

## **The Good and Necessary Consequence of the Christian's Identity**

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This year, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America will once again be addressing issues pertaining to human sexuality in the church. This is because sexuality has become one of the primary points of conflict between the church and the culture of this age and, rather than being conformed to the world, the church of Christ must stand firm upon the truth of God's word. One of the many questions facing the church today is whether or not a Christian may identify with a homosexual or transgender self-conception. More simply, can a Christian identify as a "gay Christian"? While there have been many excellent resources written on this topic, to my knowledge, none have interacted directly with the interpretative principle of "Good and Necessary Consequence." When viewed through the lens of good and necessary consequence we will see that for a Christian to adopt a homosexual or transgender self-conception is an unbiblical contradiction in terms and must be rejected by those who view scripture as the only rule of our faith and practice. So, it is helpful to begin with understanding this principle.

Historically, Reformed Christians have adhered to and applied Scripture in accordance with a principle known as *Good and Necessary Consequence*. This is the approach to Scripture that teaches that we are to believe and obey not only those things that are explicitly stated, but also that which may be deduced or inferred from Scripture as a necessary implication. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*" (WCF I.6, emphasis mine). Some doctrines and commandments are spelled out for us, while others are implied or systematically pieced together. For instance, there isn't a single verse citation we could make to spell out the doctrine of the Trinity, and yet by good and necessary consequence we rightly deduce that there is one God who exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are the same in substance, equal in power and glory. This same principle that leads us to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity likewise has led Reformed churches throughout history to believe in and practice infant baptism, the regulative principle of worship, and Sunday as the Christian's Sabbath. None of these doctrines are explicitly spelled out in the New Testament, yet we believe they are rightly deduced from Scripture by this principle of good and necessary consequence.

This principle can be demonstrated in numerous places in the New Testament, but the clearest example can be seen in Jesus' dispute with the Sadducees found in each of the synoptic Gospels.<sup>1</sup> In Matthew 22:23-32 the Sadducees try to trap Jesus with a hypothetical scenario involving the obscure case law of levirate marriage, hoping to demonstrate that belief in the resurrection is ridiculous. Jesus' response to their denial of the resurrection was to quote to them Exodus 3:6 where, when speaking to Moses at the burning bush, God introduces himself by declaring "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." With this single quotation, Jesus demonstrates that "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living" and silences the Sadducees. Jesus proves that there *is* a resurrection by citing the fact that God introduced himself to Moses by saying "I am the God of Abraham," and not "I was the God of Abraham." His entire argument hinges on the conjugation of one verb in the present tense

instead of the past tense, which is sufficient to demonstrate the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

Significantly, the passage from which Jesus quotes, Exodus 3, isn't explicitly about the resurrection – it's the call of Moses to be Israel's deliverer. The passage doesn't even mention words like "resurrection," "heaven," "hell," "soul," or "eternity," all terms we associate with the resurrection. And yet Jesus' rebuke of the Sadducees is to say, "You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." This harsh rebuke demonstrates that this is not merely a principle for Jesus alone to use in interpreting Scripture, but one he expected them to have applied as well. No Christian has a right to object, "If you can't show me the Bible verse that says it, then I'm not required to believe or obey it." On the contrary, if a truth or commandment may be proven from Scripture by good and necessary consequence, then yes, you are required to believe and obey it.

As Reformed Christians, this is a principle that ought to be kept in mind as we consider the question of a Christian's identity. At the 47<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCA, the assembly voted to declare the Nashville Statement to be a biblically faithful declaration on human sexuality. And yet, there were many who objected. Particularly, one stated reason was opposition to Article 7's denial which reads, "We deny that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption."<sup>ii</sup> Put simply, the Nashville Statement says that it is unbiblical to identify oneself as a "gay Christian." While this statement is not explicitly spelled out for us in any one verse, it does not need to be because it is rightly deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence.

