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The Westminster Standards and Gay Christianity's Side "B" [The Revoice Conference]

by

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In my first post, I critiqued the Nashville Statement for areas in which it conflicted with the Westminster Standards, particularly in its understanding of sin. In this post I want to engage with gay Christianity's Side B. This post assumes the spadework of the previous installment. Side B is the belief that the only valid sexual practice other than celibacy is between man and wife in marriage, but that you can retain a gay identity without practicing homosexuality. This is in contrast to Side A, which approves of homosexuality as a valid, Christian, sexual expression. Side B is associated with the Revoice Conference and the Spiritual Friendship movement.

I think there is much to commend about Side B, but do think it falls short of the biblical standard in multiple areas. This can be difficult to pin down since this movement crosses denominational lines and is more of an ethos than an institution or statement. Nevertheless, there are some common features of the movement that do not comport with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, which I will take as my point of biblical departure. This post is intended as friendly criticism and engagement of an ongoing conversation, in the acknowledgment that practitioners of Side B are people denying themselves, and taking up their cross to follow Jesus. That is difficult and laudatory.

The Side B Position

One of the aspects of Side B that aligns with my previous argument is that good motions or affections can be tempted to an inordinate (i.e. sinful) expression without themselves being sinful. [Wesley Hill puts it this way](#),

“For [Rosaria Butterfield and Denny Burk], I think, ‘same-sex attraction’ or ‘being gay’ or ‘homosexuality’ is something that is defined by its culmination in same-sex genital expression. But many of us (though perhaps not all?) here at Spiritual Friendship are using the terms differently. We’re understanding ‘same-sex attraction’ or ‘being gay’ as broader, more inclusive categories that can’t be reduced to the behavior, or even the desire for, gay sex. Just as chaste chivalry, to take just one example, can be an expression of heterosexuality, so we’re suggesting that chaste friendship (or a number of other ways of expressing love) can be an expression of homosexuality. Having gay sex is one way of being gay, but, if we’re taking our cues from the Christian tradition, it need not (must not) be the definitive way.”

So being same-sex attracted or gay is not about homosexual activity, but an orientation of affection towards people of the same sex, which is good in itself. In that same post Hill attributes his good same-sex friendships to his same-sex, gay orientation. Homosexual activity as an expression of that orientation is sinful, but the same-sex friendships are good. Similarly, [Julie Rodgers says that](#),

“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 intimacy with those of the same sex. Just like a heterosexual orientation 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.”

Her same-sex attraction “is that with certain women I feel the ‘it’ factor: that sense of chemistry that longs to share life with them, to know and be known by them, to be drawn outside of myself in self-giving love for them.” Ron Belgau summarizes [Hill’s argument for utilizing the term “gay” this way](#):

“The basic point here is that if gay relationships are, in part, a distortion of friendship, then there will be important points of contact between the sinful experience and what it can become, if sanctified.” Being gay is not about homosexual desire or action, but something that [enables people to have](#) “greater depths of intimacy and joy in chaste same-sex friendships than most men.” It is a sinful distortion, an inordinate motion, for same-sex attraction to express itself in homosexual activity.

This is critically important to understand of the Side B position, because when they describe themselves as gay or suggest that being gay is sanctifiable, they are not talking about desire for sex with people of the same sex. They are describing an orientation towards appreciation and chaste desire for people of the same sex.

This leads to a clear problem: what is described as gay by Side B can, and should, equally apply to those who are straight or heterosexual. If being gay is about chemistry and intimacy with people of the same sex, and does not necessitate expression in homosexual activity, you can be straight and gay at the same time. To take Hill’s example about heterosexual chivalry, there is no reason to believe that someone who meets the Side B understanding of gay could not be chivalrous in its technical sense. There is no biblical reason to suggest that because I am a heterosexual man I cannot have chaste affections for, and intimate friendships with, other men, or to suggest that in certain areas I won’t “click” with male friends better than my wife.

Rodgers describes her lesbianism in terms of being drawn to “self-giving love” to other women. But this is something all Christians are called to do! Other-focused sacrifice for their good is what loving your neighbor means (WCF 26.1-2; WLC 122, 147-148; WSC 42). Certain people may be better gifted in doing that, but to call that gifting “gay” or “same-sex attraction” is playing word games. Rodgers (and Belgau and Hill and every other Christian) is called to self-giving love to people of the same *and* opposite sex. Rodgers may find it easier to do so with other women than with men, but she still has a Christian duty to love her male neighbors as herself.

