

A Response to Missouri Presbytery's BCO 31–2 Investigation of TE Greg Johnson

Covenant Church (PCA), Fayetteville, Arkansas

October 7, 2020

The Session of Covenant Church, Fayetteville, AR, responded privately to Missouri Presbytery's distribution of its report concerning our BCO 31–2 request, in an effort to encourage them to clarify their positions and to turn away from their theological errors. Covenant received a response from Missouri Presbytery in early 2021 instructing the Session that such engagement with the reports missed the point, because Missouri Presbytery did not adopt the reports but only their recommendations. We disagree. Though Missouri Presbytery may not have adopted these reports, they did disseminate them publicly in the midst of the present controversy. So it was appropriate for us to respond to them, given our concerns. We were not making a political gesture; we were seeking the truth. Even still, we have no regrets. We have learned from Missouri Presbytery's communication with us. If Missouri Presbytery does not consider the content of the reports as necessarily representative of their views, then we can, with a clear conscience, disseminate our responses to those reports, in the hopes of contributing to the discussion regarding an important and ongoing theological disagreement in the PCA. Below is the text of Covenant's response to Missouri Presbytery.

The Session of Covenant Church, a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America in Fayetteville, Arkansas, has received a report from Missouri Presbytery (MOP) concluding its investigation into TE Greg Johnson. We hope this response identifies our points of continued disagreement and clarifies our ongoing concerns. Although MOP chose to respond publicly to our request, we currently believe it best to continue in private correspondence and to await your timely response. We recognize and respect your zeal to defend a presbyter you love, but in doing so you make several serious errors. We highlight them privately in order to give you the opportunity to correct them publicly in due course.

We believe there are fundamental errors in (1) MOP's assessment of the process we followed; (2) MOP's verdict of exoneration of TE Johnson; (3) MOP's view of homosexual identity; (4) MOP's understanding of homosexuality and sin; (5) MOP's understanding of the above reproach qualification for the ministry; (6) MOP's dismissal of the more heinous nature of homosexual sin; and (7) MOP's failure to consider the consequences of tolerating these errors in the life of the church.

(1) Process

MOP suggests that Covenant Church, along with the other courts, should have given TE Johnson “*an informal opportunity to set out his views in writing* (so that there is a record) before any formal BCO procedures are set in motion” (MOP's emphasis, 14.23–25), because the Ninth Commandment forbids misconstruing intentions, words, and actions (14.27–30). (Cf. MOP's specific criticism of one presbytery

along these lines at 52.13–16.) Slander is speaking falsehoods for the purpose of injuring someone’s reputation. We communicated only truths to MOP, and our BCO-required inquiry had no such nefarious motive. Furthermore, WLC 145 also says the Ninth Commandment forbids “holding our peace when inquiry calleth for either a repair from ourselves, or complaint to others.” Hence our BCO 31–2 request.

We did not encounter TE Johnson at his church but on the floor of General Assembly. MOP laments “the timing of events was unfortunate in the sequence of TE Johnson openly sharing his story . . . as it appeared to some that his aim was to make a big splash” (56.37–40). But TE Johnson recognizes the importance of timing. He speaks of carefully scheduling when his congregation would hear his story (eight days after presbytery, though presbytery was postponed [42.27–29]), and he speaks about a coordinated social media effort in advance of actual media coverage (42.32–33). “Yes,” he says, “this was orchestrated to get the story out before the bloggers could twist it” (42.33–34). The result: “It became the second most read CT testimony of the year, and the magazine since has used it in their fundraising” (43.2–3). We did not need to ask TE Johnson to clarify his views privately; he had made them abundantly clear in public.

We believe TE Johnson’s own words affirm the wisdom of our handling of our BCO request. Instead of having to respond to inquiries about personal details of his life from strangers, he received patient inquiries from those elders who know him best. MOP reports that TE Johnson “felt ambushed” in an interview (11.3). Johnson himself writes that “the interview was a traumatic 3-on-one train wreck” (17.17–18). He says that after speaking at General Assembly, “I couldn’t stop from shaking” (43.11). Indeed, he continues, someone approached him, “afraid that I was having a panic attack” (43.12–13). By contrast, he writes, “My presbytery knows me” (37.40). Our letter asked those who know TE Johnson best to ask him the difficult questions. We believe our BCO request was the loving thing to do.

