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## ***The Westminster Standards and the Nashville Statement***

by

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The first installment in this series will examine the compatibility of the Nashville Statement on Human Sexuality with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. One of the criticisms of the Nashville Statement was its production by a parachurch organization rather than a church. However, with the endorsement of the Nashville Statement this past summer by the PCA this criticism has been rendered moot. While I am not a member of the PCA, my own EPC shares with it the same confessional standards. So, it was with great interest that I watched a Reformed and Westminsterian sister-church declare the Nashville Statement to be biblically faithful. Both the PCA and EPC require that their officers vow that they “sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church as containing the system of doctrine found in the scripture.” The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are not the final word on scripture’s teaching, nor are they the final word on the subject matter to which they expressly speak. However, what can be inferred from this vow is that for any additional doctrinal statement to be considered biblically faithful it must be compatible with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. The PCA asserting that the Nashville Statement is biblically faithful is not the same thing as the Nashville Statement actually being biblically faithful, and the best tool to ascertain its biblical fidelity is its compatibility with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

It is my conclusion, that while the Nashville Statement agrees with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms on many points, it contradicts them in principle and word substantially enough that the claim that they are compatible is incorrect, and therefore, the claim that the Nashville Statement is a biblically faithful document ought to be rejected. There are three major incompatibilities between Nashville and Westminster: the nature of sin, expectations for sin and its experience in the life of the Christian, and the essential characteristics of the church.

### **NASHVILLE ON SELF-CONCEPTION AND SEXUAL IMMORALITY**

The linchpin in evaluating the Nashville Statement is the term “self-conception.” This term is used throughout the Nashville Statement to denote people who identify and think of themselves in gender terms or desires that deviate from God’s design in creation. Self-conception is how someone thinks of or perceives themselves. For instance, Article 7 reads,

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.

A homosexual self-conception is not the same thing as homosexual activity, but the way in which a person thinks of themselves. A homosexual self-conception is also not the same thing as homosexual desires, which Article 8 addresses separately, stating that people who experience same-sex desires “may live a rich and fruitful life pleasing to God through faith in Jesus Christ, as they, like all Christians, walk in purity of life.” Adopting a homosexual self-conception, which may not necessarily include homosexual desires, lusts, or activities, is inconsistent with God’s purposes in redemption, while someone experiencing homosexual desires may live in purity of life.

The Nashville Statement never expressly states that adopting a homosexual self-conception is sinful or sexually immoral, but it is an inevitable and necessary conclusion of its teaching. Articles 9-10 use the language of “sexual immorality” to describe sexual activities outside the bounds of God’s approval. Article 13 states that God’s grace in Christ (the redemptive power of God, revealed in scripture; cf. Article 7) does not sanction “self-conceptions that are at odds with God’s revealed will.” If God in redemption does not sanction (i.e. permit or approve) self-conceptions that are at odds with his revealed will, and if his will revealed in scripture teaches that adopting a homosexual self-conception is inconsistent with his will in redemption, adopting a homosexual self-conception is sinful and sexually immoral.

The implication of Article 7 is that “adopting” a homosexual self-conception is a choice, but Article 13’s denial possesses a broader scope in that all self-conceptions contrary to God’s redemptive purposes, chosen or otherwise, are sinful. The official Dutch and Mandarin translations of Article 7, respectively, bear this out as well:<sup>1</sup>

WE DENY that it is consistent with these sacred intentions when people want to consciously see themselves and position themselves as persons with a homosexual or transgender identity.

We deny that someone recognizing or perceiving of themselves as homosexual or transsexual is in line with God’s sacred purpose in creation and redemption.

