

The Nashville Statement and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)

by
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NOTE: “The Nashville Statement” is referenced in the material below. For those unfamiliar with that document, it can be found here - <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>

Part One – Approval of the Nashville Statement Was Unnecessary

In its General Assembly last week the PCA voted to commend the Nashville Statement as a Faithful and Biblical summary of Christian teaching on human sexuality. I have many reasons why I believe this was a mistake and I will outline those in brief over the next few days.

First of all, the PCA simply has no need to take up the Nashville Statement at all and should've simply ignored it.

Why?

Let us imagine that once upon a time an inter-denominational group of Evangelical leaders met in a major US city to craft a ‘Statement’ consisting of affirmations and denials issued to defend a robust Biblical and Evangelical position concerning a major article of Faith that was under threat from an opposing and growing liberalizing cultural and theological consensus.

No need to imagine it. It happened.

Nashville in 2016?

No. Chicago. 1978. “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” was penned and published there and then. Google it if you like.

Among the signatories: RC Sproul, JI Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and James Montgomery Boice. That’s a strong group of leaders... indeed leaders beloved by the vast majority of PCA ministers and members, all valiant in what was then referred to by Harold Lindsell as ‘the Battle for the Bible’.

One might suppose that the PCA would’ve commended it, or insisted on some action to recognize it. Nope. Didn’t happen. Between 1978 and 2019, the Chicago Statement doesn’t even show up in ANY PCA records, with the exception of a brief reference to it in a minor judicial action. That’s it. It was never addressed by the General Assembly.

Why? There was no need to do so. The PCA is governed by its Constitution, which includes not only the Book of Church Order but also the Westminster Standards: the Confession of Faith, together with the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Westminster was deemed clear and sufficient in regard to matters of stating what we believe.

I believe it still is... or at least should be!

The Standards need not be the last word on every matter but they are a sufficient *official* word on these sorts of issues.

The Nashville Statement, whatever strengths it may offer to some, is superfluous to the churches of the PCA; there is no need for the PCA to adopt, affirm, commend or act in any way on this statement any more than there was a need to affirm or adopt or commend the Chicago Statement. The Westminster Standards are not lacking in clarity on these matters, nor is our Book of Church Order.

The Nashville Statement adds nothing new to the theological understanding of our churches. It may well do so for independent churches that lack Confessional Standards, but that is not the case in the PCA. It is theologically redundant in the PCA.

Even if one agrees with every jot and tittle of the Nashville Statement it would be unwise to act on it in some kind of official way. We might just as well have commended some new book, recently published, or some sermon recently preached; either might be very good but neither should be the focus of General Assembly.

The Nashville Statement should most assuredly be one of the documents addressed by the Study Committee on Human Sexuality that the Assembly also voted to create. That is its proper place.

The notion that we should act officially on such documents then led to the late-night debate over yet further documents some Presbyteries wished to commend – a night marked by some of the most frightful speeches on the floor of an Assembly I’ve ever witnessed, one leading directly to a protest the following day, which I gladly signed.

The 2019 General Assembly would’ve done better to stay the course of silence on such documents, following the example of previous Assemblies. It did not do so. And that is cause for sadness.

I think I should add here at the end of this first post that I have addressed *ecclesiastical* action rather than *personal* action. I have very good friends and colleagues who are signatories to the Nashville Statement and it’s altogether fitting that ministers and others do sign such Statements if indeed they wish to endorse them. My point has to do with the ecclesiastical action of one particular denomination rather than the individual actions of particular ministers.

Part Two: What the Nashville Statement Doesn’t Say

When I first opened the Nashville Statement almost three years ago I did so with hopeful expectation. Given the lofty reputation of many of the document’s original signers, I was confident that a comprehensive Statement would be offered, proving helpful to many.

While much of what I read was very good, I was shocked by the Statement’s silence.

I immediately looked for a note of humility, acknowledging the church’s failure to lovingly make Christ known in its ministry to LGBTQ people, often engaging personally and as congregations in behaviors that were demeaning. Beginning with repentance for the log in one’s own eye before proceeding to deal with the retinal issues of others is, after all, typically a proper place for Christians to start. I searched and looked for it, and there it wasn’t.

Silence.