MOP’s suggested alternative strategy of submitting questions for written responses is not an informal approach. Written communications can enter into the public domain, even without the knowledge of the correspondent. MOP itself quotes from “something he [TE Johnson] wrote to a fellow teaching elder in February of this year” (56.45), and we assume MOP received permission to use this private correspondence in its report. MOP did not consult with us before publishing our request or MOP’s response to it.

Finally, if MOP believes courts should pursue an informal approach prior to a formal one, then MOP missed an opportunity to model such an approach in its dealings with Covenant Church. We have no record of any requests, informal or otherwise, to clarify our views, either before or after the promulgation of MOP’s report.

(2) Verdict

MOP believes TE Johnson does not compromise or dishonor his identity in Christ by identifying as a homosexual, and MOP also believes TE Johnson meets the above reproach qualification for being an elder. MOP calls these allegations 2 and 4, respectively. Though we have quarrels with MOP’s characterization of our concerns, we nevertheless follow MOP’s structure to facilitate clarity.

Here at the start, we want to commend the forthrightness of MOP and TE Johnson. TE Johnson identifies himself as homosexual, and even, depending upon the audience, as gay. MOP agrees with many of our statements about homosexuality and its sinfulness.

So, where are the differences? First, there is the question in allegation 2 regarding identity, on the one hand, and the nature of sin, on the other. We think MOP and TE Johnson move between imprecisely defined forms of sin in order to say someone can identify as a homosexual but can do so in a way that reflects one's knowledge of fallen predispositions and not one's actual choices.

Second, MOP disagrees with us about the relationship of the above reproach qualification as it relates to one's self-identification as a homosexual. Here the disagreement is more straightforward. MOP and TE Johnson must defuse the explosiveness of 1 Corinthians 6:11, maintaining that Paul does not mean what he says. MOP must also illegitimately relativize the above reproach qualification itself.

Finally, MOP says allegation 2 summarizes the concerns of all four courts, but Westminster Presbytery (21.5–9), Grace and Peace (21.11–15), Covenant Church (21.17–22), and Southeast Alabama Presbytery (21.24–27) express concern over TE Johnson's self-conception or identification as a homosexual. MOP mischaracterizes this concern as "self-identifying as a same-sex-attracted man" (20.40), but TE Johnson himself identifies his sexual orientation as homosexual (25.40). Though he says he has not referred to himself as gay since the 1990s (63.41–42), he says he has identified himself as gay to activists and non-Christians (64.7–10). MOP likewise notes that "*occasionally in conversations with unbelievers he will identify himself as being gay*" (MOP's emphasis, 62.15–16).

(3) Identity

Covenant Church, MOP, and TE Johnson all seem to agree with the following statement: TE Johnson identifies as a homosexual. But TE Johnson and MOP take this identification to be a non-core, non-aspirational, and descriptive identity, rather than a core, aspirational one (60.23–29). If possible, such a non-core, non-aspirational, and descriptive identity should be something at the periphery of one's self-conception.

We believe TE Johnson's words suggest this non-core, non-aspirational, and descriptive identity is not at the outer edge of his self-conception. He affirms that he was a gay atheist, who became a Christian, though his sexual orientation did not change (63.44–45). Additionally, he avoids identifying as gay before "conservative Christians," because "they struggle to hear" it (64.11–12), adding, "It is not about creating an identity for myself; it is about loving the person to whom I am speaking" (64.12–13).

We find it difficult to discern this desire in his speaking against, and not for, Article 7 of the Nashville Statement—even going so far as to say that affirming Article 7 would speak against people like him. If being homosexual is not at the core of who TE Johnson is or who he aspires to be but is instead only a description of what he thinks he is, then we wonder why TE Johnson should think Article 7 speaks against him.

