

HUMAN SEXUALITY

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I. Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

A. *Materials:*

1. Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Report, pp. 313-487
2. Council of Delegates Report (section II, A, 9, including Appendix A), pp. 38, 57-71
3. 73 Overtures and Communications, Deferred Agendas 2020-2021, Agenda 2022 and Supplements

B. *Background*

1. In 2016, synod responded to several overtures asking for clarification of the meaning of biblical marriage in Church Order Art. 69-C by appointing a study committee with the following mandate:

to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality. The central aim of this theological task will be to provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life, and in light of this to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance that explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those experiencing sexual questioning, temptation, and sin.

(Acts of Synod 2016, p. 919)

2. The mandate for this committee includes discussion of how a Reformed perspective on biblical authority should be applied, dialogue with other voices and the current scientific studies in these areas, reflections on evaluation of questions around Church Order 69, the confessional status of synodical decisions, and whether a new statement on human sexuality is needed.
3. The Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (HSR Committee) met first in October 2016, then by Zoom following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in June 2020. Four of these meetings were set aside to interact with people in specialized ministries or life situations whose input the HSR committee sought. The HSR committee submitted an interim report to Synod 2019, and three committee members were present to facilitate discussions and solicit feedback. The HSR was finally presented to Synod 2022 after a delay caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. The HSR followed this outline:
 - I. Introduction
 - II. Preamble which opens with stories from our churches
 - III. A biblical theology of human sexuality

- IV. Note on science and general revelation
- V. Pornography: Cultural Context
- VI. Pornography: Scripture
- VII. Pornography: Pastoral Care
- VIII. Gender identity: Cultural Context
- IX. Gender identity: Scripture
- X. Gender identity: Pastoral care
- XI. Homosexuality: Cultural context
- XII. Homosexuality: Scripture
- XIII. Homosexuality: Pastoral care
- XIV. Reflections on singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, polyamory, and divorce
- XV. Sexual desire: Bodies, bonding, and boundaries in the Song of Songs
- XVI. Confessional status
- XVII. Recommendations
- Appendix A: What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?
- Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications

C. *Observations on “weightiness”*

1. The HSR committee’s mandate includes grounds for the five-year window granted to the HSR committee to complete its work which noted the “scope of the task assigned” and that the weightiness of this matter “requires extended and careful deliberation” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 927). This weightiness was confirmed in dialogue with the HSR committee and felt by this advisory committee.

This weightiness is observed in these two ways: (1) In the large number of overtures, communications, and extra-synodical conversations around the HSR, and (2) in the fact that we were constantly reminded, through story and testimony, that we were considering elements of our community that touch the lives of so many who face questions, pain, and brokenness in one of the most intimate and personal areas of our lives, our sexuality:

Tragically, the church’s response to the confusion, questions, and sexual turbulence of a desperate world, and even of its hurting members, has often been silence. Whether because we are caught in our own hidden sexual sins, unsure whether God’s grace actually has power, or we are afraid to speak unpopular or unaffirming words, we have not offered the healing words of the gospel of grace to fellow sinners. (*Agenda of Synod 2022*, p. 320)

In five powerful words, the HSR declares: “We have failed each other” (*Agenda for Synod, 2022*, p. 320).

2. This weightiness affords the Christian Reformed Church an unprecedented opportunity to lament, to repent, and to reimagine our life together around the Word, sacrament and discipleship.

The church is facing a crisis of gospel proportions. Our failure to be salt and light through love, sexuality, marriage, friendship, and mutual accountability has deeply compromised our witness to the gospel. We are facing not just one problem, or even two or three. Our whole way of life has fallen out of step with the Spirit and with the teaching of Scripture, and all of us must be called to account. And yet in this very

realization we have the opportunity to reexamine our lives and our communities, to confess the sins we have committed against each other, and to call one another back to the costly path of loving discipleship. By following this path, we once again can find hope and offer hope to a desperate, broken world.

