

PRESBYTERY OF THE ASCENSION
AD INTERIM COMMITTEE TO STUDY AND REPORT ON
STILL TIME TO CARE, BY GREG JOHNSON

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15 **I. Introduction**

16 At the January 2022 meeting, the Presbytery of the Ascension gave the following assignment to
17 an ad-interim committee: *“To study and report on “Still Time to Care” by Greg Johnson, making*
18 *recommendations on its compatibility with our Standards, the AIC Report on Human Sexuality,*
19 *the commended RPCNA report and the Nashville statement, advising as to the book’s implications*
20 *for the church, such as counseling and Candidates and Credentials exams, and, if appropriate,*
21 *recommending further action in the courts of the church.”¹*

22 The members of the committee, after ensuring the book and materials were read, discussed
23 the areas of agreement and affirmation, areas of disagreement or concern, and the practical
24 implications of those disagreements (in counseling and other areas). We then settled on various

¹ All citations are from Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care, What We Can Learn from the Church’s Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

1 areas to explore in a report: Sanctification, Identity in Christ, Orientation Change, the heinousness
2 and various aggravations of different sins, and the gift of continence

3 Before exploring the substance of the book and areas of concern, we first wanted to state
4 our thankfulness for the testified work of God in the life of the author, Greg Johnson. We do not
5 intend, nor desire, to offer pastoral care or counseling in the area of his personal battle against sin
6 and temptation. Such would be inadvisable to attempt from many miles and many presbyteries
7 away. Indeed, the appropriate manner of addressing sin struggles is with a trusted pastor, in close
8 and frequent contact with the believer, and in diligent use of the means of grace.

9 Our concern in the report is the content of the book and the implications for ministry offered
10 by the book and its approach, along with his call to repentance and change in our ministries,
11 especially in light of the actions of the courts of the Presbyterian Church in America.

12

13 **II. Areas of Agreement and Affirmation**

14 First, we welcome the critiques of some of the methodologies of the “ex-gay” movement and
15 certain secularized and unwise reparative therapies. Approaches that attempt to replace a wonton
16 lusting after the same sex with inappropriate lusting after the opposite sex through worldly means
17 of psychology or pornography have no place in the pastoral care of Christians struggling against
18 same-sex attractions. Such approaches are more aligned with behavior modification and are not
19 the promised heart change God gives through his means of grace. We also note these sorts of
20 approaches are not in alignment with Reformed theology and practice in churches or with
21 Reformed practitioners like Ed Welch, Jay Adams, or others. A charismatic or legalistic approach
22 has no place in our churches.

23 Second, we appreciate the focus on outreach to individuals with these temptations or those
24 in these communities. While God’s creational order includes a high value and place for the family,
25 our churches ought to think about how to incorporate those who enter the church without a family,
26 have families that have been torn apart by sin, or have the gift of continence. The Church ought to
27 be the spiritual family of a believer, and we are also glad the author emphasizes this and did not

1 embrace the idea of “Spiritual Friendships,” or other formalized celibate partnering as some others
2 have advocated.

3 Third, we are happy for what we find in Chapter 14, which is a vigorous and exegetical
4 defense of the Scripture’s teaching against homosexual practice. The author leans on fairly solid
5 exegetes, though we note that Robert Gagnon’s work: “The Bible and Homosexual Practice,”
6 which is perhaps the most thorough and extensive work on the subject, could have been more
7 heavily highlighted and utilized. We heartily commend this exegesis, as does the AIC Report
8 Bibliography.

9 Fourth, we also acknowledge the reality of those who have engaged in sinful conduct in
10 their engagement on this issue. Chapter 16 highlighted heinous internet harassment and threats
11 against himself and others who have been open about this struggle in their lives. Thus, we affirm
12 that love for the sinner and hate of sin must be separated, much as John Owen notes: “[God] loves
13 his people, but not their sinning.”

14 Finally, we note the important observation of the great difficulty involved with the
15 mortification of sin, especially in the case of same-sex lust. Indeed, the struggle against such
16 temptations is not like a “switch” that is easily flipped. The author notes with sorrow, a sorrow
17 that we share, stories of those who were turned away from the church because their struggle with
18 same-sex attraction was too much work for the pastors and elders to make time and effort to
19 lovingly minister to them.

20

21 **III. Areas of Concern**

22 Notwithstanding the merits of the work, we found the approach, terminology, and treatment of
23 same-sex lusts to be less than fully biblical and confessional.

24 The following sections detail our concerns that the pastoral care detailed in the book is
25 insufficient, at times confused, and not sufficiently nuanced in several areas. We have tried to
26 communicate our concerns not merely as areas of theological disagreement, but also in regards to

1 how such problems affect our pastoral care of those who truly want to mortify their sins and live
2 unto righteousness, secure and growing in the grace of Lord Jesus Christ.

3

4 **IV. Sanctification**

5 One major area of dispute with the doctrine and practice set forth in Greg Johnson's work, is his
6 misuse of the doctrine of sanctification. This aspect of his work is rather hard to piece together as
7 Johnson does not use confessional language or categories in his work. Instead, Johnson appears to
8 adopt the underlying and foundational assumptions, language, and argumentation of the very
9 movements he seeks to counter in his work. Therefore, it is not the confessional standards of our
10 denomination (e.g., the Westminster Confession and Catechisms) that direct and constrain his
11 work but the various ex-gay ministries he criticizes.

12 This lack of confessional constraint is all the more important as Johnson's work is not about
13 how a person with same-sex desires can be made right with God, but rather how a person with
14 same-sex desires should seek to live in light of his justification. In other words, it is a book about
15 sanctification.

16 Careful consideration of Johnson's work brings forth two areas of specific concern. First,
17 Johnson argues that the only change that qualifies as change is the total transformation of
18 homosexual desires into purely heterosexual desires. Such an assertion appears to undercut the
19 concept of progressive sanctification as taught in our standards. Second, he appears to believe in
20 the necessity of a miraculous act of God in order for a change in sexual orientation to occur.
21 Second, Johnson argues that the only source of such total change is a miraculous work of God in
22 healing or curing homosexual desires. As such, he confuses the nature of the work of God in
23 sanctification and denies the enabling power in that work for the believer to put to death remaining
24 sin in all its aspects and powers. Each of these concerns are considered below.

25 Therefore, even as Greg Johnson denies that 'miraculous cure' is the methodology the
26 church should be pursuing, he retains the paradigm of miraculous cure in his discourse with both
27 the ex-gay movement and in his prescription for the church today. In both cases, the solution is not

1 the negation and/or adaptation of the beliefs of the ex-gay movement as Johnson describes them,
2 but the teaching of Scripture as authoritatively interpreted in the Westminster Standards.

3 **Progressive Sanctification**

4 Throughout his work, Johnson affirms the ex-gay movement assumption that the only change
5 which can rightly be called change is the total transformation of homosexual desires into
6 heterosexual desires.² This paradigm is fully represented by the image on the cover of the book: a
7 toggle switch with the rainbow colors of ‘gay pride.’ Johnson allows no instances of gradual
8 transformation as evidence of gospel change in a believer (that is, sanctification). For example,
9 Johnson quotes approvingly these words of Alan Chambers:

10 The majority of people that I have met – and I would say the majority meaning 99.9
11 percent of them – have not experienced a change in their orientation or have gotten
12 to a place where they can say that they could never be tempted or are not tempted
13 in some way, or experience some level of same-sex attraction. The vast majority of
14 people that I know do still experience some level of same-sex attraction (122).

15 Thus, Johnson (by affirming Chambers’ quotation) defines change in terms of the absolute absence
16 of same-sex temptation and desire. Furthermore, such change requires the individual to hold the
17 potentially disastrous notion that no temptation could ever come from that underlying desire or
18 lust. Unless a person can claim no level of same-sex attraction, neither Chambers nor Johnson
19 would allow that change in sexual orientation has taken place.

20 For Johnson, it appears change is the same thing as total victory over a particular sin. Or,
21 to put it differently, change necessitates perfection. As such, Johnson continues to interpret the
22 phrase ‘change is possible’ through the lens of this necessity of perfection. ‘Change is possible’
23 does not, for Johnson, mean that a person can grow in godliness in the area of their sexual desires
24 and temptation (homosexual or otherwise). Rather, he appears to interpret that phrase to mean:
25 ‘perfection is required.’