Nashville’s argument is that it is sinful to conceive of oneself as homosexual, whether or not homosexual desires are resisted or the person participates in homosexual lusts or actions. The reason for this is because Nashville asserts that such a self-conception is not only contrary to God’s design in creation, but contrary to the redemption that he is graciously working now in the life of the Christian. Therefore, a homosexual self-conception is sexual immorality, that is, sin. And this is exactly how the Nashville Statement has been understood, by its authors, signatories, supporters, critics, and several PCA presbyteries. See <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/four-cheers-for-pca-approval-o.php> and <https://www.theaquilareport.com/two-pca-presbyteries-request-missouri-presbytery-to-investigate-greg-johnson-questioning-his-side-b-views/>

### **THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS ON SIN**

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms speak of sin in two ways: the definition of what sin is and the sinful condition of humanity. Sin is transgression and lack of conformity to God’s law (WCF 6.6, WLC 24, WSC 14). Actual transgressions of God’s law proceed from the guilt of Adam’s first sin imputed to humanity (WCF 6.3-4, 6, “From this original corruption... do proceed all actual transgressions. Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God...”; WLC 25, “The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam’s first sin...which is commonly called original sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions...”; WSC 18). While the term “immorality” does not appear in the Standards, they present “moral” as an adjective of actions taken (e.g. WCF 19.1-5, 21.7; WLC 93-97). Immorality in the Nashville Statement corresponds to this definition of sin in the Westminster Standards.

The condition incurred upon humanity as guilt for this sin are the estates of sin and misery (WLC 23, 25, 27; WSC 17-19). Humanity's state of sinfulness is the guilt of sin, lack of original righteousness, corruption of their nature, and being wholly opposed to good and inclined to evil. This corruption of nature is sinful, and all motions proceeding from its corruption are themselves sin (WCF 6.5). This corruption of nature is what is historically called concupiscence [See [https://reformed.org/documents/shaw/index.html?mainframe=/documents/shaw/shaw\\_06.html](https://reformed.org/documents/shaw/index.html?mainframe=/documents/shaw/shaw_06.html)] and note #2 below]. This corrupted nature is sin, in the sense that it is sinful in character and from it proceeds inclinations to actual transgressions of God's law.

Humanity's state of misery includes loss of communion with God but gaining his displeasure and curse, so that we are justly liable to all punishments for sin in the world, including the miseries of this life. WLC 28 states that the punishments and miseries included in this life for sin are,

...either inward, as blindness of mind, a reprobate sense, strong delusions, hardness of heart, horror of conscience, and vile affections; or outward, as the curse of God upon the creatures for our sakes, and all other evils that befall us in our bodies, names, estates, relations, and employments; together with death itself.

Sin is violating God's law. The estates of sin and misery inflict suffering, temptation, and more sin upon transgressors of God's law. Not all that is inflicted is sin itself, but includes the consequences for being a sinner and living in a sinfully broken creation. This infliction is sinful in the sense that it lacks conformity to God's design and is a condition of a fallen world, but is not sin in the sense of being actual transgressions of God's law. Some of this infliction is the sinful corruption of human nature, disposing us to evil (the estate of sin). But some of this infliction encompasses the sufferings of this life that befall us, either inwardly as a loss of our communion with God, or outwardly in our experience of a corrupted world (the estate of misery).

This framework can be seen in the Standards' exposition of the 10 Commandments. WLC 138-139 states that the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Thou shall not commit adultery) requires chastity in our affections and forbids "all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections." Compare to WSC 71-72 on the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment, which states that it forbids "unchaste thoughts, words and actions." The affections of WLC 139 fall into the category of actions mentioned in WSC 72, meaning that affections here are volitional, that is, intentional or intentionally cultivated. Likewise, WLC 147-148 on the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Thou shall not covet) teaches that the commandment requires that "all our inward motions and affections [touching our neighbor] tend unto, and further all that good which is his" and forbids all "inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his." (cf. WSC 81). Here affections are something not volitional, but are impulses that must be volitionally cultivated and ordered towards our neighbor's good.