(*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 321)

3. This advisory committee calls Synod 2022 to begin these deliberations with prayer.
4. This advisory committee shares the desire of the HSR committee: “The Holy Spirit leads. God pours out love and grace. May our desire to love one another and our neighbors increase, grounded in the confidence that we ‘belong—body and soul . . . —to [our] faithful Savior, Jesus Christ’ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1).”

C. *Recommendations*

1. That synod grant privilege of the floor to HSR committee members Mary-Lee Bouma, Jim Vanderwoerd, and Jeff Weima, and, when Council of Delegates material is addressed, to Andy de Ruyter, chair of the Council of Delegates; Michael L. Ten Haken, vice chair of the Council of Delegates; Colin P. Watson, Sr., executive director; and members of the executive staff as needed.
2. That synod thank:
 - a. the members of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality for their service to the church.
 - b. those who shared and compiled the many stories we heard. It is with great appreciation, and was a tremendous honor, to receive and to hear the stories of those who shared in the HSR report, agenda, and through the various overtures submitted to synod. We recognize that this was not done lightly and required significant courage and vulnerability. For all of this, and the ways the stories included in the HSR, in the COD Report, in overtures 20 and 22 (*Deferred Agenda for Synod 2021*) and 38 and 56 (*Agenda for Synod 2022*) enriched and informed our deliberations, we extend our sincerest thanks.
 - c. those who faithfully served our church, this process and our God by praying, by engaging with our advisory committee, and by giving the many hours it took to research and write the more than seventy overtures and communications that engaged with the HSR and guided our advisory committee work.
3. That synod solemnly take note of the pervasive sin of pornography and its harm, and lead our churches into repentance and healing. The HSR describes the problem this way: “We have tolerated [pornography] because the lusts of our hearts are dear to us. We have tolerated it because we are comfortable with the objectification and domination of women. The sins that lie closest to our hearts are those for which it is the most difficult to repent” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 362).

Background: The work of the HSR in regards to pornography is deeply needed for the church today. The work of the CRC to address the sin of pornography first came to the surface in 1987 as Classis Grandville overtured synod to take a position on pornography. Synod 1988 approved a revised statement on pornography (*Acts of Synod 1988*, pp. 368-69, 605-6077). Synod gave several recommendations in response to an overture for Classis Eastern Canada in 2012 (*Agenda for Synod 2012*, p. 477, *Acts of Synod 2012*, pp.

758-59). Synod 2016 adopted a description in the Supplement of Church Order 84 stating that “participating in pornography” is ungodly conduct (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 716).

Grounds:

- a. The advisory committee turns its attention first to pornography because it is a sin which transcends sexual orientation and so, in considering a report so identified with how to address homosexual orientation, gives each one of us the opportunity to find ourselves in this report.
 - b. The advisory committee turns its attention first to pornography because it is so often a secret burden and because it so clearly violates the dignity of other image bearers of God. It is the conviction of the advisory committee that we will not be successful in dealing with the rest of the HSR if we do not deal first with the sin of pornography in our church. We note that the key New Testament text on same sex activity, Romans 1, leads into Romans 2, which reminds us that “when you, a mere human being pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance, and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:3-4)
 - c. The HSR’s teaching and pastoral care advice concerning pornography is consistent with a Reformed perspective of biblical authority and a helpful application of a biblical theology of the body.
4. That synod encourage the churches to make use of the curriculum prepared by Pastor Church Resources, in conjunction with members of the committee, to help small groups study and discuss aspects of the committee’s report which may be controversial.

Note: The advisory committee divided HSR Recommendation B into two parts and is presenting them in reverse order.

5. That synod recommend the pastoral care sections in the HSR as offering sound, introductory guidance to the churches and strongly encourage continuing conversations around the complex items within the HSR and how to faithfully implement these practices in the life of the church.