26

² See, for example, Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 58, 97, 122, 191.

1 **The “Cure” for Sin**

2 If perfection is required, by what mechanism does such true change occur? For Johnson, the
3 solution to the problem of same-sex attraction, temptation, and desire requires nothing less than
4 the miraculous intervention of God.

5 In several key places, Johnson appeals to a paradigm of disease to describe his same-sex
6 attraction. This is seen most clearly in his comparison to his own same-sex attraction with the
7 paralysis of Joni Eareckson Tada. While Johnson rightly indicates the lack of moral neutrality in
8 his own “sexual propensities of [his] fallen nature,” he clearly indicates that the pathway for
9 healing is the same – nothing less than a miraculous healing from God.³ In this, Johnson fully
10 denies the God-given pathway and methodology for progressive, gospel transformation in the life
11 of believers – that of sanctification.

12 The unbiblical paradigms of transformation promulgated by the ex-gay movement must
13 not be countered with an equally unbiblical model for change – that of “God must work
14 miraculously.” While noting that God certainly can miraculously change the sexual orientation of
15 a same-sex attracted believer, Johnson notes, “It appears this is something he has chosen to do
16 only very rarely in this era” (127). Contrary to the views of the ex-gay movement as Johnson has
17 presented them, homosexual desires are not something that must be “cured” – either by a “name
18 it, claim it” sort of faith healing or a “fake it ‘till you make it” sort of legalism. Yet neither are the
19 views of C. S. Lewis, Francis Shaeffer, Billy Graham, and John Stott correct as Johnson has
20 presented them, such that the “homosexual condition,” has “no reliable cure in this life” (32).
21 Rather, same-sex attraction is a sin which is to be dealt with like any other: by the indwelling
22 power of the Holy Spirit, the sin itself (including all desires, lusts, movements, etc.) is to be put to
23 death and new obedience is to be pursued. In other words, the notions of “cure” and “no reliable

³ See, for example, Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 95, “Does the cross of Jesus Christ not open up a space to accept the deeply rooted effects of the fall? God doesn’t always heal in this life. While Joni Eareckson Tada’s injury is of a different quality than mine – I claim no moral neutrality to my sexual propensities of my fallen nature – surely, she speaks wisdom in accepting the reality of our human condition. Frequently asked whether she wants God to heal her, she can say with peace, ‘He has chosen not to heal me, but to hold me. The more intense the pain, the closer His embrace.’” Johnson quotes from Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God’s Sovereignty* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 2010), 35.

1 cure” are both mistaken. We must instead speak of the Christian’s duty to deal with same-sex
2 attraction (or the “homosexual condition”) in terms of sanctification.

3 **The Biblical and Confessional Doctrine of Sanctification**

4 By adopting the notion that sexual attractions only change by a miraculous “cure” from God, as
5 well as the notion that the only change that counts as change is a switch from homosexual desires
6 to exclusive heterosexual desires, Greg Johnson obscures the true biblical and confessional
7 doctrine of sanctification. Instead, Johnson ought to have discussed the battle against same-sex
8 desires, temptations, and activities in terms of the destruction of “the dominion of the whole body
9 of sin” (WCF 13.1)⁴, “the more and more [weakening] and [mortifying]” (WCF 13.1) of the lusts
10 associated with same-sex attraction, “the continual and irreconcilable war” (WCF 13.2) against
11 the flesh, and “the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ” (WCF 13.3)
12 by which the regenerate part overcomes remaining corruption such that “the saint grows in grace,
13 perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (WCF 13.3). Instead of casting doubt upon the willingness
14 of God to do a miraculous work (in the same vein as allowing Joni Eareckson Tada to walk again),
15 Johnson should have spoken of the “seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces” put
16 into the heart of those being saved such that “they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto
17 newness of life” (WLC 75).

18 Further, the confession clearly articulates both the imperfection of sanctification in this life
19 (WCF 13.2) as well as the source of that imperfection (WLC 78). Rather than suggest that the
20 imperfection of the mortification of any particular sin flows from God’s apparent unwillingness to
21 conduct a miraculous “cure” of homosexual orientation, Johnson ought to have reminded his
22 readers that “the imperfection of sanctification in believers ariseth from the remnants of sin abiding
23 in every part of them, and the perpetual lustings of the flesh against the spirit” (WLC 78). Yet even
24 with these recurrent temptations and occasional fall into sin, Johnson could have reminded his
25 readers that “true believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and
26 covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession

⁴ All citations of the Westminster Standards are from *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education and Publishing, 2007).

1 for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away
2 from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation” (WLC 79).

3 In other words, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms provide far better theological,
4 practical, and pastoral instruction into the will of God for our sanctification, the power of God at
5 work within us, and the duty of the Christian to put sin to death and live for Christ than the
6 adaptation of ex-gay movement narratives as found in Greg Johnson’s shallow account of
7 “change.”

8 First, we must affirm that sanctification is “a work of God’s free grace” (WSC 35). It is
9 God who is at work in us both to will and to do (Philippians 2:13)⁵ by the work of his Spirit poured
10 out upon us (Ezekiel 36:27). Through the Holy Spirit, God works such that we “are renewed in the
11 whole man after the image of God” (WSC 35). As such, there is no aspect of our humanity that is
12 not subject to this renewing power of God’s free grace poured out upon those united to Christ. No,
13 we cannot pick which particular sins are the recipients of God’s sanctifying work at any one time,
14 but neither can Johnson claim that any particular sins are exempt from that sanctifying work in a
15 given era.

16 Further, we must affirm that the renewing power of the Holy Spirit is an *enabling* power.
17 By this Spirit poured into our hearts, we are “enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto
18 righteousness” (WSC 35). It is true that sanctification, *per se*, is a work of God’s free grace, but
19 God freely and graciously works such that we actively resist temptation and pursue good works.
20 While it would be the utmost cruelty, in our finite power, to expect Joni Eareckson Tada to get up
21 and walk, so too is it the utmost confusion not to expect a believer who struggles with same-sex
22 attraction to deny that sin and walk in newness of life. It would also be extremely confusing and
23 cruel to such a believer to fail to affirm every such victory over this sin as part of God’s
24 transforming work in his life. We must not merely say “God can change you,” we must also affirm
25 to the believer seeking to mortify same-sex attraction by the sanctifying work of God, “God IS
26 changing you.”

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

1 Finally, while we can affirm, with Johnson, that God *can* work by a sovereign miracle to
2 remove temptation from our hearts, we must not instruct our people in such a way that they reduce
3 God’s sanctifying power (in this or any other sin) to a sovereign miracle. God *can* work in such a
4 miraculous way, but the ordinary way that God works upon the hearts of believers is through
5 ordinary means. The benefits of our redemption (i.e., justification, sanctification, etc.) are
6 communicated to us via outward and ordinary means – especially the word, sacraments, and prayer
7 (WSC 88). We ought, therefore, to continually point to these ordinary means as that by which God
8 typically works in our hearts to transform us into the image of his Son. Far from suggesting that
9 someone can “pray the gay away” or that sanctification is a matter of *ex opere operato*, pointing
10 believers to the word, sacraments, and prayer reflects our own confidence in what the Scriptures
11 teach us concerning “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man”
12 (WSC 3).

13 **V. “Identity in Christ” – A New or Old Concept?**

14 Greg Johnson is a critic of the approach that many Christian counselors have taken in working
15 with those who struggle with same-sex attraction. That approach includes helping believers who
16 struggle with same-sex-attraction to focus on finding their identity not in their disordered desires
17 but in Christ. Johnson argues that this approach—encouraging the struggler to find their identity
18 in Christ—is a form of weaponized verbal abuse directed toward the struggler, and an unbiblical
19 admonition, since we do not find this language in Scripture. The following quotes express
20 Johnson’s view:

21 The language of identity in Christ is *quite recent*. You won’t find it in Augustine or Luther
22 or any of the creeds or confessions (198).

23 But too often, well-meaning believers are unfamiliar with the nuance of these discussions
24 about primary and secondary identity, phenomenological gayness, and the risk of erasing
25 someone’s story by *weaponizing their identity in Christ* (199).