Intentionally unchaste affections are sin, that is, actual transgressions of God's law. Unprompted unclean imaginations or affections can arise from the corruption of our nature, and represent the sinfulness of our state and the inward aspect of the estate of misery. Once cultivated or embraced, rather than mortified, these affections become actual transgressions. Bodily evils that befall us arise from the corruption of the world and represent the outward estate of misery. They are sinful in that sense, but are not actual transgressions. They can be sources of temptation (e.g. a broken leg can frustrate, and therefore tempt to impatience or undue anger towards the people around us), and allowing inordinate motions and affection arising from this temptation to actual transgressions is sin.

This is evident in the fall. Adam and Eve were not sinners, nor did they live in the estates of sin or misery. Yet, by virtue of deception and immaturity, they allowed their inward motions and affections (the tree was good for food and a delight to the eyes) to become inordinate, and then actually transgressed God's law. The inward motions and affections for the tree were not bad: Adam and Eve sinned in eating the fruit, not

in admiring it (WCF 6.1, WLC 21, WSC 15), and they did not possess a corrupt nature. The desire for the fruit was not sinful because it was not a violation of God's law, and the desire did not proceed from sin since our first parents did not possess a corrupt nature.

This is made clearer in comparing the fall with Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Jesus did not have a corrupt nature, nor was the estate of misery an inward reality wherein his communion with God was severed. Yet living in the sinfully broken world he experienced the estate of misery outwardly (WCF 8.3-4, WLC 48, WSC 27). It was this outward evil which befell Christ's body that Satan attempted to leverage in the temptation. Christ's 40-day fast in the wilderness not only stimulated the normal, human experience of hunger, but the hunger pains were miserable evils befalling him in his body. His resistance to Satan was a proper ordering of his inward motions, aggravated though they were by the sinfulness of the estate of misery. The desire for food is good, but an inordinate desire for food, exacerbated by the bodily afflictions that come with fasting, is bad if not controlled.

To summarize, sin is violating God's law. The corruption of human nature is a sinful condition and inclines humans towards sin. The estate of misery inwardly hardens the sinner's heart, and outwardly inflicts all humans with evil. Desires and temptations to sin can arise from our corrupt nature, from the blindness of our heart, or from the hardness of this life appealing to our normal, inward motions and affections that have been inflicted with a postlapsarian fragility.

Several examples can help illustrate this. Alcoholism is an intemperate tendency in desiring and using alcohol. Being an alcoholic does not make one a drunk, just as getting drunk does not necessitate being an alcoholic. Alcoholism could stem from our corrupted nature (the estate of sin) or from environmental factors, such as family history, genetics, trauma, bodily infirmities, etc.... (the estate of misery). Desire for alcohol is a good thing (WLC 135), and our inward motions and affections for it must be cultivated for the good of our neighbor. However, the estates of sin and misery can impose an orientation to alcoholism upon someone without them ever indulging in alcohol; partaking of alcohol could simply reveal the infliction. In the case of the outward aspect of the estate of misery, alcoholism is not sinful or deriving from a corrupt nature, but an infliction of a besetting temptation that exploits human fragility.

Anxiety occupies a similar position. Someone may be a persistent fretter, never content and obsessively worrying, not trusting in God's provision. This is an actual transgression of God's law. Predisposition to anxiety is not the same thing as being anxious, and being inclined or oriented to anxiety is not necessarily sinful or stemming from a sinful nature. The origin point of this persistent orientation towards anxiety could be the person's corrupt nature or the circumstances besetting them, which could include an anxiety disorder. There is a prudence to being responsible and soberly taking stock of one's situation in life, or being concerned for the people one loves. These inward motions or affections are good (WLC 126-130, 138-139; WSC 64-65, 74-75) but due to the estate of misery can provide an entry point for temptation to anxiety.

