

What Greg Johnson Won't Tell You About "Double Repentance"

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In his new book *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Zondervan, 2021), PCA pastor Greg Johnson gives a history of the "ex-gay movement." He believes it utterly failed and bemoans the fact that many evangelicals today still think homosexuality can be cured. In the conclusion of the book, Johnson gives what he sees as a new path by way of an old path: double repentance.

Quoting from an obscure 1978 book by Richard Lovelace, the idea of "double repentance" is essentially this: homosexuals in the church must repent of homosexual behavior and the rest of the church must repent of homophobia. It is a path that Greg Johnson claims evangelicals were on before their views were hijacked by the false hopes of the "ex-gay movement" and the fear-mongering of the culture war that fought against the normalizing of homosexuality in America. In short, "double repentance" is what the church should be about in the 21st century.

Most people reading Johnson's book will not have a copy of Richard Lovelace's *Homosexuality and the Church* on their bookshelf. It has long been out-of-print and has never been a major work in the discourse about Christians and homosexuality. This makes it a prime candidate for misrepresentation.

The "Double Repentance" Quote

The first time I ever heard of Richard Lovelace's book *Homosexuality and the Church: Crisis, Conflict, Compassion* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1978) was when Greg Johnson was being examined by his PCA presbytery in 2020 for his concerning views on homosexuality. While defending his own status as a gay celibate minister, Johnson decided to defer to Richard Lovelace.

Johnson set up the quote by saying, "Decades ago, before the culture war, before the ex-gay movement, Reformed scholars were writing about homosexuality unencumbered by the fear and combativeness of our era."¹ Then, after name-dropping several notable endorsements the book received, he quoted from Lovelace's book:

There is another approach to homosexuality which would be healthier both for the church and for gay believers, and which could be a very significant witness to the world. This approach requires a double repentance, a repentance both for the church and for its gay membership. First, it would require professing Christians who are gay to have the courage both to avow their orientation openly and to obey the Bible's clear injunction to turn away from the active homosexual life-style... Second, it would require the church to accept, honor, and nurture non-practicing gay believers in its membership, and ordain these to positions of leadership for ministry. The church's sponsorship of openly avowed but repentant homosexuals in leadership positions would be a profound witness to the world concerning the power of the Gospel to free the church from homophobia and the homosexual from guilt and bondage.²

A Notable Ellipsis

The discerning reader may have noticed that between Lovelace's first point and second point, there is an ellipsis (...). Some form of this ellipsis has been present every time Johnson has publicly referenced Lovelace—in the report from Missouri Presbytery's examination in 2020, the

¹ "Missouri Presbytery Ad Hoc Committee to Respond to Memorial Presbyterian Church Report of Its BCO 31-2 Investigation of TE Greg Johnson", Missouri Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), July 21, 2020, 38. <https://1ar.s3.amazonaws.com/2020/08/2020.07.21-MOP-BCO-31-2-investigation-of-TE-Greg-Johnson-CRM.pdf>

² Ibid., 38.

three times Johnson mentions Lovelace in *Still Time to Care*³, and in a promotional video for *Still Time to Care* that discusses “double repentance.”

This ellipsis was added by Greg Johnson in order to conceal a recurring theme in Lovelace’s *Homosexuality and the Church*: the need for repentant homosexuals to pursue heterosexual reorientation. Here is the full quotation from Lovelace (p. 125), with emphasis added to the revealed portion:

There is another approach to homosexuality which would be healthier both for the church and for gay believers, and which could be a very significant witness to the world. This approach requires a double repentance, a repentance both for the church and for its gay membership. First, it would require professing Christians who are gay to have the courage both to avow their orientation openly and to obey the Bible’s clear injunction to turn away from the active homosexual life-style, **seeking a heterosexual reorientation when this is possible and adopting a celibate life-style when it is not**. Second, it would require the church to accept, honor, and nurture non-practicing gay believers in its membership, and ordain these to positions of leadership for ministry. The church’s sponsorship of openly avowed but repentant homosexuals in leadership positions would be a profound witness to the world concerning the power of the Gospel to free the church from homophobia and the homosexual from guilt and bondage.⁴

It should be obvious why the full quote would be embarrassing for Greg Johnson. The major thrust of his message is that homosexuality cannot be cured. If change happens at all, Johnson assures us, it is a miniscule shift and an anomaly at that. But really, reorientation is a false hope perpetuated by homophobic fundamentalists who refuse to listen to gay people. This is the formal position of Side B proponents, also known as the Revoice movement.