26
27

1 **A Logical Fallacy**

2 The problem with Johnson’s argument, however, is that while he makes a partially valid point (i.e.,
3 indeed the specific term “identity in Christ” does not explicitly appear in Scripture and appears to
4 be somewhat new in popular Christian literature), he is *not* correct to say that the concept is new,
5 and more importantly, he is *not* correct that the concept does not appear in Scripture. A strong
6 argument can be made that Johnson has actually committed a form of the word/concept fallacy.

7 One form of the word/concept fallacy is the idea that because a specific *term* does not
8 appear in Scripture, then that *concept* is not biblical. The classical example of this is the word
9 “Trinity.” If you do a concordance search, you will find that the word “Trinity” does not appear in
10 either the Hebrew Scriptures or in the New Testament. So, does this mean that the “Trinity” is not
11 taught in the Bible? We Christians believe strongly that while the word “Trinity” is not found in
12 Scripture, the concept certainly is there.

13 Let us look at another example. The biblical scholar Moisés Silva illustrates this fallacy
14 through examining the word/concept “hypocrisy.” Silva points out that Isaiah 1:10-15 is one of
15 those key passages in Scripture that explains what the concept of “hypocrisy” is even though the
16 actual word does not appear there. Silva concludes that the student of Scripture “would come to
17 an unrefined understanding of the concept” if one did not consider Isaiah 1:10-15.⁶

18 So, we might ask, is the concept of the Christian’s “identity in Christ” found in the
19 Scriptures, and if so, is it anywhere taught that by reflecting on our identity in Christ we find
20 assistance in our battle with our disordered desires? These are two very important questions that
21 are crucial to our evaluation of Johnson’s book.

22 **Defining “Identity in Christ”**

23 What concept or concepts are being appealed to when struggling Christians are urged to focus on
24 finding their identity in Christ and not in their disordered desires? When framed in this way, we
25 are immediately confronted with the rich theological identity categories of both *justification* and
26 *sanctification* that flow out of the Christian’s *union with Christ* (WCF 13.1). We find in Scripture,

⁶ Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 27.

1 first, that Christians are called to understand themselves in light of their new status: they are now
2 declared righteous because the Holy Spirit has united them to Christ—a truth that is received by
3 faith. Second, we find in Scripture that the Christian is called not simply to rest in their new
4 justified status, but to see the remainder of their lives as involving a progressive transformation
5 into Christ’s image (i.e., sanctification) through a life of repentance—being conformed to the
6 image of the One with whom they are in union by the power of the Spirit.

7 In the New Testament, most explicitly in the letters of Paul, we see multiple appeals,
8 grounded in the reality of the Christian’s union with Christ, that the justified Christian must do
9 battle against sin by putting it to death (mortification) and being filled with the newness of life
10 (vivification). Put simply, the regenerate, justified Christian desires to put sin to death and desires
11 to be filled with the newness of life *so that he or she is conformed to the image of the One with*
12 *whom they are in union* to the glory of God.

13 When one encourages a Christian struggler to “find your identity in Christ,” one is not
14 saying something that is new or unbiblical. Rather, one is encouraging a Christian struggler to
15 reflect on rich biblical truths—to draw on those truths through the ordinary means of grace so that
16 they might be progressively conformed into the image of the One with whom they are in union.

17 **Exegetical Observations**

18 Multiple texts in the New Testament appeal to the Christian’s union with Christ as grounds not
19 only for fleeing from sin, but also for transformation. We select three texts here: two from Paul
20 and one from the Gospel of John.

21 In Romans 6 we see the transition between Paul’s discussion of sin and justification to the
22 practical outworking of the Christian’s new status in Christ in sanctification. He begins with a
23 rhetorical question that demands an answer in the negative: “What shall we say then? Are we to
24 continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Rom 6:1). Paul then goes on to ground his
25 answer to this question in the reality of the Christian’s union with Christ. First, Paul emphasizes
26 that the believer has been united to Christ in his death on the cross, in statements like these: a) “Do
27 you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
28 (Rom 6:3) and b) “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin

1 might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Rom 6:6). Then Paul
2 weaves in the union that the Christian has in Christ’s resurrection, in statements like this: “For if
3 we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a
4 resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5) and “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will
5 also live with him” (Rom 6:8).

6 We next turn to 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. While this is a much-discussed passage in terms of
7 the lexical meaning of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, that is not the focus of our reflection here. In
8 fact, there has been much exegetical attention placed on the vice list in this text, and the meaning
9 of certain words, but perhaps overlooked is the fact that the underlying assumption behind the
10 entire unit is the imagery of the Christian’s union with Christ.

11 Typical of Paul’s vice lists elsewhere, there is also an accompanying virtue list. In the
12 context of this passage, the transition between the vice list and the virtue list is the imperfect form
13 of the verb *eimi*, implying a shift from one status to another. In the ESV the translators chose the
14 words “were” in the phrase “...and such *were* some of you” (1 Cor 6:11). What Paul is doing here
15 in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 is very similar to what Paul did in Romans 6. He is arguing that the
16 Christian’s status has changed. The Christian is now justified and engaged in the process of
17 sanctification. Therefore, the Christian’s identity is not found in that vice list, but rather in this
18 new list of theological realities: “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in
19 the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11).

20 We should note that these theological realities are true for the Christian because they are
21 “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11b). This is, once
22 again, “union with Christ” language. The Christian is in union with Christ and that union has been
23 accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. We know that the concept of union with Christ is in
24 Paul’s mind because in the next paragraph Paul clearly grounds his admonition that the Corinthian
25 believers should not engage in sexual immorality in just this very theological reality: how can a
26 Christian engage in “union” with a prostitute when they are also in “union” with Christ? Paul
27 writes, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members
28 of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!” (1 Cor 6:15).

1 When one thinks of the doctrine of Union with Christ, one most certainly gravitates toward
2 Paul. But this is not a uniquely Pauline doctrine. It is also found in the Gospel of John. John 15
3 and Jesus’s teaching on “The Vine and the Branches” is parallel in concept to the Pauline explicit
4 teaching on union with Christ.

5 The whole point of the metaphor of Jesus as the Vine and the believer as a branch is that
6 life flows from the Vine (Christ) to the branch (the believer) only as the branch (the believer) is
7 united to the Vine (Christ). Christ says, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5b).

8 Scholars have debated whether or not the imagery of “The Vine and the Branches” of John
9 15 is about justification or sanctification. More likely, it is about union with Christ, and out of that
10 reality we see, using Johannine imagery, the outworking of *both* justification (the declarative status
11 of innocence grounded in being united to Christ’s righteousness as a branch to a vine) *and*
12 sanctification (the progressive transformation into the image of Christ as the branch draws life
13 from the vine).

14 Far from the concept of “identity in Christ” being a novel idea and unbiblical, it is deeply
15 biblical. Wherever in Scripture we see the writer appealing to the Christian’s union with Christ as
16 motivation not only to flee from sin but to be conformed into the image of Christ, we encounter a
17 plea to the struggling Christian to find their identity in Christ.

18 **Historical Theology**

19 It is startling that Johnson argues that the concept of “identity in Christ” is found nowhere in the
20 confessions and creeds of the church nor in key figures in church history like Augustine. Again, if
21 one takes a “concordance” approach to this issue, yes, the term “identity” is not there. But, the
22 concept of the Christian’s identity being found in Christ is ubiquitous. Let us look at some
23 examples.

24 While Augustine nowhere uses the term “identity in Christ,” his *Confessions* begin with a
25 rich reflection on the futility of the self ever finding its meaning in something other than the
26 reciprocal relationship between man and God. In Book I of the *Confessions*, while reflecting on
27 Romans 11:16, Augustine writes this:

1 I could not therefore exist, could not exist at all, O my God, unless You were in me.
2 Or should I not rather say, that I could not exist unless I were in You from whom
3 are all things, by whom are all things, in whom are all things.⁷

4 A human’s self-identity (although Augustine does not use this exact wording, but the concept is
5 clearly present) is ultimately wrapped up in the fact that the human is a creature and God is Creator.
6 In fact, for Augustine, the Fall has caused humans to forget this most crucial axiom.