Sexual desire follows the same course. God's design is for a man's sexual desires to be oriented towards women. But the cultivation of that inward affection matters: a married man should not sexually desire anyone other than his wife, even though he is sexually oriented towards women as a class. In God's design men's sexual desires are oriented towards women, but the good design of this desire must be cultivated towards the good of his neighbor. A married man who describes himself as "opposite-sex attracted" or conceives of himself as heterosexual is not sinning by describing the class-orientation of his sexual desires in this way instead of describing his sexual orientation being directed exclusively towards his wife. The "default" orientation of his inward motions and affections are towards women, and he must cultivate those inward motions in marital chastity. Lust and adultery are failures to do this and are actual transgressions of God's law. These sins proceed from a sinfully corrupt nature, but the inclination or orientation towards heterosexual desires is not sinful in itself. The temptation to unchastity can find its origin point either in the sinful corruption of man or in the besetting of misery upon man.

In the context of homosexuality and the Nashville Statement, the question is then into which category of sin a homosexual orientation or homosexual self-conception falls. Is a man sinning because his desires are homosexually oriented? By conceiving of himself in terms of those desires? Homosexual action is sinful; is the orientation towards homosexual desires sinful?

Homosexual lust or sex is an actual transgression of God's law, and not resisting homosexual lusts is also an actual transgression of God's law. Orientation towards homosexual desires can stem from either the estate of sin or the estate of misery, the latter of which includes outward sin, i.e. evil besetting a person in their environmental (including bodily) condition in our world's postlapsarian state. For homosexual orientation to stem from the outward aspect of the estate of misery would require that a person's normal and good inward motions and affections, in their weakened condition, are being tempted to an inordinate and unclean expression.

Homosexual desire can be inordinate inward motions of what is good, making the motion or affection evil. It is here that one of the points raised by proponents of chaste homosexual self-conception should be considered: homosexual desires can be a sinful demonstration of desire, while the *object* of the desire remains good [see <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2018/06/14/a-happy-convergence/>]. The inward affection for a person of the same sex is a good thing. Desiring intimacy and love for a person of the same sex is a good thing. Allowing that inward affection to become inordinate and expressing itself as a homosexual desire or lust is bad. Desire for food is good, but it is sinful to desire food if it belongs to someone else (coveting) or if the desire would lead to idolatry, as in Christ's temptation. However, desire for idolatry is always wrong, because idolatry is always wrong. A woman having affection for a man besides her husband is good because loving your neighbor is good, but that affection becomes sinfully inordinate when it expresses as lust or adultery. A man having affection towards another man is good, because loving your neighbor is good. Affection for another man is bad if the expression of that affection is homosexual lust or sex.

Adam and Eve were right to have affection for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Along with the rest of the creation God had made it good, and its appearance was a delight. Their inward affection reached an inordinate culmination in sin, but the desire itself was not sinful, nor did it proceed from sin. The sin of Adam and Eve, along with the temptations of Christ, give evidence that temptations to sin (i.e., transgressing God's law, with a morally perverse result) can appeal to desires that are not sinful, while the inordinate, disordered expression of those desires would be. Christ in his humanity was tempted to sin without sinning, or having a corrupted nature or impaired communion with God. Yet, Christ could have still been tempted to do something that is inherently sinful without being subject to the estate of sin via an exploitation of his environmental infirmities in the estate of misery. In other words, Christ could have been faced with homosexual temptations through his experience of loneliness or good desire for intimacy. The temptations would have failed because Christ perfectly ordered all his inward motions and affections, but the temptation to something that violated God's law did not require Christ possessing a corrupt nature, something missed in the debate over Christ's impeccability. [See <https://calvinistinternational.com/2019/10/18/tempted-without-sin-reformed-christology/>]

Temptation to sin appeals to human desire, desire that either sinfully proceeds from our corrupted nature (the estate of sin and the inward aspect of the estate of misery) or good desires weakened in our broken condition (the outward aspect of the estate of misery). It is incorrect to suggest that orientation to homosexual desire can only proceed from the estate of sin rather than the estate of misery [see <https://mereorthodoxy.com/critical-review-spiritual-friendship/>]. Inward affection for what is good, becoming inordinate as a result of besetting environmental evil (the estate of misery) can affect someone's orientation; someone's sexual orientation can be disordered due to external sin persistently inflicted upon them rather than the sinful corruption of their nature. By its besetting evils on the body, the brokenness of creation can knock someone's orientation out of alignment without that person indulging in sin. The estate of sin does touch every aspect of the human person so that all our being is now totally depraved (WCF 6.4-5, 13.2; WLC 25, 78; WSC 18), and attempting to distinguish the source of

someone's broken orientation is an impossible task, a subject to which I will return in the second part of this series.