Because of his other ideological commitments, Johnson cannot alert us to the fact that his beloved proponent of “double repentance” was also a proponent of heterosexual reorientation.

Lovelace as a Proponent of Reorientation

Richard F. Lovelace was a professor of church history at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA).⁵ He published *Homosexuality and the Church* in 1978—the same year he finished his work with a denominational task force charged with studying homosexuality and the possibility of gay ordination in the UPCUSA. No doubt *Homosexuality and the Church* came out of the work he had done on the task force. In fact, the book is dedicated to that group.

Lovelace was one of the few conservative voices on the 19-member task force—and, thereby, in the minority in calling homosexual behavior sinful and voting against the ordination of “avowed and practicing homosexuals.” Interestingly, the minority position ended up being what passed the UPCUSA General Assembly in 1978, which did not allow practicing homosexuals to be ordained but did speak of repentant homosexuals who “redirected” their desires in a heterosexual marriage or adopted a “celibate lifestyle.” Lovelace’s position was nearly identical with the “definitive guidance” of his denomination.

³ Greg Johnson has a patchwork version of the Lovelace quote on pages 83, 207, and 244 (in the conclusion of the book) in *Still Time to Care*.

⁴ Richard F. Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church: Crisis, Conflict, Compassion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1978), 125.

⁵ The UPCUSA was the “northern” Presbyterian church. It would merge with the “southern” Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination we know today as the mainline Presbyterian church.

While Lovelace did not seem to see reorientation as possible in every circumstance, he nevertheless was a proponent of it. He speaks favorably about it at multiple points in *Homosexuality and the Church* and offered thoughts on why some homosexuals failed to find lasting change:

Proponents of the active homosexual life-style within the church often attempt to prove that they cannot change or restrain their orientation by citing the failure of much nonreligious psychotherapy, or by protesting that they have “prayed about it, but nothing changed.” But few have shown any awareness of the full resources of spiritual power for change which the Christian can tap.⁶

Later in the book, Lovelace says:

The testimony of gay Christians who have turned away from living out their orientation or have even seen that orientation reversed indicates that a firsthand conviction that God (and not merely the society) speaks against the gay life, based on Scripture, is essential in gaining traction for change. Once a homosexual is gripped by a deep sense of the reality of the holy God and an awareness that He has set limits to human sexuality which rule out the gay life-style, most of the battle for change has already been won, for the heart is already broken in repentance.⁷

Even more, Lovelace does not speak of homosexual orientation as morally neutral:

The attempt to persuade the conscience that homosexuality is sinful only if it is expressed in outward acts will not pacify the conscience, which grasps instinctively the fact that all inner motives which are not perfectly channeled according to the will of God are sin. The homosexual Christian must therefore learn to relax in the honest admission that his motives are disordered, but he must commit himself to their reordering—or at least restraint—through the power of Christ infused in the process of sanctification. As he exercises the faith to believe that he is accepted [by God because of Christ], he must also face the harder task of believing that he is free not to act out the compulsive drives that still may inhere in a part of his personality. If the twin resources of justification and sanctification through Christ are preached and taught and counseled in our congregations, the barriers to reaching and delivering homosexuals will fall.⁸

“Double Repentance” in Context

There is another piece of missing context in Lovelace’s comment about “double repentance.” This is hinted at by the sentence that opens the entire quote, which says (emphasis added):

It is my hope, however, that we will not be forced to resolve our conflicts by emptying the mainline churches of homosexual believers. There is another approach to homosexuality which would be healthier both for the church and for gay believers... [the rest of the “double repentance” quote].⁹

This is an understandable omission on Johnson’s part because it only makes sense with the context of the prior section in the book. However, this missing context really is the skeleton key to the entirety of Lovelace’s point about “double repentance.”