7 In *On the Trinity*, in commenting on the context of the Johannine declaration that “God is
8 love” (1 John 4:8), Augustine starts with affirming rich redemptive identity language, including a
9 reflection on Christ as our propitiation. Then, he moves on to the special work of the Holy Spirit
10 who unites us with the trinitarian godhead. And last, how the Spirit’s work of uniting the Christian
11 with the trinitarian godhead always results in the Christian’s love for God and love for neighbor,
12 because God in His eternal trinitarian relationship *is* love.

13 Hereby, he [the Apostle John] says, ‘know that we dwell in Him, and He in us,
14 because He has given us of His Spirit’ [1 John 4:13]. Therefore the Holy Spirit, of
15 whom He has given us, makes us to abide in God, and Him in us and this it is that
16 love does. Therefore, He is the God that is love. Lastly, a little after, when he [the
17 Apostle John] had repeated the same thing, and had said ‘God is love’ [1 John
18 4:8] he immediately subjoined, ‘And he who abides in love, abides in God, and God
19 abides in him’ [1 John 4:16] whence he had said above, ‘hereby we know that we
20 abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit’ [1 John 4:13].⁸

21 Thus, while Augustine nowhere uses the term “identity in Christ,” one cannot read Augustine
22 without recognizing that he is operating in the category of “identity” when he reflects on the
23 Christian’s union with the trinitarian relationship and how the reality of that union should reflect
24 itself in a different way of living, namely, love.

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I Paragraph 2.

⁸ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book XV Paragraph 31.

1 We now consider John Calvin. One cannot read Calvin without recognizing the multiple
2 ways that his emphasis on the Christian's union with Christ connects with not only his soteriology,
3 but also his ecclesiology, pneumatology, and sacramental theology.

4 In Calvin's exposition of the Lord's Supper, for example, he grounds the effectiveness of
5 the Supper in the Holy Spirit's work of confirming our union with Christ, and as a result, our faith
6 is strengthened. Regarding the relationship between the Supper and the Christian's union with
7 Christ, Calvin writes (*italics mine*):

8 Since, however, this mystery of *Christ's secret union with the devout* is by nature
9 incomprehensible, he shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to
10 our small capacity. Indeed, by giving guarantees and tokens he makes it as certain
11 for us as if we had seen it with our own eyes.⁹

12 We might say that the Holy Spirit, working through the Supper, confirms the Christian's identity
13 as being in union with Christ and as a result the Spirit working through the Sacrament strengthens
14 the Christian's faith, the Christian's assurance of salvation, and even the Christian's capacity to
15 battle sin. Calvin writes (*italics mine*):

16 Thus, when bread is given as a symbol of Christ's body, we must at once grasp this
17 comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ's
18 body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul. When we see wine set
19 forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to
20 the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ's
21 blood. These benefits are to *nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden*.¹⁰

22 We see something similar in the Heidelberg Catechism. In a recent article, Reformation
23 scholar Abraham van de Beek argued that the first question and answer of the Heidelberg
24 Catechism (1563) is actually centered on the topic of the Christian's identity in Christ.¹¹ Van de

⁹ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV.17.1.

¹⁰ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV.17.3.

¹¹ Abraham van de Beek, "Christian Identity is Identity in Christ" in *Studies in Reformed Theology*, 16 (2008): 17-30.

1 Beek gets to this conclusion not because the word “identity” appears in the Catechism, but because
2 the concept is there. Here is the opening question and answer of the Catechism:

3 Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

4 A. That *I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my*
5 *faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.* He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious
6 blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me
7 in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in
8 heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because *I belong to*
9 *him*, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me
10 wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

11 Van de Beek argues that this first element of the Heidelberg Catechism is not simply a statement
12 of the forgiveness of sins that we have in Christ, but rather, the answer is filled with the concept
13 of the Christian’s identity in Christ—we “belong” to him as a slave belongs to his owner. Jesus
14 paid our sin-debt on the Cross, certainly, but more has happened than that. We also are united to
15 Christ even as we are liberated from the old identity as sinner to a new identity as belonging to
16 Jesus. Van de Beek writes:

17 We are in trouble due to our sins, and He pays the debt. However, the first answer
18 goes deeper: He does not only pay for our sins; we ourselves are owned by Him.¹²

19 Van de Beek’s observations are profound for our purposes. He argues that the concept of the
20 Christian’s identity being found in Christ is a foundational theme for this entire familiar, much-
21 loved Catechism! Does this cause us to doubt Johnson’s view that the concept of “identity in
22 Christ” is a novel idea, only around for the last thirty or forty years, and is not connected with the
23 creeds and confessions of our Reformed Tradition?

¹² Ibid., 17.

1 The Puritans are also well known for their fixation on the doctrine of the Christian’s union
2 with Christ, and how that doctrine relates to the Christian’s battle against sin. Just one example is
3 an excerpt from Richard Sibbes’s (1577-1635) sermon *How to become like Christ*.

4 There were two affections pregnant in Christ upon the Cross; wonderous love for
5 us to die for us, and wonderous hatred of sin to purge it, for which He died; and
6 wonderous holiness, from which hatred of sin came. Whence doth hatred of sin
7 come, but from wonderful purity and holiness, that cannot endure sin? Thus, when
8 the soul considers it is one with Christ, it hath the same affections that Christ had,
9 to love what He loves, and to hate what He hates. This puts that affection into me
10 that was in Christ, and makes me act Christ’s part, to die to sin more and more.¹³

11 In this excerpt, Sibbes clearly draws a connection between the Christian reflecting on his identity
12 in Christ as a way to be filled with love for what Christ loves and hatred for what Christ hates.
13 Again, Sibbes does not use the term “identity in Christ” here, but the concept is certainly there as
14 Sibbes calls the Christian to reflect on their union with Christ.

15 **Conclusions**

16 It is our hope to show that Johnson is in error when he argues that the pastoral attempt to help
17 same-sex-strugglers “find their identity in Christ” as a way to put sin to death and be filled with
18 the newness of life is a *new* concept. On the contrary, a Christian’s reflection on their union with
19 Christ is a *very old* concept, not only found in the Puritans, Reformed Confessions, Calvin, and
20 even Augustine, but also grounded in biblical texts. It is true that the actual term “identity” is not
21 found in these sources, but the *concept* is well-attested. This gives us confidence, pastorally, that
22 we are on firm ground when we urge sin-strugglers of all shapes and sizes to reflect on their union
23 with Christ, and the benefits that flow from it, as a way to put sin to death and be filled with the
24 newness of life.

25

¹³ Richard Sibbes, “The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law,” in *The Works of Richard Sibbes* (London: Titus Books, 2015).

1 **VI. Orientation**

2 *Still Time to Care* calls the church, in its discipleship of same-sex attracted Christians, to move
3 away from a “cure” approach and toward Greg Johnson’s “care” approach. At the bottom of both
4 Johnson’s rebuke and positive proposal is the assertion of the existence, normativity, and relative
5 fixity of sexual orientation. Johnson repeatedly asserts that sexual orientation seldom changes and
6 that to offer hope of orientation change is equivalent to emotional abuse (200-201). The following
7 section will outline Johnson’s approach to the concept of sexual orientation, showing it to be out
8 of accord with the mainstream approach within the PCA, as articulated in the recent AIC report on
9 human sexuality. Also, several pastoral concerns will be listed to demonstrate how Johnson’s
10 model may serve as a hindrance to the process of faithful discipleship.

11 **Outlining Johnson’s Approach to Sexual Orientation**

12 It is true that the category of sexual orientation is widely used today, even in theologically
13 conservative and Reformed circles. Johnson quotes Albert Mohler from a 2014 address, wherein
14 he states that embracing the concept of sexual orientation is both practically helpful and
15 inescapable (137). However, Johnson does not mention that Mohler has also written forcefully
16 against the Revoice Conference and the Side B position advocated by figures like Greg Johnson.¹⁴
17 Ed Welch, a well-known biblical counselor, has long opposed the entire category of sexual
18 orientation. In his 1998 work *Blame It on the Brain?* Welch wrote, “What clouds sin...is the myth
19 that there is, by God’s design, a homosexual orientation.”¹⁵ How does one make sense of the
20 positions of these three theologically Reformed men?

