

Human Sexuality

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Overtures

1. Introduction

We all want to faithfully love and serve our Lord with our whole being, heart, soul, mind and strength.

We all love the Christian Reformed Church.

We all believe in the supremacy of Scripture.

We all cherish our creeds and confessions.

We all want to secure the long-term integrity of the Human Sexuality Report as a clear biblical position of the CRCNA.

It is for these reasons we defend the good process used throughout our denomination's history as outlined in the 1975 Synodical Report on Synodical Decisions and the Confessions.

When any one of us professed our faith, we thought we understood scripture and the confessions. Since then, through ongoing sanctification and the power of the Holy Spirit, we continue to grow – maturing, climbing, discovering new territory in the beauty and depth of scripture as we understand it through our creeds and confessions.

What helps us on this journey is the space we are given to wonder, to question, to discover what grace and holy living is and how God transforms hearts and minds to increasingly reflect the heart and mind of Jesus Christ. On the way each of us discovers that the boundaries our confessions provide keep us on the path through correction and intentional discipleship.

As we are sanctified, we discover the benefits of grace and truth. We are set free to believe more deeply the Gospel message. We are comforted and assured that “I am not my own but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ” (HC Q & A 1).

Not only do we defend our established process, we wish to defend the necessary space needed to openly wonder, to question and discover the deep truths of scriptures together as we understand them through the confessions.

We are concerned for an ongoing stream of overtures and appeals that will undermine the intentions of the HSR and cause continued confusion in our churches.

You will hear the fullness of this in the recommendation that follows.

II. Recommendations

Heeding the prayer of Jesus in John 17 for the Church to be one, these are our recommendations.

- A. That synod accede to Overture 21-C, declaring our agreement with Synod 2022 that the interpretation of “unchastity” in HC Q&A 108 is an “interpretation of a confession.” We recommend that Synod 2023 revise Synod 2022’s declaration that this interpretation has “confessional status” (Acts of Synod 2022, p. 922) and declare instead that Synod 2022’s interpretation of “unchastity” shall be considered “settled and binding” (Church Order, Art. 29) in its use and function as an “interpretation of [a] confession” (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 603), noting the following:
1. This is the most significant category of pronouncement on doctrinal and ethical matters available to Synod.
 2. “All office-bearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances” (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 597).
 3. As such “those who err” (Church Order Art. 78) would be subject to discipline with the understanding that “[t]he purpose of admonition and discipline is to restore [the erring member] to faithful obedience to God and full fellowship with the congregation, to maintain the holiness of the church, and thus to uphold God’s honor” (Church Order Art. 78).
 4. We affirm that “[t]he members of the church are accountable to one another in their doctrine and life and have the responsibility to encourage and admonish one another in love” (Church Order Art. 79a)

Grounds:

1. Synodical decisions “shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order” (Church Order, Art. 29).
2. At the same time, “No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on par with the confessions” (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 598). That is to say, no synodical pronouncement itself (even an “interpretation of the confession”) can ever be “elevate[d] . . . to the status of the confessions” (p. 598).
3. Instead, “clothed with ‘synodical authority,’ [such pronouncements] serve that precise use and function for which they were specifically designed by synod” (p. 598). At Synod 2022, this pronouncement took the form of an “interpretation of [a] confession” (Acts of Synod 2022, p. 922). As such, “When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function” (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 603). It follows, then, that Synod 2022’s “interpretation of [a] confession” does not itself have “confessional status” but is rather “settled and binding” (Church Order, Art. 29) in its “use and function” as an “interpretation of the confession.”

4. Synod 1975's Report 47 states, "Such an interpretation given by synod must be regarded as the official interpretation, and is, therefore, binding for every officer and member of our denominational group...*One cannot place one's personal interpretation of the Confessions or a part thereof above the official interpretation of synod. That would make void the significance and power of the Forms of Unity*" (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 598; quoting Acts of Synod 1926, pp. 191-92; emphasis ours). All teaching, preaching, discipleship, and discipline within CRCNA churches should therefore conform itself to the "settled and binding" character of this interpretation.
5. Two things follow from the above, and should be recognized by all members and office bearers in the CRCNA:

As the 1975 report says, "There is an obvious difference between the use and function of a pronouncement as interpretation of the confessions and a decision involving 'guidelines' or 'pastoral advice'" (p. 598)

On the one hand, it should be acknowledged that the "measure of agreement expected" is different for a synodical pronouncement than it is for a confessional doctrine. As the 1975 report says, "Full agreement with the *confessions* is expected from all members of the church and subscription to the confessions is required of all office-bearers by signing the Form of Subscription. While *synodical decisions* are 'settled and binding', subscription to synodical decisions is not required. Registering a negative vote with regard to a synodical decision is permissible, although this is not tolerated with respect to the confessions" (Acts of Synod 1975, pp. 601-2). As this makes clear, disagreement with a synodical decision is possible/allowable, even as that decision remains "settled and binding" on the church.

With that said, it should also be acknowledged that in making the decisions it did, Synod 2022 was attempting to call local churches, office bearers, and members away from such disagreement and back towards unity on this doctrinal/moral subject. In this way, Synod 2022 attempted to use the confessions as what we say they are—"Forms of *Unity*." As the 1975 report says, "The well-being of the church is fostered when there is substantial unity with respect to all the decisions of synod" (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 602).

In sum: by declaring its *interpretation* to have "confessional status," Synod 2022 blurred lines that are clear in the 1975 report, setting a potentially confusing precedent for future synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters. Revising Synod 2022's decision in the way described above brings it in line with the position of the 1975 report on the relationship between synodical decisions and the confessions. At the same time, it honors synod's intent to clarify the meaning of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 in the strongest way possible, so as not to allow

divergent practice at the local church level by appeal to the suggestion that previous synodical deliverances were “pastoral advice” that can be set aside. As such, the purpose of this recommendation is to revise Synod 2022’s decision so as to bring it in line with the conclusions of the 1975 report, while affirming the “settled and binding” authority and significance of its interpretation of “unchastity” in Q&A 108.

- B. That synod declare the above recommendation to be its responses to overtures 16, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 29, 30, 40D, 46, and 77, and communication 4.

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Abstaining: Evelyn Bennally