

The *Hesed* Project

Wise Words from Church Members – Interpretation of Scripture

Introduction

Hesed Project CRC has been in contact with leaders and members of various Christian Reformed Churches who are preparing letters, gravamina, and overtures to express their concerns about some of the decisions made by Synod 2022 with regard to human sexuality. We respect that each gravamen or letter is a personal and pastoral matter between an office bearer or member and their church council. They contain words of wisdom that are useful for others; sharing common themes, without identifying information and with permission, is consistent with one of Synod's decisions, which called for continued research and dialogue. Synod then went on to contradict the focus on dialogue by creating conditions of fear, exclusion, and punishment. The Hesed Project CRC will continue to promote open discussion and continuous learning. That's what Hesed – God's gracious and steadfast lovingkindness – looks like in our world.

The wise words are organized into six different themes. The wise words are organized into six different themes. This document explores Interpretation of Scripture, but the full document, with all six themes, is available [here](#).

1. Chastity and Heidelberg Catechism Question & Answer 108
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Interested in engaging with other church leaders on any of these topics or with other questions you may have? Send us a confidential email and let us know what avenues you're exploring or the assistance you may need. The Hesed Project CRC is happy to help. [Email us](#).



Interpretation of Scripture

Thoughtful, God-honoring, Reformed Christians come to different conclusions after careful study of the whole Bible and specific texts relating to sexuality and its role in human relationships. A diversity of conclusions calls for continuing dialogue, rather than making a binding decision that causes further harm to members, family, and CRC ministries.

The Human Sexuality Report used one Reformed approach to hermeneutics: the Creation-Fall-Redemption framework. There are other equally valid hermeneutical frameworks that provide insight into the full meaning of the Bible. Some of these, such as covenantal, trinitarian, and christological lenses, raise important questions and cautions about conclusions reached through the exclusive use of one framework.

Below are three areas of Biblical interpretation being raised by CRC members as reasons for questioning the Synod decision to give one element of one interpretation a binding confessional status. Some of these were raised in overtures for 2022, but there was no evidence of careful consideration and clear response by Synod. Some are new or expanded considerations, adding richness to our theological reflections.

Sharing and further dialogue on these important points is essential to implement the first decision of Synod 2022.

Covenant, Belonging, and Unconditional Love

- Since the Torah is fundamentally a covenant story, some find covenant a more appropriate lens for understanding Genesis, including the accounts of creation. The focus of the creation story is the covenant relationship between God and God's creation. If it was primarily a story about creation order or transmission of creation norms, it would have taken a different form with different content. A covenant lens focuses on God's love for every human being as image-bearer, caring for the good creation, and not being alone.
- A covenant framework allows for the meristic poetry of Genesis, in which contrasts such as day and night, land and sea, earth and sky, and male and female, are understood as inclusive terms, not binary categories. Day and night, for example, includes eventide; land and sea include marsh. Genesis celebrates the richness and diversity of creation, all of which is deeply loved by God. It is not necessary to assert a rigid, male-female binary to understand the meaning of Genesis. Imposing that onto the text is imposing an external paradigm.
- To some writers of gravamina, a narrow interpretation of Genesis 2 is a rejection of the full beauty of God's creation – a violation of covenant with God. A more appropriate response is to celebrate diversity, including sexual diversity, as part of God's created gifts. This finds expression in the lived experience with LGBTQ+ persons in our church



communities, including committed Christians in same-sex relationships. They are at peace with God and contribute their gifts to God’s work in the world in ways that add to the richness of the church community and its witness to the love of God. Witness to the goodness of God’s love in such lived experiences is a strong theme running through gravamina that come from church communities with years of experience.

- Assigning gender diversity to the fall has no foundation in either science or biblical witness. Gender can be more diverse, and many observers note that creation in general is more diverse and interesting than we can imagine. It is not characterized by rigid, binary categories.
- For the Israelites living in Egypt, the Genesis story of female and male as equally image-bearers, working in covenant with God, presented an alternative to the slavery and disregard for some humans, especially women, that they were experiencing in Egypt. That is its Good News.
- In covenant theology, the primary focus of the Torah, including the Ten Commandments, is the love relationship with God and love for all our neighbors and all of God’s creation. God’s unconditional love is reflected by giving priority to the well-being of others and not causing harm. This is the spirit of many gravamina from members who cannot accept that the approach taken by Synod is consistent with their God-given mandate to follow Jesus’ example of living out God’s love.
- Covenant thinking drives many to a conviction that the baptismal vows of God’s unconditional love for children baptized in the church requires a response of acceptance and belonging for children who are LGBTQ+.
- God’s concern for “not being alone” or loneliness is another theme that flows from a covenant reading of Scripture. It is wrong to consign people to loneliness as a result of a sexual orientation they did not choose, by denying some the committed, intimate relationships that God created for the good of humankind. Fellowship in the family of God, while important, is not a substitute for a close, intimate, marriage relationship for those who desire that good thing. Any discussion of gay marriage needs to reflect the testimony of those who find their relationship to be a source of fullness, partnership, and love they cannot find completely in the community of God’s people.