Sexual orientations can then arise either from God's design, from the corruption of human nature (the estate of sin), or the persistent infliction of bodily suffering which tempt someone's good desires to an inordinate end (the estate of misery). The Westminster Standards teach that our orientation towards sinful desires proceed from the latter two categories, with the possibility that the orientation derives either from sinful corruption or outward infirmities. A homosexual self-conception, rather than homosexual activity, can then be something that is not an embracing of sin or solidarity with it, but an honest realization of the orientation of one's desires as a result of either the estate of sin or the estate of misery.

### **INCOMPATIBILITIES BETWEEN WESTMINSTER AND NASHVILLE**

This presents the first problem area: sin (immorality) is a violation of God's law, and someone who acknowledges their state of inclination is not actually transgressing God's law in that acknowledgment. In other words, adopting a homosexual self-conception without practicing homosexuality (either in the body or the imagination) is not sin. Even the estate of sin is not an actual transgression: if someone's corrupt nature is the source of their inclination towards homosexuality, while that nature is sinful, the person has not sinned until they act. This becomes even more clear if the temptation to homosexual affections finds its source not in the individual's corrupt nature, but the estate of misery. Someone who identifies as a gay Christian may do so as an acknowledgment either of the manifestation of the corruption of sin in their lives (the estate of sin) or as an acknowledgment of the evil that has befallen them in their bodies through temptation (the estate of misery) and still live a chaste life. A homosexual self-conception does not necessitate action; acknowledging that one's affections are inclined towards same-sex attraction or that one is persistently tempted towards homosexuality does not necessitate homosexual activity any more than actually practicing homosexuality necessitates one to consciously conceive of themselves as same-sex attracted. Since a homosexual self-conception is not intrinsically connected to homosexual activity, but can be an acknowledgement of the estates of sin and misery in the life of a Christian, it can be something that is not so much "adopted" as it is recognized or grasped. Sin is lack of conformity to God's law and conceiving of oneself as oriented in certain areas towards breaking God's law is not sinful action if God's law is not being broken. Paul was not sinning in conceiving of himself as the chief of sinners and would not have been sinning if he had gone on to delineate the specific sins to which he was oriented. This self-conception is not identification *with* sin, but identification *of* sin and its effects.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Nashville Statement places homosexual self-conception in the category of sexual immorality (i.e. actual transgressions of God's law), it flattens the distinctions between sin, the estate of sin, and the estate of misery, which is fundamentally incompatible with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

This provides the segue into the second problem: Nashville Article 12 claims that God graciously provides power to all believers for holiness who "feel drawn into sexual sin" and enables them to "put to death sinful desires." Since having a homosexual self-conception is presented in Nashville as an actual transgression of God's law, feeling drawn into sexual sin and putting to death sinful desires necessarily includes the desire to conceive of oneself as same-sex attracted or gay. Article 12 does not merely encompass mortifying our corrupt nature or fighting temptation, but also includes having a homosexual self-conception; adopting or having a homosexual self-conception is one of Nashville's sexual sins, and therefore God empowers all believers to not conceive of themselves as homosexual.