MOP attempts to make a grammatical case for a non-core, non-aspirational, and descriptive identity,

but here MOP makes a grammatical distinction without offering an argument for why it applies in this particular case. MOP says that terms including “‘gay’ no more define or modify ‘Christian’ than the adjective ‘tired’ defines or modifies ‘womanhood’ in the statement, ‘I am a tired woman’” (62.36–37), suggesting that modifiers do not modify.

MOP continues, “In that statement we are simply learning two facts about the person speaking—facts that may or may not be conceptually related to each other: that this person is tired and that this person is a woman” (62.37–39). MOP’s statement identifies an issue about how adjectives and nouns interact, but MOP offers no argument for their argument apart from a speaker’s intention (62.44–45, 63.13).

But intention and motive alone cannot by themselves determine the function of an adjective. Counterfeit money isn’t counterfeit and money; it’s not money, regardless of one’s intention. An enormous flea is not enormous and a flea; it’s actually quite small, independent from one’s motive. In contrast to MOP, TE Johnson shows self-conscious sensitivity to this issue (44.1–2). MOP cannot change the rules of grammar so must ultimately rely on them, too. So, for example, when MOP writes favorably of TE Johnson’s concern to avoid a “simplistic inference” (45.30), MOP isn’t communicating admiration for TE Johnson’s desire to avoid things that are simplistic and things that are an inference. Instead, MOP uses the common rules of grammar to modify a noun with an adjective. MOP’s assertion that an adjective and its noun offer “two facts” cannot by itself do the work of distinguishing a person from the adjectives he chooses to adopt for himself.

(4) Homosexuality and Sin

TE Johnson seems to suggest that someone can identify as a homosexual without affirming it by blaming its presence in him on original sin. TE Johnson seems to believe he has inherited a greater degree of homosexuality in the original corruption he inherited from Adam: “Being same-sex-attracted is an unchosen and unwanted effect of the fall that has brought a good deal of loss into my life” (49.43–44), he writes, and he classifies “the condition known as same-sex attraction or homosexual orientation” as an example of “original corruption” (17.33–34).

He places being gay or having a homosexual orientation under the heading of “sinful conditions,” contrasting them with “actual sins” that have Greek New Testament terms, such as (in his translation) “having gay sex as a top” or “having gay sex as a bottom” (19.36). TE Johnson believes that thinking otherwise illegitimately imports contemporary constructs into the Bible and harms our missionary endeavors as well (e.g., 19.38–20.2).

To make this case, TE Johnson distinguishes, and MOP defends, three forms of sin: state, acts, and a *tertium quid* that we believe illegitimately bears the weight of the argument. Using Psalm 51:5, MOP seems to identify a state of sin with original sin (consistent with, e.g., WCF 9.3). MOP, referencing Psalm 51:1, also speaks of sinful acts. The *tertium quid*—variously identified as desire, disposition, or motion (45.25, 31)—receives no exegetical support, so we are left to wonder how MOP would define it. To be fair, in the next paragraph, MOP contrasts “being guilty of a sinful state and inner inclination on one hand,

and a sinful act of disobedience that one chooses to do on the other hand” (46.14–16). But this contrast suggests MOP wants to coordinate original sin and “inner inclination” (or desire, disposition, or motion) over and against chosen sinful acts. MOP does so without scriptural support.

MOP’s appeals to the WCF and the WLC clarify the differences between us. MOP says WCF 6.5 and WLC 150–151 entail a distinction between “the sin of our (corrupted) nature and its ‘motions’” and “our willful acts of disobedience, whether internal evil thoughts or external behavior” (46.36–38). Let’s be clear: MOP takes *motions* to mean something different from *willful acts*, even internal ones.

But a motion cannot be contrasted with an act because the WCF uses *motion* and *act* interchangeably. WCF 16.3 encourages believers not “to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit.” The word *motion* here stands in for *act* and not for an *involuntary inclination* of the Spirit.

So MOP makes a distinction for which it offers no scriptural support and a distinction that also speaks against the WCF’s own language. Any motion of the Spirit is an act for which the Holy Spirit is morally responsible, because he graciously and marvelously chooses to act. Any motion of the homosexual is an act for which the homosexual is responsible, because he chooses to act.