I know Christians like my friend John Freeman of Philadelphia who served the sick with sacrificial devotion and love. There were far more Christians, however, who ignored the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and promulgated the view that AIDS was a direct judgment of God on homosexuals (I guess

they never visited Africa where the disease was decimating the straight and Christian population too). There have been many who've told heart-sick young Christians that if they just had enough faith they'd cease having same-sex desires, offering to them a magic wand approach to sanctification rather than the ordinary means of grace for 'a long obedience in the same direction' as part a community of supportive friends and family who know themselves to be sinful saints as well.

The Statement didn't even offer a note of apology for being the place where, at the other end of the spectrum, falsehoods like the teaching of Matthew Vines could take root, resulting in a false Gospel offered to those who need the authentic message of Jesus in all of its splendor.

Silence.

These abusive behaviors continue today. Recent Tennessee news accounts exposed a Sheriff who also worked as a Pastor and preached that homosexual people should be executed. That's simply a recent story demonstrating an entrenched attitude that shocks none of us who care for people who have faith in Christ while waking up daily with desires for those of the same sex rather than the opposite sex.

Silence.

Not only that, but what about the abuse of children, the sexual harassment and abuse of women, and the porn plague in the Evangelical Church? Any reasonably well-informed person knows these are infinitely greater threats to the holiness and testimony of the Church than any lack of clarity on Biblical teaching concerning human sexuality.

Silence.

I've been a Pastor for forty years and served people who are same-sex attracted in every congregation I've led. I've tried to serve their families too. When you disdain LGBTQ people you send a signal of contempt to those who love them, telling them that those they care for are unworthy of love and further engagement with the Christian Church. Bringing the Gospel in love to all and caring for all is our first and most joyful task as believers in Jesus. The path of truth-telling in a spirit of deep concern that begins with deeper listening is not easy, but it is necessary.

In my recent message at General Assembly, I quoted from the book 'UnChristian: What the Next Generation Thinks of Christianity', by Gabe Lyon and Dave Kinnamon. Here is that quote: "The single most recognized thing about Christians today in the wider culture is that we are anti-gay bigots. 'The severity of the perception surprised us...out of 20 attributes we assessed, both positive and negative, as they related to Christianity...being antihomosexual was at the top of the list...not opposition to gay politics or behaviors but DISDAIN FOR...individuals has become virtually synonymous with Christian Faith.'"

Please note that we Evangelicals are known, not for our message about Jesus, but for our *disdain for individuals*. Unfair? Perhaps. But maybe it's a word that should be heard, a warning to heed. Contempt for persons is a reputation we must seek to disown, discard, and dismantle where possible.

Evangelicals are 'burying the lead' with our obsession about speaking NOT to bring clarity and charity on such matters to the congregations we serve, but to make clear our position 'to the world'. The former is a pastoral responsibility; the latter is a culture war strategy – and it is a failure. The

'world', if you didn't know it already, is perfectly clear about what Evangelicals think on the issue of homosexuality. They are abundantly unclear about whether or not we love people.

Disdain for people – ANY people – is a heretical, Gospel denying way of life. If that is true of us, any of us, then we'd better get busy repenting and repairing that problem before we say one more word 'to the world' just to make our position crystal clear.

Silence, in that case, would be welcome.

Of course, some will say that Evangelicals cannot be accepted as anything other than haters unless we capitulate to the cultural consensus and abandon our beliefs. That's not an option for us, whatever may come. We will be hated by some and accused of hatred as well for not surrendering our views on human sexuality. Jesus loved perfectly and was perfectly hated in return. Love, even perfect love – which none but Christ can show – will not be enough to satisfy some. We must, however, make every effort to, in the words of David Brooks, 'love our crooked neighbors with all our crooked hearts.'

The Gauntlet

In the Spring of 1979, I was a Freshman at the University of Evansville in southern Indiana. A notice was given that for the first time a group of Gay Students would hold an official meeting on campus; I felt I should go to share the Gospel with them if I was permitted to do so. I asked others to go with me, but everyone I asked replied, 'No, but we'll pray for you if you go.'

A rumor began to spread that a group of football players was going to form a gauntlet through which those attending the meeting would have to pass, a story I dismissed as ludicrous. I was wrong. When I arrived, there was a gauntlet, at least thirty strong, all men, ready to hurl verbal abuse at all who passed through it. No security moved them away.

I went through that gauntlet and had spat at me the same abuse the Gay students and their faculty advisor received. It was awful. It was made worse because I knew some of the people in that gauntlet were professing Christians.

I walked the gauntlet of shame and I've never forgotten what it felt like. I've never forgotten what it felt like to share Christ with a group of people that night who were fearful. They graciously gave me the floor and I offered Jesus to them, praying later that night with a couple of students who attended.