But the remnants of sin continue to abide in every part of the believer, meaning that the estate of sin is never eradicated in this life (WCF 6.5, 13.2-3, WLC 78). That does not excuse sin, nor does it discount that God graciously empowers believers to mortify sin, but does mean that there is no guarantee that the source of corrupted affections will be remedied in this life. Likewise, the estate of misery and the liabilities

of sin in this life are not guaranteed removal upon regeneration (WLC 28, 81). If a homosexual self-conception is an acknowledgement of the brokenness of the world, including the evil of homosexual temptations besetting a person, there is no guarantee of that persistent misery departing in this life. Since a homosexual self-conception can derive from acknowledging either of the sinful condition of person or the suffering inflicted on a person, God enabling a believer for holy living does not mean that this particular indwelling enticement or external vulnerability to temptation will go away.

The Nashville Statement teaches that obedience to God demands rejecting a homosexual self-conception, and that God provides his people with the power to do just that. Certainly, the Nashville Statement acknowledges that temptations to homosexual desires can continue throughout the Christian life (Articles 8-9), but it differentiates temptation and desire from conceiving of oneself as oriented towards those desires. Personal sanctification in Nashville's framework includes overcoming a homosexual self-conception: as someone becomes more sanctified in this life they ought to necessarily conceive of themselves less and less as homosexual. On the other hand, the Westminster Standards teach that there is no guarantee that the corruption of sin and pain of this world will be removed, nor does God promise to provide his people power to overcome these estates in this life; since a homosexual self-conception can be a recognition of these conditions there is no guarantee that God will provide the power to overcome it.

The differences in application are stark: under Nashville's framework anyone who continues to conceive of themselves as homosexual is necessarily rejecting the God-provided power for holiness, while under the Westminster Standards such a self-conception can be an acknowledgment of the estate of sin and misery. In the latter framework someone with a homosexual self-conception can be living chastely without an expectation or pressure for that self-conception to change in this life, while in the former a Christian's self-conception remaining homosexual must be understood as stemming from their active rebellion against God.

This is why so many people who identify as gay Christians and determine to remain celibate do so. Their sexual desires are oriented to the same sex, whether or not that orientation stems from the estate of sin or the estate of misery. But this sexual desire is not the same as the sexual desire that ought to lead to marriage, namely a sexual desire that is oriented to people of the opposite sex. Since there is no guarantee that the conditions that prompt a homosexual self-conception will be remedied in this life, the appropriate course of action for those with such a self-conception is a commitment to chastity, which includes celibacy. The fact that people with a homosexual self-conception possess a sexual orientation does not mean they are sinning by declining to pursue a biblical marriage; the lack of a sexual orientation for members of the opposite sex is itself evidence of the gift of continence and does not constitute an "undue delay of marriage" as WLC 138-139 teaches on the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment [see <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-westminster-statement-on-b.php>].

The third area of major incompatibility arises from Nashville Statement Article 10, which reads,

WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.

WE DENY that the approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.

It is the language of "essential departure" and the denial that "faithful Christians" can disagree on this issue which is a problem. WCF 25.4 lists three distinguishing marks of the pure church: the doctrine of the gospel taught and received, the administration of its ordinances, and its worship. The essential purity of the church does not include homosexuality. To be clear: this does not mean the Westminster Standards

are silent on homosexual practice (cf. WCF 24.1, WLC 139). Confessional churches should be clear in our teaching and practice on homosexuality's acceptability. However, no sinful practices at all are included by WCF in its definition of a pure church. That does not mean that sin is to be tolerated in the church, only that the essential purity of the church is tied to the aforementioned categories rather than sinful practices.