Consider TE Johnson’s own discussion of repentance. “When I feel my heart melting because someone good-looking just walked by—even though no lustful thought has surfaced,” he says that he is “already praying, ‘Lord have mercy on me, a sinner’” (12.5–7). MOP and perhaps even TE Johnson may say he is *not* choosing not to feel the desire (in keeping with his three forms of sin), but it seems as though he is doing precisely that, to his credit. He seems to be living better than his theory.

To be clear, if TE Johnson notices someone’s appearance with mere admiration, he may feel shame, but he should not do so. A man can recognize another man’s handsomeness without desiring sexual union with him. However, *attraction* can mean more than interest or admiration. If the word stands in for sexual desire, then he is already actively sinning! He does not need to pray against lust but repent of it.

Because MOP moves a person’s specific homosexual inclinations away from sinful actions and to the Fall, MOP must take a critical view of straightforward readings of the Bible. On the reading of Romans 8:9–13 and Colossians 3:5 by Grace and Peace of Anna, Texas, MOP writes, “Nevertheless we reject this line of reasoning as simplistic and unable to account for the very strong emphasis in Scripture on the truth that the corrupt nature and its inclinations remain in believers until they die . . .” (70.1–3). MOP’s own reading of Grace and Peace’s position may be simplistic (technically, MOP offers a straw man), but Grace and Peace’s argument isn’t. They say God’s grace can and does replace sinful desires with proper ones in the very passage MOP quotes (69.42–44), even as they—in a passage unquoted by MOP—recognize that sin continues in those who are new creatures in Christ (Appendix, 32.3–7).

Blaming specific sins on the Fall produces genuine confusion. MOP speaks of “specific sins” that are “far too prevalent” (61.1–4). But what does MOP mean? Tellingly, MOP appeals to WCF 6.2, 6.4, and 6.5, leading us to think they have in mind *not* specific sins but original corruption instead (61.6–20). But MOP does not reference WCF 6.3, which speaks of “the same death in sin, and corrupted nature” and not of a

variegated sinfulness—with one man predisposed towards homosexuality, the other toward drunkenness. We believe MOP assumes something that must be demonstrated, namely, that each person inherits a different basket of sinful tendencies from our forefather Adam.

Though it seems plausible (due to each person’s unique experience) that different people have inherited different sinful tendencies, we can’t know what we have or haven’t inherited from Adam until we try it out. MOP and TE Johnson assume a man can know his particular sinful predispositions without actually sinning. TE Johnson’s own statistic—that homosexual orientation is “about 31% genetic”—actually affirms that homosexual orientation is overwhelmingly *not* genetic (32.26). The Bible speaks clearly of generational sin, but God, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen not to reveal how this occurs.

While we want to avoid an extended discussion of the possibility of genetic predispositions to certain sins, we do note how, in some areas of our lives, the recognition of a genetic predisposition to a certain negative outcome should result in a change of behavior. For example, a known genetic predisposition to heart disease should make a man, in keeping with the Sixth Commandment, more diligent about his habits and activities with a view to preserving life. If someone comes to believe he is predisposed to a certain sin, he should be more cautious about behavior and identify, and not less.

(5) Above Reproach

Speaking only for ourselves, we believe MOP’s summary of our position misrepresents our concern. MOP writes, “The appeal to both the ‘beyond reproach’ criterion and the ‘more heinous’ clause in WLC #150 - #151—but especially the latter—*seems* to imply that self-identifying *in any way* as a homosexually-inclined sinner is *particularly* egregious, and is cause for deposing a minister who otherwise has demonstrated true fidelity to Christ and has had an effective ministry” (MOP’s emphasis, 36.9–13). MOP moves away from Covenant’s concern for a specific teaching elder who identifies as a homosexual. MOP stretches this concern (using the phrases *seems to imply* and *in any way*) to be more inclusive than we intended. We wrote, “The question is not about being honest in our struggles against sin but about what kinds of self-conceptions a Christian should endorse” (Appendix, 26.34–35). TE Johnson did not say he struggled against a particular temptation; he said that affirming Article 7 of the Nashville Statement would do something to him, thus placing himself in a category of self-identification rather than struggle.