21 Albert Mohler appears to be advocating a descriptive understanding of sexual orientation
22 language. Mohler wrote in the wake of delivering his 2014 address that “the concept of sexual
23 orientation looms as very important, because it helps to identify the effects of the Fall and the
24 depth of sin.”¹⁶ For the sake of affirming the reality of people’s struggle with same-sex attraction,

¹⁴ Albert Mohler, “Torn Between Two Cultures? Revoice, LGBT Identity, and Biblical Christianity,”
AlbertMohler.com, August 2, 2018, <https://albertmohler.com/2018/08/02/torn-two-cultures-revoice-lgbt-identity-biblical-christianity>.

¹⁵ Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brian?* (Grand Rapids: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 175.

¹⁶ Albert Mohler, “Sexual Orientation and the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” AlbertMohler.com, November 13, 2014,
<https://albertmohler.com/2014/11/13/sexual-orientation-and-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ>.

1 Mohler “repented of denying the existence of sexual orientation.”¹⁷ Welch’s position insists that
2 the language of sexual orientation not only carries with it unnecessary baggage, a problem Mohler
3 acknowledges,¹⁸ but also distracts the struggling individual from his or her foundational problem
4 of sin and corresponding solution in the gospel. It is worth noting that in Welch’s *Blame It on the*
5 *Brain*, he has no problem calling people who struggle with same-sex attraction “homosexuals” for
6 the sake of describing experience.¹⁹

7 While Mohler and Welch may disagree on the utility of the language of sexual orientation,
8 they both agree that, as Mohler articulated, “Each of us, regardless of our sexual orientation, has a
9 sin orientation.”²⁰ The underlying “disease” is sin, and the “cure” is the application of the gospel,
10 both in terms of justification and progressive sanctification.²¹ There is no secular or merely
11 psychological cure for sin. The PCA’s recent study report on sexuality took a mediating position,
12 sympathetic to both the concern of descriptive accuracy and of avoiding the adoption of worldly
13 assumptions. Even Welch’s position might find a home in the report, as it states that “the
14 terminology [of sexual orientation] may require qualification or *even rejection in some*
15 *circumstances*” (italics added).²² Welch was concerned with how orientation language might be
16 disruptive to the *circumstance* of biblical discipleship and counseling.

17 Is Greg Johnson merely advocating a position on sexual orientation similar to that of Albert
18 Mohler? At times in Johnson’s book, it appears that he is concerned to give an accurate description
19 of homosexuality. “A homosexual orientation includes more than just same-sex sexual attraction.
20 It also includes the lack of sexual attraction to members of the opposite sex, which for a Christian
21 can be the far more painful half when we consider our human longing for a life partner” (193). At
22 several other points in *Still Time to Care*, the reader will likely sense that Johnson’s approach is
23 distinct from and in conflict with Welch, Mohler and the PCA study report. The report gives
24 caution against using the category of homosexual orientation in a manner that teaches its

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., “I had previously denied the existence of sexual orientation. I, along with many other evangelicals, did so because we did not want to accept the sexual identity structure that so often goes with sexual orientation. I still reject that notion of sexual identity.”

¹⁹ Welch, 179.

²⁰ Mohler, “Sexual Orientation.”

²¹ This “already-not-yet” tension is further addressed in “The Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality,” Presbyterian Church in America, 2020, <https://pcaga.org/aicreport/>, 25-26.

²² Ibid, 30-31.

1 “normativity” or overemphasizes its “rigidity.”²³ Johnson’s book appears to contradict this
2 perspective on both accounts.

3 Johnson asserts that “homosexual orientation is about one-third genetic,” even while
4 “childhood sexual abuse” and various kinds of “environmental factors” may also play a role (147).
5 Even without assessing his interpretation of the data, one must recognize that for Johnson
6 orientation is not merely a descriptive category. In his view, homosexual orientation is a fixed, or
7 mostly fixed, biological condition that causes sinful temptations (xxiii). Homosexuality is not itself
8 sin but rather a weakness resulting from the sinful estate of the world (28). Homosexual orientation
9 is fallen, but it is no more fallen in Johnson’s view than heterosexuality (139-140).²⁴ In this way,
10 Johnson makes homosexual orientation normative, in the sense of being on equal footing with
11 heterosexuality. He also makes it neutral, in the sense of not being a sin to be mortified.

12 Another way that Johnson uses orientation language in a manner that presses beyond mere
13 description into the realm of normalizing homosexuality is his tendency to ground the self in
14 homosexual orientation. Even while Johnson denies the accusation of making homosexuality a
15 core identity (193-194), his language throughout the book contradicts his denials. For instance,
16 Johnson appears to be grounding his core identity in his sexual orientation by using his
17 homosexuality to find belonging. At several points Johnson identifies with the sufferings of
18 homosexuals by identifying with them as people “like me” (xvi, xvii, 50). On page 193, Johnson
19 clearly states that “Our core identity as Christians is that we have been adopted as sons and
20 daughters of the Father into his family.” Finding a deep and pervasive sense of belonging, as
21 Johnson appears to recognize, is one significant trait of a core identity. In no way does Johnson
22 treat his “gayness” as a mere descriptive identity, akin to one’s institutional affiliation with a
23 political party or nation (195). The way that Johnson treats his own homosexual orientation
24 throughout the book sounds far more like his description of a core identity as “the defining
25 narrative you place yourself in” (194).

26 *Still Time to Care* also emphasizes the notion that sexual orientation is fixed or nearly fixed.
27 It is difficult to definitively say which one represents Johnson’s view. Johnson sees meaningful

²³ Ibid, 31.

²⁴ See VII, below, on the Heinousness of Sin.

1 differences between the fixity of gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientations (124-125, 145). It may be
2 most accurate to say that Johnson thinks men with a genuinely homosexual orientation should
3 expect virtually no change in their orientation (xx). Even while examples of gay men developing
4 genuine attraction for their wives are provided (126), Johnson maintains that to give homosexuals
5 hope for change is a form of abuse (200-202). Johnson’s view, admittedly more nuanced than a
6 purely rigid stance, nonetheless “reflects our broader culture’s notions of one’s sexual orientation
7 being a completely fixed reality—contending that there is no sense in which sexual desires can
8 meaningfully change over time.”²⁵

9 **Johnson’s Approach as a Barrier to Faithful Discipleship**

10 The primary concern of the authors of this report is that Johnson’s model of discipleship may serve
11 as a barrier to godly discipleship. The following list briefly presents several of these concerns. The
12 section above on Johnson’s approach to sexual orientation lays out the foundational justification
13 for these concerns.

14 First, Johnson appears to fail to address the issue of root sins. Johnson rightly claims that
15 sins of laziness, covetousness, or idolatry may be causing more problems in a person’s life than
16 their homosexual temptations (32). It is necessary that these sins be simultaneously dealt with in
17 order to effectively address the person’s sexual sin. This kind of root and fruit discipleship is
18 biblical and right, but unfortunately Johnson’s model serves to undermine it. Under Johnson’s rigid
19 approach to orientation, the Christian is encouraged to “steward my sexual orientation” rather than
20 mortify the sinful flesh (199).²⁶

21 Second, Johnson appears to be dividing the body of Christ with his teaching. Despite
22 Johnson’s insistence that homosexuality is just like every other sin (140, 142), his approach ends
23 up treating the experience of sexual orientation as singular. Due to Johnson’s tendency to find
24 community through his sexual orientation, the book effectively divides the church into two
25 separate tiers (212, 237-238). It will be difficult for effective discipleship to occur between the

²⁵ “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality,” 25.

²⁶ See Section IV, above, on Sanctification.

1 tiers of Johnson’s model, which subverts God’s command for church members to bear one
2 another’s burdens and call one another to greater faithfulness (Gal. 6:2; Heb. 10:24)

3 Third, Johnson appears to mistake sin for weakness. Wise discipleship involves the process
4 of discerning what is weakness and what is sin. Johnson’s theological position that sin is only that
5 which is consciously volitional (28) is in contradiction to the historically Reformed position, as
6 summarized in the PCA study report.²⁷ Johnson’s model incorrectly identifies sin as weakness.
7 This wrong theological turn in Johnson’s approach may be fueled by a noble intention to empathize
8 with struggling people, but it will result in subverting the repentance process.

