

A Response to Greg Johnson's Interview The Gospel and Christian Identity

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Starting with the title itself, there is much to like about the Rev. Dr. Greg Johnson's [who identifies as Gay] book, *The World According to God* (InterVarsity, 2002). Now, nearly 20 years later, Johnson, the lead pastor at Memorial Presbyterian Church (PCA) in St. Louis, is ready to rip portions of it out. Why? Because, as he put it in the recent *Theology in the Raw* podcast (#876) with host Dr. Preston Sprinkle, "There is something about sexual orientation that is deeply rooted, especially with men."

That fact has led Johnson now to view the world differently. In particular, the last two decades have convinced him that *he misunderstood* same-sex attraction (SSA). His research reinforces his nearly 50-year personal experience: sexual orientation really does not change, and for him in particular, has "not shifted a millimeter." Something had to change, and for Johnson, it is his *theological* orientation.

The frank *podcast interview* between Drs. Sprinkle and Johnson exposes Johnson's changed theological paradigm. Though it carries a *pervasive condescending tone*—and with moments of laughter belittles those who do not *share* the understanding of the guest and his host—the podcast provides the gift of clarity to us: Johnson's crystallized paradigm along with his expectation of our warm embrace of it. As such, the podcast demands a response, even this brief one—especially as we approach the 48th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America.

Angry and Afraid?

Johnson characterizes those who oppose his views as an *immature and likely small subset of the church* (the PCA) who celebrate theological

sword-rattling as their reason for existence. Johnson describes his earlier years in the faith as “cage-stage Calvinism,” where he too formerly raged with fury for the Reformed truth. He further concludes that those who take umbrage with his freedom to identify as a gay man, who refuse to concede that same-sex attraction is an unchangeable trait, and/or do not view SSA as an acceptable identification for a Christian do so out of fear and a failure to love their SSA brothers (or sisters). Johnson says,

What I'm trying to get us back to is that older narrative, not a paradigm of curing homosexuality but a paradigm of care—of actually loving our siblings who aren't straight. Whatever terminology they use, and a big part of loving is not beating them up over what terminology they use. If they want to say they're same-sex attracted, that's fine, that doesn't mean they're supporting conversion therapy. If they want to say gay, that's fine, that doesn't mean they have a different sexual ethic. Stop manipulating people emotionally like this because they need love, they need community, they need the brotherhood.

If I am not mistaken, Johnson is talking about brothers like me who disagree with him. He sees us as unloving, emotional manipulators, riveted to fear rather than tethered to grace. Yet it is not evident that Johnson has himself departed the cage stage. This theological debate—and note well, it *is* a theological debate and Johnson is fighting it—**must not be defined by cultural trends or “denominational politics,”** and must not be treated dismissively by *progressive* culture warriors who view their opponents as uninformed and unkind fundamentalists. Such a misrepresentation of the concerns expressed by Johnson’s opponents is itself unhelpful, unfair, and unloving.

To be fair, some in the PCA are likely both angry and afraid. Some may see denominational fights as a badge of honor and a mark of gospel fidelity. But for many (most?) of us who oppose the Johnson SSA paradigm, we are not angry; we are deeply grieved. We believe God’s Word opposes Johnson’s SSA new theological position. In fact, I would

contend that most in the PCA who oppose SSA as an unchanging orientation and an acceptable category of self-identification for Christians or pastors do so out of love for Christ, His Word, and His church along with zeal for Christ's disciple-making mission. They respond out of fear of God, conviction and compassion; they humbly contend *for biblical and theological reasons*.

Many grace-filled brothers have spoken recently against Johnson's SSA paradigm. These men are no ivory-tower theologians, who hurl their theological darts from afar. These are men mindful of their own sins and of their constant dependence on the mercy of God. These are men whose own family members have exited their closets. These are men who shepherd congregations with people who identify, or have identified, as LGBTQ+. These are men who have shared the gospel with LGBTQ+ people, borne witness to their repentance and conversion to faith in Christ, and tearfully rejoiced with the angels. These are men who have counseled post-operative transgender converts, who are legally united in marriage and face the difficult discipleship decision about how now to honor God.

