

Overture to Synod

Classis Lake Erie adopted this overture from the Council of Ann Arbor CRC

Re: Synod 2022 decision, 2020 Report on Human Sexuality

Background:

In June 2022, Synod considered the “Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality” (HSR), and a majority of delegates voted to recommend the HSR to churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality. More significantly, Synod declared that same-sex sexual activity is sinful under all circumstances by asserting that “unchastity” in the Heidelberg Catechism encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, polyamory, pornography and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment.” This codified an interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, thereby granting this interpretation “confessional status.” Confessional teachings must be upheld by all who hold office in the church, including clergy, elders, and deacons, and professors at denominational schools.

We at the Ann Arbor CRC are a community of followers of Christ devoted to the Christian Reformed Church. Our mission statement proclaims that we are a purposeful community engaging the world with the love of Jesus through the practice of Christian hospitality. Within our community, we hold a diversity of opinions regarding the HSR, and we have participated together in a series of congregational listening circles to discuss Synod’s decision. Within those listening circles, we have heard that the confessional status decision leaves our community broken and unable to offer the hospitality and love Christ has called us to give. While discernment of God’s will for our lives with regard to human sexuality is important, this topic does not lie at the heart of the Gospel or in core Christian doctrine. Making this interpretation confessional does not allow for differing convictions among sincere Christians striving to discern God’s will. As a community, we love the Christian Reformed Church and want to remain a part of the denomination, yet many are sadly wondering if a church such as ours will still be welcome.

Overture:

We dispute the decision of Synod 2022 to adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report, declaring that an interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 defining homosexual sex as “unchastity” already has confessional status in the CRCNA. We request that this interpretation be made advisory and non-binding.

Grounds:

1. Synod’s interpretation of a confession does not have the same authority as a confession itself. The claim that an interpretation of Q&A 108 already has confessional status is without precedent. Homosexual sex in the context of committed same-sex marriage is not addressed in the confessions of the church, and office bearers of the church should not be bound to adhere to an interpretation of the confessions for which there is not widespread agreement or sufficient study that includes diverse voices and opinions.
2. The Human Sexuality Report does not adequately represent the full breadth of

Reformed scholarship on issues of human sexuality. There is significant disagreement among scholars, theologians, and pastors about what constitutes a faithful and Biblical sexual ethic. Since those in disagreement with the prior 1973 synodical report on homosexuality were not allowed to serve on the committee, a diversity of Reformed voices were not included, and the report is limited and affected by their absence. Reformed scholarship values a diversity of opinions and trusts that Christ is present in culture. By rejecting the input of our members who held a different interpretation than the 1973 report, the report is not complete.

3. The Human Sexuality Report relies on incomplete and flawed scientific and medical claims. By not including the contributions of science, we fail to seek wisdom from general revelation. While we strongly affirm that the Bible is the Word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation, general revelation also plays an important role in Reformed theology and practice. In fact, the Belgic Confession begins answering the question “how do we know God?” by naming general revelation when it says “We know God by two means: first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, areas letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God.”

Elaboration of the Grounds:

1. Synod’s interpretation of a confession does not have the same authority as a confession itself. The motion brought before Synod 2022 read as follows: “That synod affirm that ‘unchastity’ in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A.108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation ‘an interpretation of [a] confession’ (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.”

This motion referenced an Act of Synod 1975 out of context. The Report on Synodical Decisions and the Confessions adopted at Synod 1975 make clear that the authority of the confessions is subordinate to scripture, and the authority of synodical decisions is subordinate to the confessions. Granting confessional status on the basis of a synodical interpretation of a confession is not the process to follow in a matter as weighty as this, is unprecedented, and it will inevitably lead to division in the CRCNA. Beyond this illegitimate route to confessional status undertaken at Synod 2022, a more fundamental concern is the application of confessional status in the first place to declare homosexual sex sinful in all circumstances, including within a committed same-sex marriage.

Confessional status should be reserved for the core doctrines of our faith and have a purpose of maintaining the integrity of the gospel, but the Human Sexuality Report fails to establish that this “issue involves the heart of the message of the gospel” (HSR, p. 144). In light of scientific understanding in regard to human sexuality and differing conclusions of Reformed scholars regarding human sexuality (see #2 and #3 below), it is not appropriate to raise any particular belief about this complex issue to the level of confessional status. Doing so causes irreparable harm to the denomination, creates a crisis of conscience for office-bearers, and further alienates those in the LGBTQ community who have already been isolated and harmed by the actions of our church.

2. Requiring affirmation of the CRC's 1973 Statement on Homosexuality as a prerequisite to serving on the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality eliminated the possibility of a comprehensive treatment of the subject matter. Excluding otherwise-qualified potential members from this committee resulted in insufficient Reformed engagement with the topic, as evident in the report's treatment of individual texts as well as the whole arc of Scripture. Significant voices within the Reformed tradition with differing conclusions about matters of human sexuality were not considered within the report. This was a missed opportunity to engage with ongoing Reformed scholarship in this area.