9 Fourth, Johnson fails to fully challenge destructive ideas found in the present culture. One
10 of the clearest dangers of Johnson’s model is his call for Christians without same-sex temptations
11 to remain largely silent on theological issues as they attempt to “feel empathy toward sexual
12 minorities” (33). He argues that too much discussion about terminology, specifically from those
13 who disagree with Johnson’s terminology (xxi-xxiii, 33,191-193), may unintentionally traumatize
14 homosexuals (200-203). This approach sadly discourages Christian counselors from fully
15 identifying, contextualizing, and confronting homosexual sin. Given the cultural context, one
16 cannot effectively disciple struggling homosexuals without challenging the destructive and anti-
17 biblical rhetoric of the surrounding world (2 Cor. 10:5-6).

18 Finally, Johnson’s teaching has the effect of blunting hope in those he seeks to counsel.
19 Building hope is an important part of discipling Christians who find themselves in a fierce battle
20 with sin. The power of God’s Spirit to progressively mortify the desires of the sinful flesh is a key
21 hope-building component which loses potency under Johnson’s model.²⁸

22

²⁷ “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality,” 8-9.

²⁸ See Section IV, above, for greater detail on this important point.

1 VII. On Celibacy: Calling, Gift, or Circumstance

2 *Still Time to Care* rightly presents celibacy as an obligation for those who remain single, but does
3 not adequately treat the subject, nature, and manner of celibacy as a practical help to pastoral care
4 by omitting Confessional categories, particularly those addressed in Larger Catechism 138-139.

5 Greg Johnson’s thoughts on celibacy begin in his own plan for celibacy, as he explains:
6 “My plan remained celibacy unless God led otherwise. Throughout the decades, there have been
7 seasons when I have reopened the question of pursuing marriage with a woman. After a season of
8 prayer and counsel, I have always felt peace in accepting singleness as a calling from my Savior”
9 (xx).

10 From a distance, there is not sufficient reason to doubt the sincerity or faithfulness of the
11 author in pursuing chastity in the form of celibacy. However, the author is not always careful, or
12 perhaps even aware, of the biblical and confessional distinctions on celibacy. The author does not
13 clearly articulate what is meant by the “calling of celibacy” and whether this is meant to express
14 the command of celibacy while single, or the “gift of celibacy,” or the “gift of continency” as the
15 Standards understand the teaching of 1 Corinthians 7.²⁹

16 *Still Time to Care*, in exploring this issue of celibacy, highlights Schaeffer’s words about
17 “homophiles” viewing “celibacy as a calling” from God since “in this case they must face the
18 dilemma of a life lived without fulfillment.” (12) This “high calling” (24)³⁰ is buttressed with texts
19 that typically deal with the “gift of continency,” or the “gift of celibacy” with references to 1
20 Corinthians 7 and Matthew 19:12 in regards to John Stott’s celibacy. (27) The author even refers
21 to these texts as speaking about the “celibacy as a gift equal to marriage” in chapter 14. (158)
22 Again, in chapter 20, celibacy is called “a gift” (229) and no distinction is made between C.S.
23 Lewis (who was celibate while unmarried, but open to marriage that he entered later in life) and
24 others who remained celibate as a gift such as the Apostle Paul. (230)

²⁹ See the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 138.

³⁰ In calling it a high calling, it must be noted, such language ought to be tempered as not to suggest that it is a “supererogated” work above and beyond the normal call of chastity. One can find a standard Reformed defense of this teaching in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, Volume 2, pages 27-32.

1 What is meant by a “call to celibacy”? By failing to distinguish between a command to
2 celibacy while single, and the more specific gift of celibacy, pastoral guidance is confused as to
3 whether someone dealing with these temptations should pursue, or at least be open to, marriage.
4 In imagining future goals with a congregant who struggles with same-sex attraction, should such
5 a person be encouraged to be open to and even pursue marriage? Does the “call of celibacy” as
6 Johnson understands it necessitate celibacy as the default counsel for such a person? Does it
7 constitute abuse, according to Johnson, to suggest sanctification can include as a goal change in
8 sexual desires to include marriage to the opposite sex and a family?³¹

9 These questions are not answered, even as the author cites those who have identified as
10 homosexual but entered into biblical marriage. The author does call to support “mixed-orientation
11 marriages,” (237-238) yet the author approves approaches where people are not pressured to
12 change in terms of orientation or orientation identification. (105) In calling for support for such a
13 marriage described as “mixed-orientation,” he mostly highlights the difficulties of such a union,
14 which one wonders if this is exacerbated by maintaining the personal identity of a sinful
15 orientation, even with a man and woman in marriage who are desiring each other. (237-238) The
16 impression is given that for the author, marriage may be the exception rather than the rule for
17 counseling congregants who struggle with same-sex attractions.

18 **Pastoral Concerns**

19 The confusion in this matter lies in the neglect of the Reformed and Confessional concept of a
20 “gift of continency.” Such an understanding requires a careful inspection of 1 Corinthians 7:7-9:

21 *“I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of*
22 *one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good*
23 *for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they*
24 *should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”*

25 The author will cite this passage occasionally but does not exegete it in the book. This is
26 practically problematic because a process for discernment of celibacy or marriage is never laid out,
27 but both are presented without preference as “opportunities to grow in Jesus. Both have their

³¹ See chapter 18 in *Still Time to Care* – Ending (Unintentional) Emotional Abuse, particularly page 200.

1 sorrows. But both can be a wellspring of grace and blessing.” (238) Hence, there is confusion about
2 living celibately in singleness while pursuing marriage, over and against pursuing and committing
3 to celibacy as a committed perpetual way of life.

4 The book’s instructions on celibacy lack the nuance and specificity of our Standards. The
5 Standards emphasize all single people are commanded to chastity in celibacy, but also maintain
6 that Scripture presents a duty for all of “marriage by those that have not the gift of continency”
7 (WLC 138). The AIC report, in turn, presents celibacy as an option for those with struggles in this
8 area which may have an indeterminate or lifelong future of celibacy without using the language of
9 “gift” or “calling.”³²

10 Our Standards and Scriptures are clear: all non-married persons are commanded to chastity
11 in celibacy, whether they have the “gift” of continency/celibacy or not. Also, those with the gift of
12 continency have such a gift for a particular purpose: the context of Paul’s admonition in 1
13 Corinthians includes the gift in order to pursue some sort of service for God. For a masterful and
14 pastoral treatment, it is worth quoting John Calvin on this subject at length, to get a sense of the
15 pastoral issues involved in such a discernment:

16 We are informed by an open declaration that it is not given to every man to keep
17 chastity in celibacy, even if he aspires to it with great zeal and effort, and that it is
18 a special grace which the Lord bestows only upon certain men, in order to hold
19 them more ready for his work. Do we not, then, contend against God and the nature
20 ordained by him, if we do not accommodate our mode of life to the measure of our
21 ability? Here the Lord forbids fornication. He therefore requires purity and modesty
22 of us. There is but one way to preserve it: that each man measure himself by his
23 own standard. Let no man rashly despise marriage as something unprofitable or
24 superfluous to him; let no man long for celibacy unless he can live without a wife.
25 Also, let him not provide in this state for the repose and convenience of the flesh,
26 but only that, freed of this marriage bond, he may be more prompt and ready for all
27 the duties of piety. And since this blessing is conferred on many persons only for a

³² “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality,” 32.