And despite Johnson's contention to the contrary, these are grace-filled men who do "put the gospel first." They are grateful that men like Johnson obey God in their sexual behavior and who find contentment in their celibacy. Yet, for biblical and theological reasons, they **do not find Johnson's SSA arguments defensible—that fallen "sexual orientation is part of our identity."** These are men who believe God's Word speaks directly to SSA identification and sanctification.

While all are rattled by the unrelenting blows of the current moral revolution, in their concerns about Johnson's paradigm, these courageous and compassionate pastoral leaders are not caving to fear of man; they are reckoning with what it means to fear God and to love their neighbors. **If you listen to the podcast with Drs. Johnson and Sprinkle, you will wait in vain for a biblical and theological defense.** A sentimental and sociological one fills the airspace. Yet these SSA

matters need careful, biblical, theological, confessional, pastoral response. They drive us to the very foundation of our faith concerning our source of authority. When it comes to sense of identity, what is our final court of appeal?

Authority and Identity

If you ask a group of evangelical or reformed Christians to define “guilt,” most will describe a feeling of shame and sense of remorse. “Guilt is that feeling I have when I believe I have done something wrong.”

Sounds basic, doesn’t it? Only to those who have imbibed the cultural waters of theology as primarily a matter of self-expression, a Schleiermachian-friendly paradigm where the interpretive framework for theology draws foremost upon the *sensibilities* of the human psyche. This is not your father’s guilt. And it certainly is not the way your heavenly Father defines it.

According to almighty God, guilt and *feelings of* guilt are not the same thing. **In fact, guilt is not a feeling.** God defines righteousness. God defines sin. God defines guilt. And to our point here, guilt is a **fact**—a divinely disclosed one based upon the explicit mandates of God’s Law. If you murder someone, you *are* guilty whether you *feel* badly or not. **If you speak the truth in love** to someone according to the need of the moment, you are *not* guilty whether or not you *or your hearer* feel badly.

Our “massively sentimental age,” as Brian Mattson put it recently, has compromised our collective ability to navigate the gap between what is *and* what we perceive, what is true and what we feel. **The hellish hegemony of the almighty self has poisoned the air we breathe**, and sadly, the theological framework we now inhale and exhale. We should find little shock that this contaminated air has swept into our beloved PCA.

In fact, that air seems to have filled Johnson’s position on SSA. He has the freedom to use the self-identification language he wishes, and others have the freedom to use the language they wish. Johnson insists, “I tell people they can call me whatever they want so long as it’s not

mean. I have been gay, I have been ex-gay, and I have been same-sex attracted. And I can't say that any of those terminological shifts amounted to anything at the soul-level." For him this freedom of self-determined identity and self-determined language applies to everyone, every creature at least.

According to Holy Scripture, God created you and me. *He* defines us. *He* interprets our status and identity. And *His* language matters. Though the cultural waters in which we swim make *my sense of things* the ultimate determiner of reality, it is not so. What is so is what *God* declares.

Scripture gives lucid explanation concerning **who we were in Adam and who we are now in Christ**. **The Bible makes identity binary**: we are either identified by and with the first Adam or identified by and with the Last Adam. As covenant heads, they and their respective characters and conduct demarcate our identities.

To the point, **identity—like guilt—is a theological fact, not a product of human perception**. When in Adam, no matter how good you may have felt about yourself, and how blindly optimistic you were about the ability of your mind, will, and emotions, you neither knew yourself nor interpreted yourself accurately. You did not and could not please God. "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). Period. No qualifications. No exceptions. No equivocation. No redefinitions.