We believe there is an objective standard of being above reproach in contrast to MOP’s claim that “*what will be and what will not be ‘above reproach’ is inherently a subjective one, varying from one time and place to another*” (MOP’s emphasis, 83.36–37; cf. 37.17–19). We believe such a position is false, pernicious, and injurious to the peace and purity of the church. It’s false, because a qualification for elder does not vary from one time and place to another. It’s pernicious, because, if a particular subjective view becomes widespread, it could bar capable men from the ministry simply because a presbytery takes a dim view of certain social or political positions, disqualifying those who hold them as not being “above reproach.” And, finally, it is injurious to the peace and purity of the church because it opens the door to object to ordinations that have nothing to do with biblical qualifications, but subjective ones instead.

Covenant’s appeal to nature provides an answer to MOP’s mistaken belief that the above reproach qualification is an “*inherently subjective one, varying from one time and place to another*” (MOP’s emphasis, 83.37). Saying that something is a sin against nature is most obviously not an inherently subjective judgment but a preeminently objective one. MOP may think the judgment false, but MOP cannot say it is subjective, without distorting the ordinary meaning of that word. We want to emphasize that MOP agrees with the idea that “‘contrary to nature’ [is] characteristic of all homoeroticism” (81.6). We find it difficult to reconcile self-identifying with a sin “contrary to nature” while simultaneously being a man “above reproach.”

1 Timothy makes clear that this requirement is far from being a question of market research, one that compares “an older generation of Christian lay people and presbyters” with “younger people growing up in the 21st century” (40.38–43). Being above reproach is not defined by the estimation of others. When Paul says an elder should be well thought of by outsiders in 1 Timothy 3:7, he isn’t simply reiterating what he says in verse 2 (that he should be above reproach). One’s reputation in a particular social context and being above reproach are different things. We see the objectivity of the above reproach qualification most clearly when, in a different context, Paul exhorts Timothy to flee what false teachers love. Paul exhorts him in 1 Timothy 6:14 to keep or guard the commandment unstained and above reproach (τηρησαί σε τὴν ἐντολὴν ἄσπιλον ἀνεπίληπτου) until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though times and places vary in their attitudes towards sin and doctrine, the Word of God in Timothy should stand firm.

(6) A Sin More Heinous

MOP misunderstands our concern about heinousness. MOP says that “care must be taken to avoid the over-simplified and erroneous conclusion that the Westminster Standards teach that *every instance* of homosexual sin is always more heinous or egregious than every instance of heterosexual sin” (MOP’s emphasis, 85.10–12). Covenant’s concern does not arise from the infinite complexities of possible aggravations to any particular sin. The contrast of a one-night stand between two men and “a single heterosexual man who has a 6-month affair with a Christian married mother of three children” in MOP’s 2017 Report demonstrates this misunderstanding (87.17–27).

First, neither man should be a teaching elder. Second, MOP appeals to two different situations. Sins against nature *ceteris paribus* are more heinous than sins that are not against nature. Put differently, being against nature is a per se aggravation of any transgression. A better parallel: two unmarried men having sex versus an unmarried man having sex with an unmarried woman. These sins are not equally heinous.

TE Johnson says his story was shared publicly to help “that teenage kid in youth group who thinks he’s the only one” (26.6; cf. 27.14–15, 57.7). But if TE Johnson’s story is helpful, why did the congregation receive “a heads-up the previous Monday by video, including what to expect and the provision of children’s church for older kids” prior to his unicorn sermon(42.38–39)?

All elders must recognize their sinful tendencies. This recognition is not a cause for disqualification

from office but is, instead, an integral part of sanctification. We cannot imagine any court of our denomination claiming otherwise. However, identity is different.

Hence the controversy over 1 Corinthians 6. TE Johnson says, “Sexual orientation is a nineteenth century scientific and social construct,” and he says that, in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul uses two terms that refer “not to sexual orientation or temptation but to actual sexual practice between two men” (18.27–29). MOP says, in defense of TE Johnson, that a “failure to distinguish sinful acts from ongoing sinful inclinations . . . is what leads to a caricature of his views that makes it appear he is setting aside the apostolic teaching of I Corinthians 6:9–11” (54.15–19).