Now, it could be argued that the "doctrine of the gospel taught and received" includes the need to repent from sin, and that tolerating homosexuality is tolerating sin, and therefore churches that tolerate homosexuality in teaching and practice are not truly preaching or receiving the biblical doctrine of the gospel. Denny Burk of CBMW makes this argument in defense of Article 10 [see <https://cbmw.org/the-nashville-statement/why-the-nashville-statement-now-and-what-about-article-10/>]. Under such a broad definition of "gospel," any sin taught or practiced by a church would constitute an essential departure from the Christian faith, rendering any mark of the pure church other than "don't teach or practice sin" unnecessary. This appears to be the functional view held by CBMW in light of Article 10 [see <https://cbmw.org/topics/homosexuality/christian-sexual-ethics-is-a-gospel-issue>]. This is hardly the intent of the Westminster Standards. I would be shocked if this broad definition would receive universal application in the PCA; Are they going to state that withholding baptism from infants (a grave sin and maladministration of one of God's ordinances; cf. WCF 28.5, WLC 109) constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness? Or that including images of Christ in public worship (worshiping God in terms other than what he established; cf. WCF 21.1, WLC 109) is not an issue that otherwise faithful Christians can agree to disagree? Under the logic of WLC 151, would homosexuality or Sabbath breaking be considered a more heinous sin in the eyes of God? The point here is not whataboutism, but that homosexuality as sin does not deserve a special category by which the essential faithfulness of a church is measured, and that the PCA's current practice and ecumenical relations bears this out.

It is possible to interpret "essential departure" as a reference not to the marks of the pure church, but the standard for church discipline. But this interpretation raises a problem of a different nature: Article 10 does not say that *practicing* homosexuality constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness, but *approval* of homosexual immorality does. If something constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness it is grounds for exclusion from the church. It challenges credulity to think that any Westminsterian church would use approval of homosexuality as a litmus test for either admittance to, or maintenance of, church membership.

The visible church is constituted by those who "profess the true religion" with their children (WCF 25.2). "True religion" is a reference to Christianity in general and does not mean "Christian doctrine without error" as even the purest churches still retain some error (WCF 25.5). Error in doctrine alone is not a basis for exclusion from the visible church. Indeed, WCF 30.3 states that church censures (i.e. church discipline) are for *offending* brethren, that is, church members who practiced sin (which may include propagation of false teaching). One of the purposes of discipline is to deter others from similar offenses; it seems unlikely that excommunicating someone for privately approving of homosexuality would be an effective means of convincing other Christians to change their opinion. WCF 30.4 teaches that excommunication should only be employed after considering the nature of the offense and conduct of the church member, and WLC 151 would normally serve as a helpful guide in evaluating those criteria, and it emphasizes conduct, not belief. Privately holding a (sinful) opinion is not an offense in the sense present in WCF 30 or WLC 151.

But if Nashville is correct, and if Article 10 is referencing church discipline, then Nashville teaches that believing that homosexual immorality is acceptable, whether or not the person holding that opinion is sharing it, is a sin so grievous as to deserve excommunication.<sup>4</sup> Yes, approval of sin is sin, as is holding incorrect doctrine, which is what approval of homosexual immorality is. The issue with the simple standard of "approval of sin is grounds for excommunication" is the same problem as the issues discussed above about the marks of the church: once any incorrect doctrine or inappropriate approval is considered grounds for excommunication because it is wrong, any wrong belief must be considered



grounds for excommunication. The burden is on Nashville to demonstrate that approval of homosexuality constitutes an essential departure from Christianity as *damnable* heresy, and is not just incorrect doctrine [see <https://cbmw.org/topics/homosexuality/the-nashville-statement-confronts-heresy-and-thats-why-we-needed-it>].

While the Westminster Standards allow for church discipline for opinions held rather than just for opinions shared, the implementation of church discipline for holding opinions is for damnable heresy (e.g., the counterpart to “notoriously wicked” in WCF 24.3; the opposite of “true religion” in WCF 25.2; the profaning of the “holy profession of the gospel” in WCF 30.3; and the “found ignorant” in WLC 173), not an incorrect doctrine. This legacy can be seen in the membership vows taken in confessional Presbyterian churches, including both the PCA and EPC. Members are asked to affirm the essence of the gospel by stating their faith in Christ, and then vow to maintain the peace and purity of the church. Damnable heresy is excluded in the affirmation of faith, and sinfully offensive action is rejected by the latter vow.

Approval of homosexual immorality alone is not grounds for exclusion from the visible church.