In Christ: Resurrection and Identity

Dead in trespasses and sins, the sons of disobedience needed new life—complete with a new heart, a restored will, and a new identity. And that is exactly what we receive in the resurrected Christ. Scripture and Scripture's Christ do not offer a reparative therapy program; they deliver cosmically-critical, sin-forgiving, freedom-rendering, past-crushing, and utterly-transforming new life and new identity *in Christ*. Christ, on the cross, not only conquered the guilt of sin but the *power* of sin. Jesus' victory has rendered a decisive breach with sin, and His children are no longer *identified* by it or *mastered* by it. This is why the

Apostle Paul says, “So you must also [along with Christ Jesus!] consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). Several important facts emerge in this text concerning identity and sanctification:

1. Union *with Christ*. Christ is raised *for us*; and we are raised *with him* (Eph 2:6; 1 Cor. 15:12ff).

- In the gospel, I not only receive the double graces of justification and sanctification, but I also receive the Christ who justifies and sanctifies me. I am His and He is mine. By His Holy Spirit, this inviolable bond between Son and the children of God, between the Redeemer and the redeemed, between Savior and the saved, provides the very framework for how we must see ourselves. **We are in Christ. Full stop.**
- Therefore, no matter how stubborn the sin, the temptation, the desire, the lust, or the sorrow, as one united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, **we are not defined by our sense of things**. The gospel frees you from this tyranny, including the self-labeling and/or self-destructive intimations of SSA.
- The deepest channels and strongest shackles of stubborn sin no longer define you. You are a new creation in Christ. The old things have passed away. New things in Christ have come.

2. From *Christ to Us*. Our in-Christ identity bears directly upon our thinking and our use of language. As our Savior and Master, Jesus gives **explicit mandates about self-identification**, because we are *united to him*.

- We are delivered by, determined by, and defined by the success of Christ and the power of His resurrection. For this reason we must think and speak of ourselves according to our life in Christ.
- A look to our prior sinful self for identity is not only wrong; it absurdly and perversely defies the meaning of, power of, and nature of the work of Christ in His resurrection from the dead *for us*. His life is our life; His holiness, our holiness. “And because of

him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Only in disobedience do I think of myself or speak of myself otherwise.

- To think of ourselves in any way—even secretly—as still alive to sin is an open denial of the saving and sanctifying power of God in Christ.

3. *From Us to Christ.* With Paul's breathtaking doctrine of in-Christ solidarity, we discover seamless bi-directional riches of our communion with Him.

- Note first the stunning historical argument. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues from our future resurrection to Christ's past resurrection. "For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised" (1 Cor. 15:16). Solidarity with Christ is such that we cannot speak of Jesus' past resurrection apart from our future one!
- Note second the stunning implications for sanctification, where the power of this resurrection solidarity bears upon our current morality: "And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!" (1 Cor. 6:14, 15). The point is startlingly blunt. If you go to bed with a prostitute, as a member of Christ's body, you bring the holy Lord Jesus *with you*.
- This solidarity in Christ's resurrection and our bi-directional communion with Christ shape self-identification. Wherever I go, I take Christ with me. Accordingly, our self-conception necessitates a Christ-conception. **If I consider myself a SSA Christian, then Jesus is an SSA Christ. If I am a gay Christian then Jesus is a gay Christ.** What grotesque distortion of our Savior, His holiness, and His saving and sanctifying work!
- But don't miss this. Johnson tells us **language** of self-description is no big deal. **Whatever someone chooses to use as language for**

themselves—“gay Christian”, “ex-gay Christian,” “same-sex attracted Christian,” etc., we should just accept it. The Apostle Paul says otherwise. Whatever adjective you are prepared to put before *your* name as a Christian, you first place it before the name of Christ.

Honesty and Identity

Believing he has lived a lie, Johnson pleads for honesty: “Every time I said I was ex-gay, I felt like I was lying, because if gay was a lifestyle, I had never been gay. If gay is a sexual orientation, it has not shifted a millimeter. And so, I was actually thrilled to call myself same-sex attracted when that language came out because at least I wasn’t lying.”