The advisory committee sensed complexity in this area, so we make the following observations:

- The HSR’s pastoral care sections ought to be conversation starters regarding what it means to live a healthy Christian sexual life for both married and single persons.
- The text of the HSR recognizes the need for continued dialogue among scholars and research into the fields of biblical studies and the biological and social sciences, especially related to the topic of gender dysphoria (HRS Sections VIII, IX, X). This need was also recognized in Overtures 40 and 42 (*Agenda for Synod 2022*).
- It is important that listening and supporting conversations concerning pastoral care are initiated with a variety of unique cultural settings and geographic regions. We were encouraged by the engagement with the Korean Council, with Classis Red Mesa, with Consejo Latino and with sisters and brothers in the African-American community, and see a need for much more engagement in the future.

- We need each other for this work of pastoral care, and that the contributions of those representing different generations, different cultural and geographic contexts, and different roles (areas of expertise that include social scientists, teachers, pastors, elders, counselors, students, young adults, and health care providers) will be essential for developing guidelines for pastoral care. This will be especially true as the scope of pastoral care in the context of human sexuality expands to address topics like sexual consent, sexual violence, technological advances, and the shift toward more single persons in the church.
- Continued conversation around pastoral care might have a powerful influence on elements of congregational life like gospel preaching, faith formation, the diaconate, our missional calling, the sacraments, and church discipline.
- Finally, reflecting a lengthy committee discussion over the first paragraph under XIV.B, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 460, that the churches need help balancing scripture and the confessions with regard to the more difficult portions of Scripture. The church needs wisdom to preach and teach the solemn warning texts (i.e., 1 Cor. 6 and 11) in a way that is consistent with the confessions. Indeed, we need a better balance of radical hospitality and radical obedience as an outpouring of the lavish grace of God. Only in this balance can we offer as a demonstration to all persons the words and deeds of costly discipleship that are the responsibility of all who call on the name of the Lord.

Grounds:

- a. There is a gap between our theology and our practice of pastoral care in the context of human sexuality.
 - b. The advisory committee recognized the need for a continued conversation regarding our practice of pastoral care building on the foundation of the HSR.
6. That synod not appoint a team of individuals to draft a statement of faith on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the conclusion of the report, but that synod warmly encourage the institutions and agencies of the Christian Reformed Church to develop resources to support effective, life-affirming pastoral care in the areas of sexuality, marriage and gender.

Grounds:

- a. Congregations and classes need time to reflect on the implications of this year's decisions.
 - b. Future synods can prioritize which of the many suggested tasks related to human sexuality (including suggested edits to the report, additional studies, etc.) will be most urgent.
7. That synod not accede to Overture 57.

Grounds:

- a. The recommendation is a weighty matter that has not been before the churches.
 - b. The recommended change is not consistent with the foundational starting point of the HSR found in the 1973 Study Report for Homosexuality, and would undermine its reception in the churches.
8. That synod not accede to overtures that recommend the appointment of a new committee at this time.

Grounds:

- a. Congregations and classes need time to reflect on the implications of this year's decisions.
 - b. Future synods can prioritize which of the many suggested tasks related to human sexuality (including suggested edits to the report, additional studies, etc). will be most urgent.
9. That synod declare these recommendations to be its answer to the following overtures:
- a. Recommendation 4: Overture 52 (*Agenda for Synod 2022*)
 - b. Recommendation 5: Overtures 20, 27, 28, 29 (*Deferred Agenda 2021*) and 20, 21, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 50, 53, 54 (*Agenda for Synod 2022*)
 - c. Recommendation 6: Overtures 30 and 53 (*Deferred Agenda for Synod 2021*)
 - d. Recommendation 7: Overture 57
 - e. Recommendation 8: Overture 26 (*Deferred Agenda for Synod 2021*), Overtures 20, 37, 45, 47, and 50-D (*Agenda for Synod 2022*)
10. That synod declare the work of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology complete and dismiss them with thanks.