This issue is magnified when it is considered that the Nashville Statement includes homosexual self-conceptions under the umbrella of homosexual immorality. If someone were to approve of their friend determining to live chastely while identifying as a gay Christian, their approval would meet Nashville’s criteria for “essential departure” from Christian faithfulness. The Nashville Statement asserts that this is not an area where otherwise faithful Christians can agree to disagree. This is hugely problematic, as at best it suggests that churches should not tolerate their members approving of homosexual immorality, and at worst is asserting that approval of the non-sinful acknowledgement of sin and misery on a person’s sexual orientation constitutes a departure from essential Christian faithfulness. If instead the Nashville Statement is addressing the marks of the pure church, it is asserting that approval of someone conceiving of themselves as homosexual constitutes a departure from the true church.

In short, the WCF lists three marks of the pure church, and approval of homosexuality is not among them. Granting that homosexual practice is sinful does not remedy this incompatibility: no sin is included in the WCF’s marks of the pure church. The WCF does not provide a special category for homosexual sin distinct from other sin, much less approval of homosexuality, so the Nashville Statement adding a category of sin to determine the purity of the church is not compatible with the Westminster Standards. The Westminster Standards do not require church censures for privately held opinions outside of damnable heresy, and so the Nashville Statement is incompatible with the Westminster Standards by going too far in demanding excommunication. But the Nashville Statement demands this treatment for Christians who approve of those who are chaste and conceive of themselves as homosexual. This goes way beyond the bounds of the Westminster Standards, and the incompatibilities are highlighted by Nashville’s absolutist conclusion: otherwise faithful Christians may not disagree on this. It is, in Denny Burk’s words, a line in the sand, and Nashville stands on the opposite side from Westminster.

There are several other smaller contradictions between Nashville and Westminster that do not rise, in my view, to the level of fundamental incompatibility due to their peripheral relationship to the main topic, but are still worth recognizing. The Nashville Statement seems to equate chastity with celibacy, while the Westminster Standards teach that chastity ought to continue within marriage (WLC 137, WSC 71-72). This has been addressed well - [see <https://purelypresbyterian.com/2017/09/02/thoughts-on-the-nashville-statement/> and <https://mereorthodoxy.com/nashville-statement/>]. As also noted in the first link, “[Nashville] Article 14 states, ‘*Forgiveness of sins and eternal life are **available** to every person who repents of sin and trusts in Christ alone.*’ The term ‘available’ here is strange. Repenting of sin and trusting in Christ alone is the very means by which the sinner avails himself of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This article would be much better if stated like this: ‘*Forgiveness of sins and eternal life are **given** to every person who repents of sin and trusts in Christ alone*’ (emphasis original).” The phrasing betrays a broadly evangelical, Arminian approach to the Nashville Statement.

In light of these observations it must be concluded that the Nashville Statement is not compatible with the Westminster Standards; therefore it is at odds with the system of doctrine found in the scriptures, and is not a biblically faithful statement.

#### NOTES

1. I will admit to using several different translation tools, but believe that these accurately communicate in English what was in the original Dutch and Mandarin.
2. Steven Wedgworth's article at *The Calvinist International* provides a good breakdown on concupiscence in relation to homosexual orientation, but fails to take into account the estate of misery. See <https://calvinistinternational.com/2018/06/28/concupiscence-sin-gay-christianity-desire-orientation/>
3. Contra this article on Reformed Forum - <https://reformedforum.org/the-gospel-and-self-conception-a-defense-of-article-7-of-the-nashville-statement/>
4. The Dutch translation of Article 10's denial reads, "WE CONFIRM that it is sinful to approve homosexual impurity or transgenderism. Whoever does approve of this fundamentally deviates from the steadfastness that may be expected of Christians and from the testimony to which they are called." This is stronger than the English, and indicates that approval of homosexual immorality constitutes a departure from the "true religion" and is a basis for exclusion from the church.