Put simply, MOP and TE Johnson want Paul to say something that he does not. They read Paul as speaking against acts alone, but he isn’t—nor can he. We all act from our identity. Being and doing go hand in hand. Indeed, one way to disavow the act is to reject the identity that goes along with it. Though the stingy man acts stingily (Proverbs 23:6–8), Christians should always find themselves alienated from, and not identified with, the sins they commit (Romans 7:20).

Both MOP and the PCA Ad Interim Committee Report appeal to authorities that disagree with MOP’s understanding of 1 Corinthians 6. MOP points to Gordon Fee’s commentary, characterizing it as “masterful” (55.34) and its exposition of 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 as “very helpful” (55.39). MOP references pages 242–245 (55.40).

We urge MOP to continue on to pages 247–248. There Fee says that “Paul is urging the Corinthians to become what they are They are to *be* and *behave* differently from the wicked” (his emphasis). Fee also contradicts MOP’s mistaken claim that those that emphasize the word *were* in 1 Corinthians 6:11 (as Southeast Alabama Presbytery does [Appendix, 5.5]) are mistaken (53.39–54.15). Fee does the same: “Security in Christ there is, to be sure, but it is a false security that would justify sinners who have never taken seriously ‘but such *were* some of you.’ That is to whitewash the sinner without regeneration or transformation; Paul simply would not understand such theology” (his emphasis, 248). He continues, “What is most often missing in such theologies is the central ingredient in Paul, the transforming work of the Spirit” (248). As he says on 1 Corinthians 5:7, “‘Become what you are’ is the basic nature of Paul’s parenthesis [exhortation]” (217).

Paul’s emphasis on becoming what you are conflicts with someone who adopts homosexuality as a self-conception and has, according to this imperative, an obligation to act on that self-conception. Act in accordance with who you are. If you’re gay, then act like it, and if you’re not acting like it, then you’re not gay. MOP may desire to characterize such thinking as simplistic, but in so doing, they contradict their own authority’s interpretation of a key biblical text.

MOP should also consider the Ad Interim Committee Report’s discussion of Paul’s use of terms in 1 Corinthians 6:9. They refer Paul’s terms not to the sexual acts exclusively but also to the people involved (AIC Report, 6n4). In contrast to TE Johnson’s claim that Paul refers to the acts of having “having gay sex as a top” or “having gay sex as a bottom” (19.36), Fredrik Ivarsson, in the book chapter the committee cites, shows systematically how *μαλακός* applies both to the act and to the person: “When *μαλακός* is

used pejoratively for a man in ancient texts,” he writes, “it means he is being depicted as effeminate. The ‘soft’ man lacks masculine posture, courage, authority and self-restraint; he is like a woman. One aspect of this softness is penetrability” (180). He continues, “The penetrated male is of course μαλακός, but being μαλακός does not necessarily imply being penetrated” (180). To use TE Johnson’s terminology, “having gay sex as a bottom” means that one is of course μαλακός, but one can be μαλακός without “having gay sex as a bottom.”

Ivarsson sees a concern for manliness in Paul’s approach to the Corinthians: “As their sole father in Christ, he can demand obedience (1 Cor 4:15–17) and, if they do not comply willingly, he will have to produce his stick (4:21)” (172). “How, though, could the Corinthian men be accused of effeminacy?,” Ivarsson asks. “We have seen how Paul in 1 Cor 5–6 attacks the arrogant leaders’ lack of authority over other men in the congregation. Another deficiency concerns their women. Paul’s much-debated statements on women’s behavior might be aimed more at the men than at the women” (181). The Corinthian church is so unmanly that it boasts about its sexual permissiveness instead of disciplining it; the church leaders are so unmanly that women in the church disregard their authority. And Paul says: Be what you are, not what you were. You were soft, but now you are men.