Simply put: Side B promotes distinctive features of being gay that are not unique to being gay, and those features, therefore, cannot be considered definitive of same-sex attraction.

Side B and Westminster

So why is this definitional disagreement a problem? If the Westminster Standards teach that an orientation to sin can arise from an external infliction of temptation to take what is good to a sinful expression, and Side B argues that being gay can be about good intimacy in same-sex friendships, what is the issue?

Belgau [argues in many places that homosexuality is a distortion of friendship](#). That may be the case, but it indicates the primary of difference between Westminster and Side B. Westminster teaches that sin is a violation of God’s law. Transgressions of God’s law proceed from our corrupted nature, which is truly sinful. Commonly, as in these examples, proponents of Side B speak of sin as good affections misdirected, as the corrupted counterpart to that which is good.

If the Nashville Statement conflated actual transgressions, the estate of sin, and the estate of misery together, Side B makes an opposite error, in that they cut out the estate of sin. There is very little

acknowledgement that being gay could proceed from the estate of sin rather than the estate of misery. While the condition of misery may inflict a sinful, external vulnerability upon someone, yet confessional and biblical teaching is that sin and sinful desires proceed from sinful corruption. Homosexual desires and actions are therefore not merely the sinful doppelgängers of good, same-sex friendship, but actual transgressions of God's law that originate in sinful corruption.

Hill considers the [examples of Down syndrome](#) and [Paul's thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12](#) as parallels to his gay identity. He uses these conditions as examples of sinful afflictions "outside of God's blueprint", yet used by God for his people to encounter his grace and power in the person of Christ. Belgau [describes being gay in these terms](#), "Let's say you have something—we'll call it X— which enables you to enjoy greater depths of intimacy and joy in chaste same-sex friendships than most men. Let's further say that, connected with X, is a temptation toward violations of chastity with men." In this framework, being gay is good, a gift from God, which happens to include an additional layer of temptation to it. What is healed later is not being gay, but the temptation to homosexuality. It is not being gay but the appended temptation that accompanies it that is the same-sex thorn in the flesh.

But an orientation away from God's design is sinful, just as Down syndrome is sinful. Not that being a person with Down syndrome is an act of sin, but that it is an affliction of the sinful estate of misery. Paul's thorn in the flesh may have been used by God, but it will not afflict him in the resurrection; if being gay is good in itself it cannot simultaneously be something that will be ultimately healed by Christ. The weakness that comes with being gay may be used by God to demonstrate the power of Christ, but that weakness will be healed by him. While being gay, like Down syndrome and Paul's thorn, may be used by God for his glory and his people's good, they are conditions that will be healed by Christ *because they are sinful*.

Now, Hill does acknowledge that Down syndrome and Paul's thorn are imperfect analogies, but one of the significant limitations of them is that a same-sex orientation as something "outside of God's blueprint" is an *orientation to sin*. This is not the case with Down syndrome or Paul's thorn in the flesh. Those conditions may aggravate the flesh, providing an opportunity for sin, but are not themselves orientations to sin.

And that seems to be the biggest point of departure between Westminster and Side B. The estate of misery can include sinful external pressure that orients someone's desires towards a particular vulnerability without them actually desiring it. For instance, someone's good desires for same-sex intimacy could be buffeted by external sin such that their desires for same-sex intimacy are oriented towards the temptation to homosexual desires without actually desiring homosexual sex. The estate of misery may orient someone in their weakness to find themselves consistently fighting sinful desires.

The Westminster Standards understand deviation from God's design in creation to fall into one other three categories: the estate of sin, the estate of misery, or God's work of grace in redemption wherein sin and the curse are defeated and creation is restored (e.g. WCF 7.2-3; WLC 30). Being gay is not part of God's design in creation, and so while God may providentially use that orientation for his glory and his people's good now, it is not the final orientation for any of God's children.

