

HUMAN SEXUALITY

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Response to the Report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

A. *Materials*: Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Report, pp. 313-487

B. *Background*

1. General

We cherish the gift of the faith we share, the creeds and confessions of the church, and the Reformed interpretation of Scripture. Like the section of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) on desire, we are inspired by the delight the Song of Songs lovers find in each other's bodies, the equality of their love for each other, and the exclusivity of their relationship, as well as the deep intimacy God desires to have with us (pp. 453-56). We affirm the importance of Paul's warning to flee from immorality and the biblical admonition against willful, unrepentant sin.

Human sexuality is a broad topic addressed by fields such as theology, psychology, and biology, and experienced daily by each human on our planet in different ways. Human sexuality is stunning and awe-inspiring in its complexity. Current scientific research has spurred theological reflection. This reflection at times causes anxiety as long-held beliefs are challenged; it can sometimes feel as if this reflection creates fault lines in the foundations of our faith. We fear losing our foundations. Or perhaps we do not understand where these reflections might lead, and we fear what the unknown future might hold.

Within our denomination, there are differences of opinions. This is obvious due to the large volume of overtures and communications sent regarding the report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (HSR). It is our desire to be curious together, to hold space for more conversations to happen in our churches.

The members of the minority report wonder what the various conclusions raised in the HSR mean for the CRCNA and its members. Some of us have fairly settled viewpoints, while others are still wrestling with this. We hope we can engage these spaces and conversations together with grace and truth, as we strive to live with the humility of Jesus.

We share the belief that everyone is made in the image of God. We acknowledge that we do not always treat all people as such, and therefore we have people in our communities who live on the margins. Many of our LGBTQ+ members inhabit such margins. We lament that we have not followed in Jesus' steps, as he demonstrated radical hospitality and love to those who were marginalized. Jesus always demonstrated the compelling nature of grace and truth side by side in their fullness. We are in awe of Jesus' ability to hold these two together, and we strive to do likewise. We do not, however, fully understand the truth of all things, and therefore we would like to approach this topic with grace-filled curiosity.

The members of the minority report are united in our desire for clarity, humility, and grace with regard to the topic of human sexuality in the CRCNA. We desire to model the radical hospitality of Jesus toward all in our communities. We are committed to walking alongside people in their lives of discipleship.

2. Theology

The Christian Reformed Church recognizes the strength of a Reformed hermeneutic, the guidelines we use to interpret the Bible. The Reformed tradition uses four main elements in its guidelines for interpreting a text: *literary*, *historical*, *grammatical*, and *theological*. These four elements are all undergirded by our understanding that Scripture is inspired by God and that the Holy Spirit helps us to understand Scripture today.

We note that by applying a Reformed hermeneutic, those who hold to a high view of Scripture come to different conclusions about what God ordains as normative for human relationships. For members of the minority report, the interpretations of key texts that inform the theology of human sexuality in the HSR are not the only or even the most compelling and faithful way to interpret these texts. The HSR's interpretation of Matthew 19, for instance, describes Jesus as presenting an overarching theology on human sexuality. God's will for sexuality is rooted in the creational norm set in Genesis 1 and 2: that male and female persons, a proper binary like day and night, may join in marriage. This union is made by God, and thus indivisible by man.

As Overture 26 points out, however, "a more faithful interpretation of Matthew 19:1-12 would begin with a look at the literary and cultural context of the passage. . . . In each of the first three pericopes of the unit Jesus commands people to care for, welcome, and be generous to those who are on the margins of society, those who are vulnerable and/or have no status (women, eunuchs, children, and the poor). He concludes the unit with a parable that demonstrates that it is God's character to be scandalously gracious rather than to follow what is "fair" according to the letter of the law" (Overture 26, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 574).

Jesus points to Genesis 1 and 2 in this text, not in order to affirm universal creational norms, but “to remind everyone that the purpose of marriage was so that men and women could together live into the fruitfulness of God’s blessing. Moses’ law regarding divorce was given as a measure of protection for women because of the sinfulness of men. A certificate allowed them to remarry and thus secure their economic and social space in society. Jesus’ point is that men should love their wives rather than look for a law that enables them to shirk their duties. In other words, he calls men to fulfill the law with radical, costly love and justice” (Ibid, p. 575).