One of the places we see this most clearly is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Paul writes, "*Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,*<sup>10</sup> *nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.*<sup>11</sup> *And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God*" (NASB). Notice the way Paul speaks of these Christians in verse 11. You *were* these things. Significantly, Paul does not merely say you used to practice these things. He goes beyond that and addresses their identity. It's also significant that Paul says "you were" and not "you are." In Greek the imperfect indicative ταῦτά τινες ἦτε makes the statement even more forceful, highlighting the radical change that has now taken place through union with Christ. The descriptions of verses 9 and 10 are who these Corinthian Christians *were*, not who they now *are*. And this is a vital distinction. In Jesus' own rebuke of the Sadducees this same kind of distinction was sufficient to demonstrate the resurrection of the dead and warrant the harsh rebuke that his opponents did not know the Scriptures. God *is* the God of Abraham. And who are Christians? You *were* adulterers, homosexuals, drunkards, and covetous, etc. And by good and necessary consequence the text teaches that this is not who a Christian *now is*. This is because to be washed by Jesus Christ cleanses us from more than just legal guilt. If you have been washed by Christ, you have a new identity.

This is why it is correct to say that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception or identity is unbiblical. As Reformed Christians, we cannot be those who apply the principle of

good and necessary consequence to our doctrines of God, worship, and the church, and yet fail to apply it to our ethics.

This should also dispel two popular, yet unbiblical approaches to identity. One popular view of the Christian's identity is the belief that someone who used to struggle with (for example) alcoholism or pornography addiction still *remains* an alcoholic or porn addict, and always will be in this life. It is then argued that when a gay man becomes a Christian there is an ineradicable identification with past sins and temptations, so such a man is now a "gay Christian." Yet this is not an anthropology that comes from Scripture. This is a view of anthropology and sanctification derived from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), a non-Christian self-help group that teaches participants to acknowledge that if they were once alcoholics, they are always alcoholics. Yet AA does not build its anthropology from Scripture. According to AA, participants must simply acknowledge a higher power, sin is a mere moral defect, and there is no view of the transforming power of the gospel. Alcoholics Anonymous is a pluralistically spiritual attempt at behavioral modification. But the gospel of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ is not about behavioral modification. When we are united to Christ by faith, Christ frees us not only from the guilt of our sins, but also their power. And this transformation flows from the fact that we really are new creatures.

In reading 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 do we need to ask if the Christians in Corinth ever committed any of these sins again after their conversion or were tempted in such ways? We know that they did. Paul goes on in chapter 11 to rebuke them for drunkenness at the Lord's Supper (among other sins). Yet even though they fell back into these sins and undoubtedly continued to be tempted from time to time, Paul does not speak of these Christians in terms that they still are and always will be drunkards or homosexuals. Neither does Paul identify them as drunkards or homosexuals *in Christ*. That is who they were apart from Christ, but it is not who they now are. Paul explicitly says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." This is significant for the Christian's identity even as we continue to struggle with sin and temptation in this life. Very simply, our sins do not define us. Christ does. So to adopt a theology of the Christian's identity or a doctrine of anthropology and sanctification from non-Christian organizations, rather than from Scripture, isn't just syncretistic, it's downright dangerous.

Another common view in approaching this topic is to claim that when one describes oneself as a gay Christian, one is not describing identity, but simply one's experience; that this is nothing more than to say that one is a Christian who experiences same-sex attraction (and therefore, that all of this discussion about identity does not even apply). Yet this approach equally goes against Paul's words to the Corinthians. They had not only been defined by those sins apart from Christ, they had also experienced them. Yet when Paul addresses these Christians, he does not separate identity from experience. Indeed, when he rebukes them for sinfully failing to exercise discipline he writes, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened" (1 Cor. 5:7). The church as a whole was experiencing sin by tolerating sexual immorality, yet this rebuke was for God's people to act in accordance with who they are. They must cleanse out the leaven because they *are* unleavened. Even when addressing this famously troubled church Paul very simply writes, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor. 1:2). It is vastly

significant that despite all of the sins this church committed, tolerated, and experienced, which the Apostle Paul had to confront, he still addresses them as *saints*, that is, *holy ones*.

In approaching discussions of identity, it cannot be denied that everyone has unique experiences and it is very easy to view or even define everything around me through the lens of my personal story. But we must remember to be a people whose *only* rule for faith and practice is Scripture. Are these not theological matters? To insist that subjective experience has an equal say with Scripture is to betray our foundation of *sola Scriptura* and to separate theology from Scripture. In this life Christians will continue to experience temptation and we will continue to fall into sin. Yet, with Scripture alone as our guide, we must identify, define, and view ourselves in the same manner that the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture does. According to Scripture, those who are united to Christ are not defined by sins nor by experiences of temptation, but by belonging to Christ.