The next day the student paper ran a story that a Christian had come to the meeting to proclaim the acceptance of homosexuals to Jesus. My Christian friends were mad at me... they thought I'd compromised the message. If you tell the truth about Jesus you sometimes end up disdained by both sides of the divide. I hadn't compromised the message, except perhaps, as I fear is so often the case, I didn't say radically enough how tenderly and openly Jesus receives sinners. I'm still amazed he received me.

The proclamation of truth and grace in Jesus should begin with an acknowledgment in public statements of our own sin, our own failures, and our own desire to communicate the truth in love.

The Nashville Statement is mute when it comes to our own repentance.

For that reason alone, I could not sign it.

We have work to do and silence on the Gospel and our repentance isn't an option.

Part Three – Speaking the Truth IN LOVE

This is the final blog post I will write on why I could not sign the Nashville Statement or vote in favor of commending it during the recent PCA General Assembly.

It may be hard for some to imagine or understand that a person could be in agreement with 95% of a doctrinal statement on a matter and still be unable to sign it; no statement, after all, is perfect. I do agree with the vast majority of what the Statement proclaims, but my reservations are enough to make me pause.

My objections outlined in the two previous posts have to do first, with the way we handle such Statements in our own Ecclesiastical Assembly, and second with the silence of the Statement on the failures of the Church in regard to its loving and faithful witness to the Gospel among LGBTQ people and their families.

In this last, brief post let me note at the outset that the many good things this document says are exactly the reason so many colleagues and friends of mine feel able and compelled to sign and commend it. We do not disagree with one another, I am sure, on the vast majority of what it does say, and says clearly and faithfully. The Statement even insists that Christian communication of the Gospel be marked by charity as well as clarity:

WE AFFIRM our duty to speak the truth in love at all times, including when we speak to or about one another as male or female.

WE DENY any obligation to speak in such ways that dishonor God's design of his image-bearers as male and female.

As I noted in my second post, I am saddened that the authors of the Statement missed the chance to follow this excellent counsel by beginning their work by noting our very marked lack of love, seen in numerous ways over many years. Nevertheless, I believe the authors and signers earnestly intend to follow Article 11 (I know my friends and colleagues do!), and in this, I rejoice.

Final Notes of Objection

My final three reasons for not commending this document concern the absence of practical pastoral wisdom in its articles, its statement concerning what amounts to 'allowable vocabulary' in the conversation about identity, and the apparent fixation on the issue of human sexuality by those in positions of leadership in some places in the Evangelical community.

First, immediately after the debate at the General Assembly that resulted in a majority vote in favor of commending the Nashville Statement, other Overtures were presented by those stating that these were needed in addition to the Nashville Statement because of the Statement's lack of practical pastoral wisdom and counsel. Several speakers highlighted the weaknesses of the document, all making points I'd agree with. Again, in my view the proper place for the Nashville Statement in the PCA would be as one of many resources the Study Committee would consider in order to set before us a comprehensive, theologically sound, Biblically faithful, and pastorally wise document for the benefit of our Officers and Churches.

One man commented on a previous blog post that the PCA simply HAD to pass this or we would send the wrong signal to the rest of the Church and to the world. Respectfully, I don't think it's wise

to make a PR exercise of our legislative work at General Assembly. Far too much is at stake. Whatever others may make of our communion, it is absolutely essential that we make every effort to present to our churches the very best in scholarship and wisdom. Such an undertaking takes time and rushing the roast to the table before it's perfectly prepared makes for a very unpalatable meal. I look forward to the Study Committee's work precisely because I know and trust the community from which this Committee will be formed; they are in many cases my theological heroes and I am eager to benefit from their work.

Nomenclature and Identity

Second, I want to note the issue of vocabulary in our discussion of identity, but in doing so first note our unity in the Gospel. The disagreement some have over the use of terminology like 'Gay Christian' is addressed in Article VII of the Nashville Statement under the words 'self-conception' and yet this disagreement demonstrates how far reaching our unity is.

As I listened to the debate the other night, at least in reference to the Nashville Statement, I noted the Assembly's deep unity as it debated the merits of commending the Statement or not.