3. The presentation of conclusions derived from scientific literature in the Human Sexuality Report is flawed and incomplete. There was no evidence of a formal process of consultation with medical or scientific experts in the writing of the report. There was no description of the literature review used in the report, which casts doubt on the reliability of the scientific evidence cited in the report. The HSR erroneously concludes that a failure thus far to identify genetic factors that predict homosexual disposition with high accuracy suggests that being gay is not an innate condition (HSR, p. 93), and in this way the HSR even contradicts the 1973 report, which states that "homosexuality is not the result of any conscious choice or decision on the part of the person" (Acts of Synod 1973, p. 614). Members of the CRCNA who are also professionals in the medical or social sciences have criticized the report for its handling of these matters (footnotes 1-3).

Incomplete understanding of the medical and scientific literature increases fear and stigmatization, and it impairs the Church's discernment. The treatment of the Belgic Confession, Article 2 by Synod 2022 is incomplete. The HSR references Synod 1991's statement regarding the "primacy of special revelation" as grounds to de-emphasize the importance of medical and scientific scholarship in the area of Human Sexuality. In doing so, Synod 2022 adopted a position that ignores three elements of the Reformed tradition for interpreting general and special revelation as advised by Synod 1972 and Synod 1991.

First, the report on Creation and Science (Report 28, Synod 1991) warns against allowing science to dictate our interpretation of scripture but goes on to quote from the Acts of Synod 1972 (p.515), which states that "scientific discovery can become the occasion for reexamining traditional interpretation and in this way can lead to a reinterpretation of certain aspects of the Bible." (Acts of Synod 1991, p.384) But the Creation and Science report doesn't interpret "primacy of special revelation" as grounds to cut off dialogue, debate, or research between special and general revelation. Rather, the report encourages debate, as in the days of Copernicus, to take place in such a way that both special and general revelation are allowed to speak, saying "so today we may not foreclose the possibility that something similar could occur under the impact of certain contemporary scientific perspectives." (Agenda for Synod 1991, p.384).

Second, the report on Creation and Science addresses how Reformed Christians should approach "apparent" conflicts in the dialogue between the Bible and science. The report humbly asserts that acknowledging an "apparent" conflict "means to affirm as a religious confession that the conflict is ultimately only (*italics original*) apparent, that in the mind of God there is no contradiction... even when we do not understand how this is so" (Agenda for Synod 1991, p. 402). As Reformed Christians, we are not called towards an approach in which the "primacy of special revelation" means an end to debate or an unqualified rejection of science. Instead, "as Reformed Christians who recognize the authority of general revelation and the legitimacy of the

scientific enterprise as a God-given task, we also resolutely reject [an unqualified rejection of the scientific account]”. Rather, “[b]eing Reformed means that we accept the problem in all its difficulty” (Agenda for Synod 1991, p. 402).

Third, the Acts of Synod 1991 advocates for a Reformed approach to reading and interpreting general revelation through the glasses of special revelation and the confessions that was not allowed in the mandate to the HSR study committee. The decision of Synod 2022 is inconsistent with the traditional Reformed approach to scholarship advised by Synod 1991, which advises a process that welcomes ongoing debate: “The church urges scholars who seek to provide guidance to the church on sensitive issues of faith and learning to first submit their ideas and theories to peer review as the most appropriate arena for adequate scholarly assessment of their biblical, confessional, and scientific validity” (Acts of Synod 1991, p. 776). When Synod 2022 declared an interpretation of the word ‘unchastity’ to be confessional it sought to end dialogue and debate. In its decision Synod 2022 failed to heed the pastoral advice of Synod 1991 which says, “The church reminds its members of the necessity of distinguishing in the context of the present debate what is essential to the faith from what is not and of the importance of allowing open and vigorous discussion on matters pertaining to the latter. Fellowship within the body of Christ should not be broken over such matters” (Acts of Synod 1991, p.776).

Footnotes:

1. Video. “Misuse of Research” by Dr. Emily Holder. <https://youtu.be/bJndecsMpvs>
2. Video. “Intersex Children and the CRC approach to Sexuality” by Kathy VanderGriff. https://youtu.be/4ELd_WlVn0U
3. Excerpt from Sexuality Report Letter of Concern signed by 147 Calvin University faculty members 12/10/2020: “*The report insufficiently engages with relevant scholarship from our disciplines, leading to a biased view of the theological, scriptural, and scientific basis for the report. The discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation lack the scientific and hermeneutic rigor and accuracy of prevailing peer-reviewed scholarship...*”
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1beBncKOEjnMSVqMqwlh5IDuHtmzcCizS>