Does Johnson have a point? Isn’t it dishonest to deny my sense of identity? Is God asking me to be inauthentic? Does God forge sanctification in my heart by dishonesty? Hardly! Instead, he graciously informs us that any self-designation that does not align with Christ is itself the lie. Authenticity of soul occurs when I am in alignment with what God says about me in Christ. Anything else is deception.

Yes, our own sinful proclivities deliver real and regular threats. But isn’t that the point? The Christian life is a violent *battle*. But Christ has already won the war, no matter what I feel or perceive. As John Owen famously put it, “Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” By the grace of God, I am freed from affirming my sin as an identity marker. I may repeatedly lust, get angry, pursue self-glory, or suffer SSA. But these sins do not define me. To claim otherwise outrightly denies the efficacy of the Christ’s cross and the power of His resurrection glory. Recategorization of SSA as an untouchable identity fails the biblical and confessional test. Johnson’s new doctrine of sanctification requires befriending an identity that opposes Christ. Deciding that a particular besetting sin is no longer sinful may temporarily placate one’s emotions. But friendship with the world is enmity with God. And to whatever degree we find affinity with this new SSA paradigm, we need confession, not concession. We need repentance, not redefinition.

A Call to Delight

Real freedom is found in knowing that we are not prisoners of our pasts or to our own self-perceptions. We are not victims of the jet propulsion of lusts or of fallen aesthetic impulses. Thanks be to God! Christ frees us from these things. The gospel we preach delivers reverse thrust against our past sinful lives, our thinking and our willing. And to put a point on it, if it *does not*, it is not good news. A Christ that leaves us in our old categories and abandons us in our own self-interpreting devices is not the Christ of Scripture.

Fellow Christians and my fellow elders in the PCA, the resurrected and exalted Christ *defines us*. No matter how we may feel, we are not Muslim followers of Christ, materialist followers of Christ, or SSA followers of Christ. Such language opposes the gospel. We are instead sons and daughters of God, who possess a new name, a new heart, new language, and a categorically new *orientation*. And as those in Christ, that is how we must count ourselves.

To be sure, we may not taste the newness in the way we would like. In that sense, we join the Apostle Paul (see Romans 7)! We may even feel that we have failed to progress a “millimeter.” But that self-perception of failure may be as flawed as thinking that gospel sanctification is impotent against sexual orientation. We may also need to (re)submit to the mandate of Romans 6:11, to count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Unless we yield our minds and hearts—and our *sense of identity*—to God’s Word, we will formulate and affirm misguided conclusions. Romans 6:11 provides the definitive starting point for divinely-certain progress in sanctification, including the rescue from my faulty sense of identity.

By contrast, TE Johnson seeks the PCA join him in his newfound paradigm. But Johnson’s SSA and identity paradigm aligns neither with Scripture nor our confessional standards, and we should make this point lovingly, lucidly and lastingly.

There is no room for fluidity in this debate. Identity is either defined by us or defined by God. Sanctification either extends to us

comprehensively or it is not gospel sanctification. Sin is stubborn and internal proclivities surely still fight mightily against us. But as fierce as is the warfare, Christ the Victor and our Identifier is greater still.

As ordained officers in the PCA, we must remain steadfast in affirming these glorious truths, our biblical and confessional standards, and the comprehensive hope of the gospel to unbelievers.[1] Indeed, let us *delight* in the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the fully adequate sanctifying Savior of sinners.

For the glory of God and the honor of his Son Christ Jesus and with the theological, evangelistic, and pastoral delight incumbent upon officers of Christ's church, let us hold fast our convictions so well-expressed in Westminster Larger Catechism 75:

Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life (underline added).

[1] A good resource to consider for both church officers and laity is last week's conference lectures given by Drs. Jon Payne and Richard Phillips at the [Pensacola Theological Institute](#).

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