1 short time, let every man abstain from marriage only so long as he is fit to observe
2 celibacy. If his power to tame lust fails him, let him recognize that the Lord has
3 now imposed the necessity of marriage upon him. The apostle proves this when he
4 enjoins that to flee fornication ‘each man should have his own wife, and each
5 woman her own husband’ [1 Cor. 7:2]. Against: ‘If they cannot exercise self-
6 control, they should marry’ in the Lord [1 Cor. 7:9]. First, he means that the greater
7 part of men are subject to the vice of incontinence; second, of those who are so
8 subject he enjoins all without exception to take refuge in that sole remedy with
9 which to resist unchastity. Therefore if those who are incontinent neglect to cure
10 their infirmity by this means, they sin even in not obeying this command of the
11 apostle. And let him who does not touch a woman not flatter himself, as if he could
12 not be accused of immodesty, while in the meantime his heart inwardly burns with
13 lust. For Paul defines modesty as ‘purity of heart joined with chastity of body.’ ‘The
14 unmarried woman,’ he says, ‘is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be
15 holy in body and spirit.’ [1 Cor 7:34] Thus while he confirms by reason that precept
16 mentioned about, he says not only that it is better to take a wife than pollute oneself
17 by associating with a harlot, [cf 1 Cor 6:15 ff] but he says that ‘it is better to marry
18 than to burn.’ [1 Cor. 7:9]”³³

19

20 **VIII. Heinousness: Is Homosexuality a more Heinous Sin?**

21 One final area of theological concern in *Still Time to Care* is the treatment of the relationship
22 between different sins, and whether some sins are more heinous than others. This is particularly
23 evident in Chapter 13, where the author goes to great lengths to equate the “sinfulness of
24 heterosexuality this side of the fall” with “homosexuality,” (139) in a way that is unharmonious
25 with Larger Catechism 150-152

26

³³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed., John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 2.8.43, 406-407.

1 **Near Equivalence of Homosexuality with Heterosexuality**

2 After characterizing the position of church leaders on a podcast as having a “very shallow view of
3 their indwelling sin-their own internal corruption,” the author interprets their statement:
4 “heterosexual men don’t need to repent of being attracted to another woman” as being a lusting
5 sexual attraction, and concludes, “Heterosexuality as experienced this side of the fall is drenched
6 in sin.” The author then describes heterosexuality as “a generic desire for the opposite sex.” (140)
7 which is different from “uni-heterosexuality,” a novel term Johnson approvingly cites from Nate
8 Collins, the founder of ReVoice. (140) This leads him to conclude: “Heterosexuality as
9 experienced this side of the fall is also a fallen orientation on account of its failure to remain
10 exclusive to one spouse at the attractational level.” (140) Johnson then identifies the similarity:
11 “Whether we speak of a sexual pull to a neighbor’s wife or to a neighbor’s brother, we’re not
12 dealing with something that’s morally neutral.” (140) He goes on to state: “Only Jesus had a
13 nonsinful, nonshameful sexual orientation,” an orientation which remains undefined by the author.
14 (140)

15 The final conclusion is that “...there is no reason to believe that the ordinary progress of
16 spiritual growth would involve the replacement of sinful homosexual temptation with sinful
17 heterosexual temptation. That’s aiming too low.” (140) That we are called not to be asexual or
18 adulterous leads to the conclusion “God calls us to holiness, not to heterosexuality.”

19 The reason the author has painted homosexuality and heterosexuality as two fallen
20 orientations is clearly stated: “I want to bring the rest of you down to the level I inhabit. Because
21 the basement is where Jesus is hanging out. He’s a friend of sinners. And I want to help you.”
22 (140) This leads to the conclusion that “...we don’t need to set up a bunch of ex-straight ministries
23 to help you sisters and brothers be cured of your unwanted attractions to other people’s spouses.
24 That approach has been tried for forty years with a *very similar fallen sexual orientation*, and we
25 found that internal corruption didn’t go away. I don’t tell straight men they’re not real Christians
26 for identifying as straight, even though that typically means attractational polygamy. So long as
27 they’re not bragging about it and they recognize that it’s disordered, I don’t get too worried.”
28 (Emphasis added 140)

1 There is one place where a distinction of heinousness between heterosexuality and
2 homosexuality is mentioned when he does say: “If my internal sexual pull is disordered 100
3 percent of the time, perhaps theirs might be disordered 90 percent of the time?” (141)

4 Immediately after equating heterosexuality and homosexuality as “very similar” fallen
5 orientations, the author then goes on to answer a hypothetical question about a connection between
6 pedophilia and homosexuality because they are both “unnatural” (141), characterizing it as a
7 “jump.” (141) Instead, the author suggests the greater heinousness of pedophilia is located in the
8 lack of consent.³⁴ The author marshals a few statistics regarding pedophilia, identifying pedophiles
9 as seemingly disproportionately bisexual, but defining pedophilia as “fixated” and attracted only to
10 children and not adults, implicitly suggesting pedophilia is an orientation different from
11 homosexuality. Though numbers of bisexuals and heterosexuals are identified as those who are
12 simultaneously also pedophiles, the author then claims: “There is no statistical link between
13 pedophilia and homosexuality.” (141) The author insists that “a good child protective policy
14 doesn’t require knowledge of one’s sexual orientation.” (142)

15 **Concerns with this Presentation**

16 There are several issues with this presentation, and reason to doubt the author’s credentials and
17 skills as a statistician. Certainly, there is great difficulty in interpreting the data of studies which
18 try to deal with statistical links of higher instances of sexual abuse in the childhoods of those who
19 later identify as homosexual.³⁵ For instance, the Family Research Council interpreted same-sex
20 child abuse as homosexuality,³⁶ which led to massive pushback from the secular academy, and
21 some likened the comparisons to racism of the past.³⁷

22 This context should make an author very cautious of making definitive statements based
23 on studies, or to navigate the difficulties in statistics of causation and correlation. Considering
24 these factors, the author is not qualified or free enough from bias to read the limited statistical data

³⁴ This is curiously undefined, since consent is variously defined, as the determination of age of consent varies by state, culture, and time – to the neglect the objective measurements of our Standards in Westminster Larger Catechism Question 151.

³⁵ See, for instance: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9127231/>

³⁶ See, for instance: <https://web.archive.org/web/20050215004037/http://www.frc.org/?i=IS02E3>

³⁷ See, for instance: https://lgbpsychology.org/html/facts_molestation.html

1 to make the conclusion he does: “There is no statistical link between pedophilia and
2 homosexuality.” (141) Especially since the author cites “childhood sexual abuse” as a potential
3 contributor to a homosexual orientation later in his book (147), which undermines the idea that
4 there is no link whatsoever.

5 Some of the difficulty in reading *Still Time to Care*’s treatment of homosexuality and
6 pedophilia is that an entire framework of orientation³⁸ is imposed on the discussion yet is unevenly
7 applied. Pedophilia seems to be considered by many as an orientation, as it fits the criteria in
8 secular Gender and Sex studies. Yet, the paradigm of care is not explored in regards to such an
9 orientation, but is only used as a point of offense at any comparison between homosexuality and
10 pedophilia as sins of unnatural affections. (141-142)

11 The cumulative effect and purpose of Johnson’s comparison of homosexuality and
12 heterosexuality, as he defines them, results in an equating of the two. Even the points of distinction
13 are flattened and dismissed.

14 The cumulative effect and purpose of Johnson’s equating homosexuality and pedophilia is
15 to distance the two and to present the latter as more heinous on modern, though not confessional,
16 criteria and categories.

17 **Pastoral Implications**

18 The Larger Catechism, 151, identifies factors causing greater heinousness to sins such as
19 the persons offending, the parties offended, the nature and quality of the offense, and the
20 circumstances of time and place of a sin. But what is the pastoral use of the teaching of the
21 Standards in regards to the equality of sin’s ability to condemn, yet differences in aggravations
22 and heinousness of sins?

23 First, the most basic use is to understand the Scriptures, such as the differences in penalties
24 for various offenses in the Old Testament Law, as well as understanding the Biblical assumption
25 that some sins are “greater” as our Lord said to Pilate: “You would have no authority over me at

³⁸ See Section VI – Orientation, above.

1 all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore, he who delivered me over to you has the
2 greater sin.” (John 19:11 ESV)

3 Second, there is use in the urgency of warning of danger to unbelievers: The use of 1 John
4 5:16 and Hebrews 2:2-3 indicates an awareness of the greater danger of more heinous sins, and
5 consequently to cause us to flee from such sins and seek repentance and grace from God. To
6 neglect the warning of the heinousness of certain sins fails to adequately plead with the unbeliever
7 of their danger (Hebrews 2:2-3).

8 Third, there is use in the urgency of warning of great danger to believers. Rather than
9 treating all sins as equal, there is a particular need to address more dangerous sins, as the Standards
10 teach that sins are made more heinous depending on the persons offending, the parties offended,
11 the nature and quality of the offense, and the circumstances of time and place of the offense. Thus,
12 we have a warning to believers seeking a teaching office, to know their sins are judged more
13 heinous due to their position (James 3:1), or that sins are greater when committed directly against
14 God (Psalm 51:4) or against the leaders he appoints (Psalm 105:15), or that sins against nature
15 have greater consequences (Romans 1:26-17), or that sins committed, for instance, on the Lord’s
16 Day when worship should be conducted are more heinous (Ezekiel 23:37-39, Isaiah 58, Nehemiah
17 13:15-22, etc.).

