff at this comparison, seeking to claim that the situation in Corinth is completely different from what is exemplified in the Revoice movement. There are certainly some differences between them. But we should take heed that Paul’s rebuke is not simply at the people guilty of the egregious sexual sin. He rebukes the entire church for their passivity and arrogance. Matthew Henry considers that the sexually immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 may have been a gifted member of the church, someone that many would hate to lose for his contributions to the body. Henry comments:

Pride or self-esteem often lies at the bottom of our immoderate esteem of others, and this makes us as blind to their faults as to our own. It is true humility that will bring a man to a sight and acknowledgement of his errors. The proud man either wholly overlooks or artfully disguises his faults, or endeavours to transform his blemishes into beauties.<sup>196</sup>

Henry’s words are sharp and quite applicable to the promotion of gay celibate ideology. There is much pride undergirding the movement—pride that overlooks faults, pride that artfully disguises faults, pride that endeavors to transform blemishes into beauties. If Revoice were simply about repentance and faithfulness it would speak differently than it does. Where is the fear of the Lord? Where is the love of righteousness? Where is the reverence for God’s Word? Where are the clear declarations of the truth? Where are the warnings against falling away?

When Christians have critiqued or rebuked the Revoice movement, the criticism has been called divisive, self-righteous, ungracious, and unloving. Nate Collins says, “Christian leaders need to move beyond the safety of sterile doctrine and abstract morality and teach their

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<sup>196</sup> Henry, Matthew. “1 Corinthians 5,” from *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706). *Bible Study Tools*. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/1-corinthians/5.html>

followers how to understand the day-to-day realities of the LGBT experience, even when it's uncomfortable."<sup>197</sup> Perhaps there is some truth in this. But Collins' statement is intended to silence anyone who might object to the Revoice movement. After all, he makes it sound as if "sterile doctrine" and "abstract morality" are the primary interests of Christian critics of Side B—as if Revoice critics could not care less about the flesh and blood people struggling under the dominion of their desires.

Many seem to think the objections to Side B reflect a bunch of semantic games. This leads Wesley Hill to say:

If I could wave a magic wand and change just one thing about conservative Christian discourse right now, I would make it a requirement that every straight person telling gay Christians 'Don't call yourself gay' would have to expend (at minimum) an equal amount of energy talking about what they, the straight critics, can do to make it seem less necessary for gay people to so identify... Things would look a lot different in the church if we worked harder on curbing the abuse and worried a whole lot less about hectoring the sufferers over their choice of terminology.<sup>198</sup>

Is that really what this paper is about—sterile doctrine, abstract morality, and bullying hurting people over their word choices? Such a reaction misses the love behind the warnings given. Those who struggle against the flesh are to be commended—but not with the weakening words that secular psychology and human cleverness provide. Vain philosophy is of little benefit to the believer. Paul warns that worldly philosophies take captives—propping up empty deceit, according to both the traditions of men and the elemental spirits of this world (Colossians 2:8). Christians should be rooted and grounded in Scripture (Colossians 2:7), because it is by the law of the Lord that the soul is revived (Psalm 19:7). By them the servant of God is warned, in keeping them there is great reward (Psalm 19:11).

This is sadly counter to the way the leaders of the Revoice movement tend to speak. They do not cry out like the Psalmist, asking to be declared innocent of hidden faults (Psalm 19:12). Instead, they construct elaborately nuanced explanations in order to declare themselves innocent of hidden faults. The work of the Holy Spirit is so minimized so as to appear absent altogether. Is there a hatred of sin or only a hatred of shame? Is there a thirsting after righteousness or only a thirsting after members of the same sex?

Hidden away on one of Revoice's FAQ's is one of the few acknowledgements that there can be any victory in the battle against temptation by those who call themselves same-sex attracted:

While most of us have not perceived a change in our orientation (i.e. a change in the direction of our sexual desires), many of us have experienced various kinds of change in how we experience those desires and the role they play in our life and thought processes, and we rejoice in these both as signs of how God has been working in our hearts, and as signs of God's promise of the complete transformation and sanctification that is our inheritance.<sup>199</sup>

If this statement were consistent with and representative of Revoice's fuller ideology, surely this would be the testimony repeated time and again across social media, blog posts, and public presentations of Side B proponents. Sadly, this is not the case. Those who claim they are free continually reveal themselves to be shackled to their sexual identity—even as they nuance the concept of sexual identity to become slightly more orthodox sounding. The public discourse of the Revoice movement is full of accommodations, equivocations, ambiguities, and

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<sup>197</sup> Collins, Nate. *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 76.