Image-bearing, Moral Agency, and Conscience

Responses to Synod’s decision suggest that further exploration of Biblical teachings about image-bearing is needed. Biblical teaching about image-bearing may provide useful guidance for ethical ways of living in changing historical circumstances. It also grounds more attention to the exercise of moral agency and conscience, which received no attention in the Human Sexuality Report.



- Being an image-bearer of God is fundamental to our identity in Christ and how we live in the world. All humans are called to image-bearing as partners with God in care for God’s creation. Denying someone a full range of ways to be an image-bearer, because of sexual orientation or gender, is a violation of that person’s core relationship with God. Some call it playing God in the lives of other people. Same-sex marriage is a way for gay persons to be image-bearers. Denying them that gift and way to witness in their world shows lack of respect for their status as equal image-bearers.
- For the Israelites in Egypt, the Genesis teaching that all women and all men are image-bearers of God was protest against the slavery and dehumanization they experienced in Egypt. Image-bearing affirms the value of enslaved people and invites them to a new partnership with God for the redemption of the world. It restores dignity and moral agency. The Human Sexuality Report erodes dignity and respect for the moral agency of some persons within our community, based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. These are people often marginalized in our society. Members who see Christian witness as restoring dignity and moral agency find themselves unable to comply with some of the decisions of Synod 2022.
- In the New Testament image-bearing is pictured as being a new creation. “Putting on Christ” is to love as Jesus loved, living in community and expressing care for others and the world, without discrimination. Image-bearing is embodied, and it includes our sexuality. Sexuality is not merely biological, nor is there a Biblical basis to say the biological aspect is determinative, as the Human Sexuality Report does.
- The importance of human agency, as co-creators with God, raises ethical questions about who should make which decisions, including the exercise of consent in intimate relationships. A Reformed witness on current questions about consent could be an important contribution to our culture. It is an important missing piece in the Human Sexuality Report.
- The Reformed tradition places a high value on not binding the conscience of any person more than the Bible absolutely requires, out of respect for every person as equally called to image-bearing and full exercise of moral agency. Every member exercises the roles of prophet, priest, and king within Reformed theology. Members are saying that their conscience requires non-compliance with some elements of Synod’s decision. In the context of ethical issues relating to peace and war, the CRC has moved toward greater recognition of individual conscience. Exercise of conscience also applies to this matter. Squelching the exercise of conscience and moral agency is a serious matter that violates other provisions in the Reformed confessions. It warrants more attention.



Creation Order and Creation Norms

Responses to the decision of Synod suggest a need for more reflection on teachings about creation norms, which were used to justify giving the prohibition of homosexual sex binding, confessional status.

- Genesis is a covenant story about the relationship of God to humans and creation. If its primary purpose was conveying creation norms, it would be much different. God’s providential care for creation and the role of humans as image-bearers and co-creators are reinforced throughout Scripture, but asserting that very specific provisions are creation norms is reading into texts what may not have been there in their original context and is not necessary for salvation. This is also true for matters of gender. Questions about the possible diversity of male and female biology and the complexity of gender are not part of what is presented in the Bible as “necessary to know for salvation.”
- The Human Sexuality Report’s claim that Matthew 19 is about creation order is not the only possible interpretation, say responders to Synod 2022. The context is a debate about the Torah, the book of the covenant. Jesus’ reference to “male and female he created them” does not necessarily lead to asserting binary sexuality as an absolute creation order. Jesus is telling his followers that women and men are equally image-bearers of God, to be respected, not discarded as property or less than fully human. The question comes in a cultural context that treated women as possessions, easily discarded through divorce. The reference to “one flesh” is a reference to the covenantal nature of marriage, which was not being respected by Jesus’ questioners. Living a covenantal life was something Jesus’ listeners would understand. Adultery breaks covenant: it is not first of all about sex. Covenant also prevents “being alone” or loneliness. Some responses see the final decision of Synod as contrary to an obvious reading of this key passage. Applying it in a rigid manner as a creation norm is not the only possible approach and taking it has impacts that contradict its obvious meaning. Members who take following Jesus very seriously cannot accept harmful consequences of one reading when another has good fruits that are consistent with other teachings of Jesus.
- The claim that the male and female binary is the creation norm is not exegetically necessary. It may be a dominant pattern that is consistent with the way God created but there may be more to creation, just as the sun rising in the east is not all there is to say about how earth and sun relate. This problem is even greater when it comes to gender diversity, which did not receive adequate attention by Synod. The consequences and harms of the current direction for trans-gender and intersex persons suggest more time instead of closing doors. Ignoring voices from those communities was harmful in itself, say some, and a violation of covenantal love.