18 Rather than treating opposite-sex and same-sex lusting as equal, the Westminster Standards
19 includes under “the nature and quality of the offense” a reference to sins against the “light of
20 nature.” [WLC 151.3] The original 1648 proof text for this phrase was Romans 1:26-27.³⁹ One
21 also sees this applied in the writings of a member of the Westminster Assembly, William Gouge.
22 Writing on marriage, Gouge excludes the “unnatural minglings” of same-sex relations, which are
23 classified alongside other unnatural unions of related persons and beasts.⁴⁰ Rather than merely
24 flattening and equating same-sex and opposite sex offenses, our Standards treats same-sex offenses
25 as more heinous, or of greater aggravation.

³⁹ John Bower. *The Larger Catechism: a Critical Text and Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 203

⁴⁰ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home, Vol 2: A Holy Vision for a Happy Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014) 7-8.

1 But what purpose is there in our Standards identifying sins, especially this one, as more
2 heinous in its aggravations? Certainly, it is not for reasons of pride, as the following question in
3 both the Shorter and Larger Catechism focuses on the nature of all sin bringing condemnation. It
4 is logical to deduce that this qualification helps Christians to treat and fight their sins adequately.
5 If some sins are more heinous and are not treated as such, Jeremiah 6:14 and 8:11 indicates a
6 danger of treating a sin too lightly for the sake of the people and the preacher. The result of
7 inadequate warning and repentance was the terror of festering sins, and severe discipline and
8 judgment.

9 Failure to warn a believer of the danger of sin results in a shallow repentance and shallow
10 pastoral care. Sins of greater aggravation take more in terms of pastoral care, time, and repentance.
11 A pastor or counselor should not be frustrated that a congregant mortifying these sorts of sins will
12 take more time, require more deep repentance, and require more pastoral care and energy. Granted,
13 mortifying lusts of all kinds likely do not get enough pastoral attention, but if a pastor does not
14 recognize the greater heinousness, and thus greater spiritual damage caused by some sins, the sin
15 will be treated too lightly, and the pastor may be tempted to dismiss too quickly the great difficulty
16 faced by a believer fighting against these more heinous sins and temptations.

17 As stated before, certainly the pastoral identification of some sins as more heinous is not
18 to take pride or comfort in our sins being less heinous than another's sin. The Catechisms' teaching
19 on the equal worth of condemnation of all sins ought to guard against such pride (Shorter
20 Catechism Q 84, Larger Catechism 152). Thus, one should not use these doctrines to take offense
21 at being called a sinner worthy of condemnation for sins as much as any other sinner, be they sins
22 like yours or unlike yours.

23 Pastorally, those under our care should know we stand together at the foot of the cross in
24 need of grace, and not apart from them, seemingly insulted at the comparison of our sins with
25 others. Those with sins of opposite-sex, same-sex, and pedophilic lust all need grace together to
26 avoid condemnation. Yet, those suffering from unnatural lusts and offenses must be duly warned
27 of the danger and extent of their need of sanctifying grace and repentance, and our willingness to
28 spend time and offer compassion as we lead them to adequate repentance.

1 Thus, *Still Time to Care* gives advice and framing that can be destructive of compassionate
2 pastoral care in identifying, warning, treating, and repenting of sins of greater aggravation and
3 heinousness.⁴¹

4

5 **IX. Conclusion**

6 The reading and review of any book is no simple matter. Serious engagement requires that the
7 reader wrestle with a work’s content, context, and purpose. Even where disagreement emerges,
8 few books are utterly and extensively flawed – and Greg Johnson’s book is no different. Indeed,
9 our careful interaction with this work has demonstrated to us that there are several areas of
10 agreement with Johnson’s thought.

11 At the same time, our study has uncovered fundamental and foundational problems with
12 both the biblical and confessional fidelity of Johnson’s underlying thesis and the clarity and
13 coherence of the demonstration of that thesis. While by no means limited to that which we
14 highlighted, we were particularly concerned with his handling of the biblical and confessional
15 doctrine of sanctification, his misuse of identity in Christ, his aberrant views on sexual orientation,
16 his disregard of the confessional teaching on the heinousness and various aggravations of different
17 sins, and his lack of interaction with the confessional understanding of the gift of continence.

18 The church desperately needs clear, careful, biblical, and confessional interactions with
19 these issues. *Still Time to Care*, however, is not these things – for that reason, this AIC cannot
20 recommend it as a general resource for our churches. Rather, we encourage our Ruling and
21 Teaching Elders to carefully engage with Johnson’s work – both through the lens of this report
22 and their own critical interaction with it – such that the serious deficiencies and errors contained
23 therein can be counteracted through the preaching and teaching within our churches.

⁴¹ For additional practical helps see: Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity* (Carlyle PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), especially the section on the Ten Commandments and question LXXXIII, “Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?” See also Kevin DeYoung, “Is Every Sin the Same in God’s Eyes?” KevinDeYoung.org, March 15, 2022, <https://kevindeyoung.org/is-every-sin-the-same-in-gods-eyes/>

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X. Recommendations

In light of the above, the committee brings the following recommendations before the presbytery:

1. The Presbytery of the Ascension receive the report as biblically and confessionally faithful and commends its use in our churches;
2. The report be published publicly on our website;
3. The presbytery direct the Stated Clerk to communicate with the Stated Clerk of the denomination and the Clerks of the other PCA Presbyteries, indicating the public availability of the report;
4. The questions appended below be considered by Candidates and Credentials in examinations; and,
5. The committee be dismissed with thanks.

Committee Members:

- RE David Gibson
- TE Scott Moreland
- TE Jared Nelson
- RE Dr. C. Scott Shidemantle
- TE Dr. Steve Tipton

1 Candidates and Credentials Committee might consider asking questions of candidates such as:

2 On Sanctification:

- 3 1. Describe the changes that we should expect will occur in us as we are
4 progressively sanctified.
- 5 2. What counsel would you give a Christian who is not experiencing change in one
6 area of his or her life? Would you give different counsel to someone who is not
7 experiencing a change in their same-sex attraction? What would you consider to
8 be "change" in such attractions?

9

10 On Identity:

- 11 1. Some have argued that the idea of “Identity in Christ” is nowhere found in the New
12 Testament. Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? What would be the
13 practical ramifications for the way you answer this question? (Expected answer:
14 while the specific term “identity in Christ” is not found in the New Testament, the
15 concept is certainly there wherever we find the language related to the doctrine of
16 the Christian’s Union with Christ. To reject “identity in Christ” as a concept may
17 do injury to the Christian’s understanding both of their Justification, Sanctification,
18 and Assurance of salvation.)
- 19 2. Explain the concept of the Christian’s “Union with Christ”—where it might be
20 found in the New Testament and what the implications of this doctrine might be for
21 pastoral counseling. (Expected answer: the candidate ought to go to passages like
22 Romans 6 or John 15 to demonstrate that the Christian’s Union with Christ is the
23 basis not only for Justification but also sanctification. Practical outworking of this
24 in pastoral counseling would focus on how reflecting on the objective reality of the
25 Christian’s Union with Christ utilizing the ordinary means of grace is an effective
26 way to battle personal sin).

27

1 On Orientation:

2 1. How do you understand the category of sexual orientation within a biblical
3 anthropology? Include your views on whether or not sexual orientation is fixed and
4 how sexual orientation relates to progressive sanctification.

5 2. Is the terminology of sexual orientation helpful in preaching and
6 discipleship/counseling contexts? If so, in what ways?

7

8 On Heinousness of Sin and Celibacy:

9 1. Are some sins more heinous than others, or are they all the same in the sight of
10 God? What makes something more heinous? What is the use of identifying some
11 sins as more heinous in your ministry?

12 2. How do you understand that Larger Catechism prescribing “marriage by those that
13 have not the gift of continency”? How would you help a congregant discern if they
14 have the gift of celibacy?