To summarize from *Homosexuality and the Church* (pp. 120–123), Lovelace was making the point that there were many gay people already in the mainline church. He didn’t want to conduct trials to expose them but he wanted gay people, of their own volition, to confess their homosexuality if they were going to turn from it or to transfer out to a gay-affirming denomination if they were not. If they were unwilling to repent and unwilling to leave, Lovelace said they should stay silent about their homosexuality for the sake of unity and the consciences of the other believers in the church who were convinced homosexual behavior was sinful. Overall, it is probably the weakest

⁶ Ibid., 129–130.

⁷ Ibid., 133–134.

⁸ Ibid., 135–136.

⁹ Ibid., 125.

section of the entire Lovelace book—riddled with his own justifications for staying in a spiritually dying denomination.

The reality is that Lovelace knew there were many practicing homosexuals already in the UPCUSA. Some were church members; others were seeking to be ordained. Some may have already been ordained and were wanting to “come out” publicly. Many had spoken directly to the task force over the 15 months that the group met. The task force itself had Chris Glaser on it—an openly gay man who had been denied ordination in his presbytery. Furthermore, during the process of deliberations, a fellow task force member and former General Assembly moderator, Willard Heckel, came out to the group as a homosexual.¹⁰ Lovelace didn’t want to see anyone kicked out of the church but hoped that anyone who embraced homosexuality would have the integrity to repent or leave on their own. Unsurprisingly, this did not happen—even after the conservative position won out at General Assembly in 1978.

When Lovelace presents the idea of “double repentance,” he is speaking of active sodomites who are repenting of their sin and being renewed by the Holy Spirit’s work. He envisions that this work would include some repentant homosexuals eventually being ordained into leadership—but in order for that to happen, any lingering fear of homosexuals would need to be removed. He rightly recognizes homosexual behavior as destructive and ensnaring. Lovelace also sees compulsive homosexual behavior as so deep-rooted and entangling that celibacy will be a marked victory for some.

What Lovelace doesn’t address in *Homosexuality and the Church* is what few had even considered at that point—the question of the gay identity existing apart from sexual expression. This lack is reflected in most discourse about homosexuality at the time—both secular and Christian. Perhaps it reflected a lack in the culture at large, as public expressions of gay identity were only just beginning to take shape during the 70s and 80s. It was only after homosexuality became more mainstream and overall acceptable that the subtler distinctions within homosexuality—such as the distinction between orientation and sexual behavior—became more discussed. With these distinctions also grew an expanded category of ways to “sin” against homosexuals.

The Ambiguous Charge of Homophobia

The other side of “double repentance” is the question of homophobia. The word gets thrown around a lot these days—especially by non-Christians supporting the LGBTQ+ socio-political cause. But with the ascendancy of Side B/Revoice, we now see it used by evangelicals speaking about evangelicals.

In a promotional video for *Still Time to Care*, Greg Johnson says this of Richard Lovelace:

This is an old school, conservative evangelical in the 1970s who is grieved over the sins of the church against gay people. And he wants the church’s gay membership to be embraced. And uh and the “dual repentance” is people like me, we repent of homosexual practice, and everybody else repents of homophobia. And the evidence of that is non-practicing gay pastors.¹¹

¹⁰ Chris Glaser, *Uncommon Calling: A Gay Christian’s Struggle to Serve the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 [originally published San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988]), 169–170.

¹¹ Greg Johnson (@PcaMemorial). “Our approach to care requires a double repentance: repentance from homosexuals who confess their sin and turn away from any homosexual lifestyle, and repentance from the church for its mistreatment of LGBTQ+ members, and then open acceptance of non-straight believers.” November 2, 2021, 8:37 AM. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/PcaMemorial/status/1455529375659593734>

What Johnson doesn't ask is what exactly did Lovelace mean by the term *homophobia*? One really doesn't have to go very far to find out, as Lovelace clearly defined it as "irrational fear and hatred of homosexual persons."¹² He saw this attitude expressed in "the inability of church people to maintain an attitude of compassionate concern for homosexuals while disapproving of the active homosexual life-style."¹³ He didn't give much detail beyond this, but he was describing an unloving attitude that shows no concern for the soul or state of a particular sinner.