The areas of the debate are over first, the extent of sanctification to be expected in this life and, second, the language used to describe those who experience this struggle. The first is a thorny theological matter of great consequence and I believe our Confessional Standards are a sure guide. The latter is important in regard to identity within the Christian Church and how we address those who are outside the Christian Church when we engage in witness or dialogue. Apart from these issues, there is no disagreement I am aware of. Let's remember that as we try to help one another limp to the finish line on this difficult issue.

I myself do not find terminology like 'Gay Christian' to be helpful, the adjective modifying the noun, and leaving me wondering if a person who so identifies has fully grasped the totality, the radicality, of the change wrought by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit as he unites us to Christ. Others will parse the phrase as a double-barrelled noun, and that too seems problematic. BUT... I cannot and must not make this a shibboleth for fellowship.

Here is the reason this is so.

Firstly, our contemporary nomenclature is filled with the language of nineteenth and twentieth-century psychology, especially in regard to sexuality. Whether we are discussing words like 'homosexual' or 'orientation' we are using words that are rather recent inventions. Scripture does not speak of people in these ways. We are simply men and women, fallen image-bearers of God, regenerated or not. Our identity as humans is rooted in creation, fall, redemption in Christ, and human destiny is to be found in the consummation of the ages. It is not surprising then that when we borrow the language of the contemporary scene in an effort to teach Biblical truths we will sometimes stumble badly and feel a deep need for greater clarity.

Secondly, our world is in the midst of a massive shift away from the moral ecology in which it has found its moorings for centuries, turning to a very uncertain future in which what it even means to be human will be debated in earnest. The roots of our social deconstruction go deep into the soil of romanticism and visions of godless secularism, and the fruits of these aspirations have been and will continue to be bitter and deadly. The revolution around us is more than a generation in the making and was foretold by the likes of Schaeffer and others many years ago and ably summarized by the likes of Charles Taylor today.

In reference to human marital relations, this began not with the approval of homosexual marriage by our Courts, but with the redefinition of marriage codified in our laws as no-fault heterosexual divorce, a change many in Evangelicalism were only too happy to welcome.

In this climate of accelerating radical change, the very language we employ is having a difficult time keeping pace with the revolution. It is not surprising to me that many Christians struggle to find the right words to describe their situation in Christ while at the same time reaching back to the world in witness. Patience is needed. Listening is needed. If the Nashville Statement is used to shut down this conversation – and I have seen it used this way – then it will remain of limited value to us.

Nearly every Christian leader I speak with who has ministry experience with Gay and Lesbian people, or who themselves experience the temptations to live as such, have a certain degree of clarity about the terminology they believe is right and good – *but also a generosity of spirit when it comes to the way others speak*. I have seen this in too many to name here, and I am grateful for their example to me. I would like us to follow their lead, developing the language we need for both pastoral care and evangelistic endeavor.

Was This Really Needed?

Lastly, I can't help but note in closing that while Pastoral and Theological guidance is needed by the Church in every era, and our finest Pastors and Scholars across many disciplines must now give themselves to this important work afresh, I find it odd that this issue, in particular, was seized upon in 2016 as demanding a response. It was in many ways too little, too late, at least in terms of public witness, whatever benefits it may offer the wider Church.

Why not a Nashville Statement on Racism, in the Church and in the culture? Why not a Nashville Statement on the Christian treatment of Refugees as God's image bearers? Are these not also compelling issues about which we might also bear public witness and assist the Church in its work and growth in grace? Why not a Nashville Statement on the abuse of women in Evangelical circles, some in churches led by a signer of the Statement?

I Love My Brothers

In closing, I want to be clear that I love and admire many of my brothers who not only worked on this statement but who have since signed it. I thank them for their labors...this is a difficult and challenging conversation to have among ourselves and I am glad we are doing this work. I am with you and I am for you.

I agree with so much of what the Nashville Statement says. It is not enough, however, for me to sign it. Its tone and spirit are inadequate for me to commend it as a teaching tool. Its silence on a crucial matter is, for me, a deep and fatal flaw.

I must believe our PCA Study Committee will exceed the Nashville Statement in Theological rigor, Biblical fidelity, Pastoral wisdom, and Gospel humility. That is at least my earnest prayer and hope. I love the PCA and delight to serve Jesus as a member and minister of this part of his Church.

Thank you to all who have commented, corrected, and encouraged me. Thank you most especially to my brothers and sisters – so many! – who have written me these past few days to tell me of their stories of Christ finding them in their awareness of same-sex desire, of their children and parents, and siblings, and friends... and how these posts have encouraged them in the Gospel. You have all encouraged me, and I am grateful.