It should be noted that all of this discussion about the Christian's identity is no mere ivory tower squabbling over terminology. Theology always has implications, and even how a Christian views himself plays a vital role in one's life as a believer. Indeed, sanctification begins and flows out of identity and so to be wrong at this point has the potential for drastic consequences.

When Paul is teaching the Christians in Rome about sanctification he notably does not begin with a list of do's and don'ts. Rather, Paul begins by teaching Christians about their new identity in Christ: "Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him" (Romans 6:6). Paul's teaching at this point is that the Christian no longer has solidarity with Adam, mankind's first federal head through whom all mankind belonged to the domain of sin and death. The Christian is now no longer a citizen of this age of sin and death, but of the eschatological age to come where there is no more sin. The old self is dead and the Christian is now a new creation. So it is not without significance that Romans 6:11 is the first imperative in the entire book of *Romans*. There, Paul writes that Christians are to "consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). This first commandment in all of *Romans* concerns identity. This is because what we do flows out of who we are and the Christian is to consider himself (his *identity*) as dead to sin and alive to God. Sanctification *begins* with one's identity as a new creation in Christ.

This is why a moniker such as "gay Christian" is not simply unwise, it is unbiblical. To adopt such a moniker is to deny that the old identity has died. One who is a citizen of the Kingdom of God must consider the old self (and the old identity) dead, because in the new creation, of which the Christian is *already a citizen*, there is no more sin or death. To join together the descriptions of a sinful lifestyle or temptation - one's old identity - to one's new identity in Christ (e.g. to claim to be a "gay Christian") is to put your hand to the plow while looking back. This is why Paul speaks the way he does in Romans 7, that when he sins, "I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me" (Romans 7:20). This is not to say that the Christian now has split-personality disorder or to absolve him from responsibility of any sins he now commits. Rather, Paul's point is that for those in Christ our sins are something foreign and utterly incompatible with our new identities.

So when Paul finally does give us the ethical implications of the gospel, it should be no surprise that he writes what he does in Ephesians 5:3, “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.” Notably, Paul does not simply say these sins should not be practiced. He goes beyond that. Paul writes that these sins should not even be *named among us*. The ground for this commandment and those that follow is that Christians are saints, that is, *holy ones*. These sins do not fit with who we are, holy citizens of the new creation. It is a contradiction. Paul goes on to argue in verses 6 and 7 that it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience and that we are therefore not to become partners with them. Paul is presenting the dichotomy between those who are now holy ones and those who are sons of disobedience. We do not partner with them, we do not walk as they walk, and the sins they commit are not even to be named among us. Yet what is it to call oneself a “gay Christian?” That is to take a name of the sons of disobedience, a form of sexual immorality, and partner it with our new identity as holy ones in Christ. It is an unbiblical contradiction of identities. Since sexual immorality is not to be named among us, it necessarily follows that there is no justifiable reason why it should be among our names and identities.

So through this it should be seen that, by good and necessary consequence, it necessarily follows that any self-conception that joins any sin with identity in Christ (e.g. gay Christian, lesbian Christian, adulterous Christian, etc.) is unbiblical. As Christ demonstrated when he silenced the Sadducees, it is too low a view of Scripture that refuses to believe in and obey only that which is explicitly spelled out. “I am the God of Abraham” demonstrates that there is a resurrection and those who deny it know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. Likewise, the full doctrine of the Trinity flows out of reading the good and necessary consequences of Scripture. So does the hypostatic union. And so does rejection of a gay self-conception united to one who is united to Christ. We cannot be those who apply good and necessary consequence to our doctrine, yet refuse to apply it to our ethics. Even though in this life Christians still battle and experience temptations and sin, such sins do not define us anymore. Those things are who we *were*, not who we now *are*. What defines those of us who have been washed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is that we are in Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> For a full treatment of good and necessary consequence, see *By Good and Necessary Consequence* by Ryan McGraw (Reformation Heritage Books).

<sup>ii</sup> You can access the full Nashville Statement here: <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>