Lovelace highlights the "sin of homophobia" in his book because it was one of the few points of consensus that could be reached between the warring parties within the UPCUSA. The liberals in the UPCUSA rejected the authority of the Bible and believed the sexual teaching of Scripture to be astonishingly unclear. Nevertheless, the liberals had no doubt about homophobia: it was a sin. Meanwhile, there were conservative ministers in the denomination, like Lovelace, who also saw homophobia as an issue that needed to be addressed.

Jerry Kirk—a conservative UPCUSA minister—summarized this position well in his 1978 book, *The Homosexual Crisis in the Mainline Church*:

The homosexual has sinned. But Christian, your sin of lovelessness may be keeping him from finding hope and Christ. He may not as yet have found a Christian who will love him as he is and guide him to wholeness in Christ.¹⁴

Similar to Lovelace, Jerry Kirk defined homophobia as "the fear and rejection of homosexuals as people."¹⁵ Yet, even with the call to be compassionate and loving, Kirk still warned people of the dangers of "the gay movement" in the church and society:

The battle is not just a decision for or against ordination of homosexuals. The battle is against moral laxity within the life of the church (its clergy and laity) and in our nation. The battle is for more stable and wholesome family life. The battle is for deeper spiritual vitality and for congregational renewal. God is calling the church to a new sense of prophetic clarity in private morality and for pastoral compassion in ministry to broken people.¹⁶

We should also recognize that, in our day, the term *homophobia* is notoriously ambiguous. It was originally coined by a psychologist in order to describe "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals"¹⁷ but was quickly co-opted by activists to describe any form of discrimination or rejection felt by gay people. More often than not, it is a political word utilized to accomplish political goals. Similar to the current charge of racism, homophobia is less a definable action someone does than a certain feeling of being slighted or treated differently as a minority. With that, the charge of it can be levelled against openly hostile acts of aggression and demeaning language or for "microaggressions" and inferences.

Also, similar to the discussion of racism, homophobia can point beyond personal attitudes of rejection to a systemic privileging of heterosexuality over homosexuality. In this way, any belief that sees heterosexuality as normal and good is demonized by mainstream LGBTQ+ as being *homophobic*—especially orthodox Christianity.

¹² Richard F. Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church: Crisis, Conflict, Compassion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1978), 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴ Jerry R. Kirk, *The Homosexual Crisis in the Mainline Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 125.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷ George Weinberg, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1972), 4.

Greg Johnson will not admit it but the Revoice movement has imbibed enough mainstream LGBTQ+ thinking to join them in using the charge of homophobia as a weapon against evangelical churches. It is a bully tactic—easy to say and nearly impossible to disprove. It feels like it fits—even though what actually counts as homophobia remains ill-defined. Is it homophobic for Christian parents to wish that their gay-identified child were heterosexual? Ed Shaw¹⁸, Nate Collins¹⁹, and many other Revoice proponents say “yes.” Is it homophobic for a church not to hire a youth pastor who says he is same-sex attracted? According to Ray Low at the Revoice 18 conference, yes.²⁰ Is trying to cure homosexuality homophobic? According to Greg Johnson’s book, absolutely.

If everything that falls under this broad definition of homophobia is a sin—which is the implication when anyone says it needs repentance—then the conservative pushback against the LGBTQ+ cultural onslaught is also sinful. That is the charge, a charge implied by the very fact that Johnson cites the “culture war” as part of the problem. Christians should agree that being unkind or hating someone is wrong—but Johnson is trafficking a lot more in that term than Lovelace was.

The Forgotten Threat of Spiritual Warfare

One thing that Richard Lovelace discusses in *Homosexuality and the Church* that Greg Johnson, Nate Collins, Wesley Hill, Preston Sprinkle, Scott Sauls and any of the other proponents of the Revoice movement are unwilling to discuss is the reality of fierce spiritual warfare that surrounds homosexuality. It is a fundamental component of why so many supposed former homosexuals go back to the lifestyle, why so many gay people twist Scripture to justify their lust, and why the LGBTQ+ agenda seeks to either silence or queer the church. Yet Revoice and Greg Johnson have been utterly silent on this.