The Westminster Standards see a same-sex orientation as bad, either as a sinful infliction in the estate of misery, or proceeding from the corruption of the estate of sin. A same-sex orientation is either an orientation to same-sex sin or an orientation to same-sex temptation. Since what Side B describes as the positive aspects of being gay are duties binding upon all Christians, a Westminsterian position rejects the positive aspects of being gay as being inextricably linked the temptations to homosexuality. Additionally, no Side B proponent claims to be same-sex attracted or gay *in addition* to being heterosexual, but instead of being straight. This is lost on Belgau's and Rodger's definitions of what it means to be gay, which only focus on the attraction to people of the same sex, not upon lack of interest in people of the opposite. God's design for opposite-sex orientation is replaced with same-sex orientation, and no amount of chaste same-sex intimacy compensates for the fact that this change in orientation arises from the estate of misery.

This is compounded when it is considered that the corruption of sin infects every aspect of the human person. The corruption of the estate of sin is intertwined with all of our good desires. Disentangling the good, which is merely weakened in the estate of misery, from the truly evil, is the difficult task of repentance.

Repentance is when someone with grief and hatred for his sin turns from it to God in acknowledgment and trust of God's mercy in Christ (WCF 15.2, WLC 76, WSC 87). Repentance is for actual transgressions, and should be done for particular sins and not just for a general sense of sinfulness (WCF 15.5). Since repentance is for transgressions of God's law, turning to God in his mercy demands that sorrow and hatred for sin manifest in obedience to God in his law. To this point Side B and Westminster agree as it regards homosexuality: homosexual desires and actions are sin and should be met with repentance.

However, penitently striving after God in obedience requires rejecting not only actual transgressions of his law, but resisting the origin of those transgressions. The estate of sin with its corrupt nature from which actual transgressions proceed should be killed. Repentance of specific sins demands mortification of the corrupt nature from which those sins proceed (WLC 167). This mortification is properly accomplished by Christ and his Spirit (WCF 6.5, 13.1; WLC 75; WSC 35), but there is duty incumbent upon believers to strive against the body of sin. Understanding that sin is properly lawlessness leads to precision in repentance: It means repenting over the desires themselves, since they are themselves sinful transgression. It means repenting over the corruption from which those desires proceed by mortifying the body of sin. It means repenting over your *being*.

Obedience to God, therefore, requires repenting of our sinfully corrupted being by the mortification of sin. Homosexuality as an actual transgression of God's law must be repented of, and that repentance demands mortification of the estate from which that transgression proceeds. To repent of homosexuality (in actions and desires) means mortifying the condition which produces those transgressions, namely, same-sex orientation or being gay. If being gay proceeds from the estate of sin, it must be repented of. If being gay proceeds from the estate of misery, it must be mortified in that the orientation to same-sex temptation is resisted and killed. Hatred for sin should lead the Christian to drastic mortification of any temptation to sin. That's what the sixth petition of our Lord's prayer teaches us: that we ought to pray for and seek deliverance from temptation and any besetting evil that leads towards temptation (WLC 195, WSC 106). Mortifying sin should lead the Christian to pray for God's deliverance from the estate of misery when that condition orients their

affections towards sin. Any alleged gift of God that is inherently attached to a temptation to sin is gift from which God's children need to be delivered.

A Westminster Confession-subscribing pastor should be able to tell a man who is sexually attracted to other men to repent of sinful desires and to kill the attraction from which they originate. Side B seems incapable of saying this because homosexual desires are only an inordinate expression of a good affection. If same-sex orientation is good and homosexuality is only an inordinate (sinful) expression of it, then repenting of homosexuality does not require repenting of same-sex orientation. But actual transgressions proceed from a sinfully corrupt nature, so the source of the homosexual desires must be repented of. Side B will struggle in telling those who are same-sex oriented to mortify their desires, because they will be faced with the impossibility of disentangling the good gift of being gay from its inseparably linked temptation to homosexuality. A Westminsterian approach will be able to encourage those who are same-sex attracted to mortify their sinfully corrupt nature from which homosexual desires proceed without fear of losing chaste same-sex love precisely because that love proceeds from and expresses obedience to God's law (e.g. WLC 147-148) and does not require a same-sex orientation. Since repentance includes obedience to God, repentance from sinful same-sex desires or orientations should necessarily lead to chaste same-sex love, that neither requires nor is bettered by being gay.