In order to describe and defend TE Johnson’s homosexuality, MOP distinguishes three forms of sin (which we discuss above). We actually think that it would be most helpful to identify four, and we will do so using MOP’s own response. MOP recognizes that we regularly discover our predispositions through actual sinful activity, going down into the door of the basement of our hearts (46.3–6). We have predispositions; we also commit actual sins and develop a newfound recognition of our individual tendencies to commit them. TE Johnson and MOP also recognize certain character traits that are stronger than recognized tendencies (30.17–20, 36.43–46). Finally, all parties see a difference between those engaging in homosexual activity, on the one hand, and predispositions, recognized tendencies, or settled character traits, on the other (38.42–44; cf. 55.19–22).

Covenant Church takes TE Johnson’s insistence on being identified as a homosexual—even in a non-core, non-aspirational, and merely descriptive sense—as an indication that homosexuality is more than a predisposition or recognized tendency for him but is instead a settled character trait, though, to be clear, not one exercised in homosexual activity. True, what someone says about himself may be different from his actual identity (59.4–8). But we do have to take people seriously and consider what claims they make about themselves. Identifying with one’s sin in this way speaks of a recognition of a sinful character trait more than a recognized tendency to sin.

The recognition of defective or vicious character traits can and should disqualify people from holding certain offices. Take an example removed from the present concern: cowardice. Cowardice is a vice; it is a sin. In any army larger than a handful, we can expect there to be some soldiers who are predisposed to cowardice. Some will recognize their tendencies towards cowardly acts. Others may be genuine cowards through and through. Finally, there will be some who are actively engaged in acts of cowardice, e.g., they are now running from the enemy when courageous soldiers are standing their ground. A private can function well in an army even though he quietly and embarrassingly recognizes a tendency to cowardice.

But we cannot imagine a frontline officer endorsing cowardice as part of his identity, even in a non-core, non-aspirational, and merely descriptive way. First, cowardice is antithetical to the mission of the army. Second, a combat officer who says he is a coward declares himself unfit to command. Third, endorsing cowardice in any way encourages those who flirt with cowardice to identify more closely with it. In Deuteronomy 20:8–9, commanders are appointed only after the removal of those who are fearful and fainthearted.

Homosexuality is sinful. In any denomination larger than a handful, we can expect some ministers to be predisposed to it. The way one recognizes a tendency towards homosexuality is not through a genetic marker but through immoral activity, either through physical activity or the lust for it. A consistent pattern of this activity or lust will result in a settled character trait focused on the pleasure of such activity. Finally, there will be those who identify as homosexuals who engage in an active homosexual lifestyle.

While we can imagine a layperson serving the church well even though he recognizes a mere tendency towards homosexuality, we cannot imagine a church officer endorsing homosexuality as part of his identity, even in a non-core, non-aspirational, and merely descriptive way. First, homosexuality is antithetical to the mission of the church. Second, an officer who identifies as a homosexual declares himself unfit to shepherd. Third, endorsing homosexuality in any way encourages those who flirt with homosexuality to identify more closely with it. Sinful self-identifications are contrary to Paul's exhortation to consider no one according to the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16). We cannot do what the Bible so clearly forbids us to do.

(7) Our Heartfelt Concern

There is much more at stake here than just winning a debate or a vote. There are two fearsome prospects before the PCA: first, erroneous views regarding sin and identity can cause little ones to stumble; second, these erroneous views currently hold some captive.

We write with heartfelt concern for the influence of MOP and TE Johnson on Christians, especially younger ones. MOP applauds TE Johnson for his desire to help the awkward teenager in the youth group by sharing his own personal testimony (57.19–23; cf. 26.5–6, 27.14–15, 57.6–7). But this concern cuts both ways. A teenager who is realizing a tendency towards a sin he wants to resist may be told by TE Johnson or MOP to find his core identity in Christ but to take on a non-core identity as a homosexual as well. Such encouragement to identify as homosexual—even in a non-core, non-aspirational, and merely descriptive way—can deepen and fossilize this theoretical teenager's recognized homosexual tendencies. TE Johnson's ministry will cause, or may already have caused, some of Christ's little ones to accept a grievous sin as an identity.

We also write with heartfelt concern for MOP and for TE Johnson. MOP's report reveals a tolerance and endorsement of serious errors by MOP and by TE Johnson. We respectfully ask MOP and TE Johnson to repent of these errors that cause great harm to them and also to the peace and purity of the church.