In contrast to them, Lovelace says few Christians are prepared for the spiritual battle that wages war for their souls—which is a major reason behind the stunted sanctification of many “gay Christians”:

Most Christians today are unaware of the personal and institutional forces attempting to destroy God’s creation, and few are braced against these in the attitude of resistance commanded in Ephesians 6:10–12, 1 Peter 5:8–9, and James 4:7. Ministers and laypersons alike persist in the rather unreasonable belief, left over from the Age of Reason, that there are no superhuman beings active in God’s creation. But the Scripture speaks plainly, if tersely and without superstition, about angelic beings who are loyal to God and benign, or are fallen and malicious. Paul speaks not only of our encountering structures and systems which are demonic, but of our hand wrestling with personal demonic agents (see Ephesians 6:12). Since the principal aim of fallen angels is the destruction or distortion of God’s creation, it is not surprising that frequently these are involved in the twisting of human sexuality, as in the case of Mary Magdalene (see Luke 8:2). While the indiscriminate use of lengthy procedures of exorcism may not be called for in all cases of persistent sexual bondage, what is certainly appropriate in every case is the admonition of James: “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” (James 4:7 NAS). Probably few gay Christians who have “prayed about” their condition without success have been spiritually realistic enough to follow this injunction, and therefore it is not surprising that the condition has persisted without healing or control.²¹

¹⁸ Ed Shaw, *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 95.

¹⁹ Nate Collins, *All But Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 256–257.

²⁰ M.D. Perkins, *A Little Leaven: Confronting the Ideology of the Revoice Movement* (Tupelo, MS: American Family Association, 2021), 53. https://afa.net/media/595378/afa_alittleleaven_perkins_2021.pdf

²¹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church: Crisis, Conflict, Compassion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1978), 137.

For anyone who has worked with or spoken to repentant homosexuals, those who have come to a knowledge of the truth will testify to this reality. Satan loves to keep men and women in bondage to their lusts—and the Revoice movement has found clever ways to help him.

“Double Repentance” versus the “Double Cure”

Greg Johnson has tried to say that the best way forward for the evangelical church is a “double repentance.” As we have seen, he misrepresents Lovelace in order to make his own point. Johnson says there is no cure (apart from final glorification) for dishonorable passions. He also says that this view does nothing to diminish the power of the gospel or the work of the Holy Spirit. *Still Time to Care* attempts to prove that the expectation of change is completely unfounded—and potentially homophobic. If it is homophobic, then it needs repentance.

Johnson says Christians should move beyond trying to “cure” homosexuality in order to “care” for homosexuals. But what makes these ideas so exclusive? The idea that one of them is impossible.

Any sincere Christian should be asking: what is wrong with thinking that there should be a “cure” for the reigning power of any particular sin—even homosexuality? The Bible certainly gives us cause to think there is a cure:

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. (Romans 6:5-6)

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:12-14)

This is where Revoice proponents like Johnson attempt to put “dishonorable passions” (Romans 1:26) in a different category from “shameless acts” (Romans 1:27), as if the latter needs direct repentance and can be overcome by the power of God but the former will permanently inhere in the life of a believer with little change until we are in the new heavens.

Rather than embracing the vexed concept of “double repentance,” Christians should rally around the much more biblically defined concept of the “double cure”:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me
Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.
(from Augustus Toplady's hymn “Rock of Ages”)

Here we have biblical truth, expounded clearly and succinctly. Christ's blood does not merely take away the guilt of our sin but also removes the powerful grip it holds on us, enabling us to choose righteousness over wickedness, allowing us to actually put sin to death even at the level of our desires. “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5).

While Revoice proponents are busy delicately nuancing a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior, the Lord calls us to put it all to death because it is worldly and wicked. Certainly, where there is a lack of compassion or outright hostility among Christians in our churches, the Scripture speaks to this as well: “But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth” (Colossians 3:8). In this all Christians have the power to change—having received this double cure by the blood of our Savior. “Cleanse me from its guilt and power.”



About the Author

M.D. Perkins is research fellow of church and culture for the American Family Association and is a ruling elder at Lawndale Presbyterian Church (PCA). His study into the issues surrounding “gay Christianity” and the Revoice movement are featured in the paper *A Little Leaven: Confronting the Ideology of the Revoice Movement* (2021) and in his forthcoming book *Dangerous Affirmation: The Threat of “Gay Christianity”* (2022).

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