<sup>198</sup> Hill, Wesley. "Weariness." *SpiritualFriendship.org*, November 16, 2018. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2018/11/16/weariness/>

<sup>199</sup> "How does God bring about change and sanctification in the lives of Christians attracted to their own sex?" *Revoice*, March 16, 2020, accessed February 4, 2021. <https://revoice.us/uFAQs/how-does-god-bring-about-change-and-sanctification-in-the-lives-of-christians-attracted-to-their-own-sex/>

compromises—so much so that anyone who has carefully observed the language and emphasis of Revoice must come to the conclusion that the above statement from the FAQ is orthodox posturing.

It is good to want to stand distinct from the sexual debauchery and decadence of the present age. Yet, by definition, standing distinct includes sharp distinctions. What we find in Side B thinking is a constant blurring of lines. Their narrative of innate and immutable orientation is identical to that of the affirming church and the broader secular world. Their insistence that their core identity is not rooted in their sexual desires is a sentiment that could be echoed by countless “gay Christians” regardless of whether they are Side A or Side B. The identity politics underneath the LGBT movement is reflected in the Revoice movement just as easily.

Christian sexual ethics is not a category completely separated from theology. It may seem that way on the surface because we tend to think of it in isolation—but the moment we start defining sin and Christian faithfulness, we are having an ethical conversation that is guided by whatever theological framework best holds those ethics in place. If we are unclear about the theology, we may quickly become unclear about the ethics. It is only a matter of time.

Furthermore, our ethics cannot be derived from and defined by the pain of hurting people. As tragic or as unfair as that pain may seem, our standard must be more objective than the struggle, confusion, and uncertainty of subjective personal experience. “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight” (Proverbs 11:1). The only way to have a just and true measurement is a careful and accurate understanding of biblical teaching.

One-on-one discipleship and pastoral counselling offer a number of ways that these truths may need to be applied and fleshed out—but even this is not a zero-sum game where all answers are right so long as someone can find a Bible verse to justify it. In some situations, the truth needs to be presented softly and with tenderness. In others, a strong rebuke is necessary. In still others, patience, a listening ear, and a trust in the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work are the right responses. Ministers of the gospel are accountable before God for how they speak truth and show love to those under their care but the Scripture is the guide as to whether counsel is biblical—not a person’s felt needs or hopes.

Likewise, all people are responsible for the truth they hear and how they hear that truth. Whether the truth comes in softness or harshness, even if it comes mixed with pride or self-righteousness, the truth of God’s love and the warning to repent and believe is one all people are accountable to respond to rightly. The rightful discernment of gospel ministers—if they be true gospel ministers—is hindered when we begin to demand they respond a certain way or with a certain emphasis to best fit what we want to hear. The more we isolate ourselves within our victimhood enclaves, our self-identified niches of experience that can only be met by someone who not only sympathizes but empathizes with every facet of our unique makeup, we cut ourselves off from fellowship with other believers and the means of growing in faith and love through the local church.

The apostle John summed up the truth and expectation of the Christian life this way:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

This message to all people who call themselves Christians comes with both theological truth and personal warning. It speaks beyond individualized experience to the nature of God (“God is light”) and how that truth should manifest itself in those who believe that truth (“we

walk in the light”). The very nature of how we live reflects what we truly desire. If we desire the light, we will walk in the light.

Though I want to believe that the message of 1 John 1 is the same message proclaimed by the Revoice movement, I cannot honestly say that it is. Overall, it is a step away from clarity, a step away from orthodoxy, and a step toward an inclusivity based on self-identification rather than spiritual truth. Sadly, it may not be long before the fruit of the compromised roots visibly affects churches and denominations that claim biblical orthodoxy. Indeed, some who once embraced Revoice’s celibacy a few years ago have already moved toward Side A gay affirmation or even full sexual debauchery.

The toll will be in the spiritual health of the people—average church members who want to be loving and think this offers a better way, pastors who are tempted to broaden their reach by softening the edges of their teaching, youth who are bombarded with LGBT propaganda and don’t want to be seen as fools for thinking differently than the world, and those who struggle against unnatural lusts and are tempted to ease up in the battle.

The church is already marching forward to the uncertain sound of the trumpet. The longer the Revoice movement goes unaddressed or tacitly accepted, the more the fundamental problems will ingratiate themselves in the life and thinking of the church. Ultimately, the Revoice movement is not the enemy—but it is a dangerous path that will not lead to the spiritual flourishing it promises.



### **About the Author**

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### **About the Publisher**

**American Family Association** (AFA), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, was founded in 1977 by Donald E. Wildmon, who was the pastor of First United Methodist Church in Southaven, Mississippi at the time. Since 1977, AFA has been on the front lines of America's culture war. The original name of the ministry was National Federation for Decency but was changed to American Family Association in 1988.

Today, AFA is led by president Tim Wildmon and it continues as one of the largest and most effective pro-family organizations in the country with hundreds of thousands of supporters.

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