In its treatment of Genesis 1-2, the HSR emphasizes that God created humans both male and female, and concludes that it is through our biological sexual differences that we image God. However, “[the HSR] ignores the simpler reading that males and females are each created in the image of God” (Overture 33, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 567). The HSR also does not define how our binary sexual differences image God.

Overture 24 notes that “in Genesis 1, not only humans but also the fish and birds are commanded to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:22). Hence, we understand that they too (along with the livestock) were created male and female. But despite possessing male and female sexual difference appropriate to their kind, these creatures are not in the image of God. Why then would sexual difference constitute the image in humans but not in animals? Genesis 1:27 is better understood as stressing that both men and women reflect who God is in the world. The created equality of women suggested by the text stands in stark contrast to the foundational beliefs of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, which viewed men as more godlike, with women ranking sometimes below male slaves in the social hierarchy. God’s people are to be different from the surrounding cultures by valuing women as fully equal to men in personhood and worth” (Overture 24, *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, p. 526).

We also wonder at the unbalanced application of this creational norm to homosexual and heterosexual practices. The HSR clearly finds that same-sex sexual practices violate this creational norm by being, necessarily, nonprocreative. However, it is silent on the topic of nonprocreative heterosexual practices (such as the use of contraception).

The HSR’s focus on universal creational norms also undermines the New Testament emphasis on creating disciples to grow God’s kingdom instead of growth through producing children.

3. Science, general revelation, gender identity

The HSR properly highlights the challenges we face in a world where members of our community don’t identify in strictly binary or cisgendered terms. They, too, properly point out that the science in this area is constantly evolving and we must be ready to learn more.

The HSR notes that science is not general revelation in itself, but a cultural response to general revelation, and therefore not to be given the authority of revelation. However, there remains a bias. While science is recognized as fallible and cultural, theology is not recognized as the cultural response to special revelation. Through the emphasis on special revelation as “readable” and “primary”, without the properly Reformed humility of recognizing one’s own fallibility, the HSR is at danger of equating their theological perspective on Scripture with Scripture itself. Just as science is provisional, fallible, and political, so too is theology provisional, fallible, and political. “For now we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Multiple overtures have pointed to the suspect use of scientific evidence in the HSR. Issues that have been raised include questions about the reliability of studies referenced, the proper conclusions drawn from various studies, and the reputability of institutions and sources referenced (Overtures 33, 37, 39, 40, 42, Agenda for Synod 2022). Therefore, the HSR’s discussion on gender identity is at best, incomplete, and at worst, insensitive and lacking scientific rigor to many who read this report.

4. Homosexuality

It is evident from the volume of overtures regarding the homosexuality portion of the HSR that there are differences of interpretation in the CRCNA on this topic and a desire for more dialogue within the churches. They also draw attention to the differing theological arguments arising from Reformed theologians. Overture 37 states that “the very existence of a variety of robust biblical and theological arguments for the inclusion of celibate *and* married LGBT Christians in the church signals that there is not theological consensus on this topic” (Overture 37, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 581).

We also draw attention to the fact that “the report does not represent the diversity of voices present in the Christian Reformed Church...” (Overture 41, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, 629). While the HSR includes a number of stories of people who have same-sex attraction, nearly all of them reinforce the conclusions of the HSR (Overture 46, *Agenda for Synod 2022*) and fail to recognize what is good, true, and beautiful within the lives of many who are in committed same-sex relationships. Multiple overtures rightfully speak to this gap in the report, and we are grateful for the stories that were shared (from 2022, Overtures 38, 55, 56; from 2020-2021, Overtures 23, 50). Hearing the diversity of LGBTQ+ voices is critical as we continue to seek clarity.

Additionally, we recognize “the report does not serve us well as we learn how to live with our differences” (Overture 40, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 625). Instead, it creates a position that brings further harm and pain to those who already feel marginalized by the church and its people. Both the HSR and Overture 24 highlight troubling statistics of increased rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide among LGBTQ+ people, particularly among youth (Overture 24, *Deferred Agenda 2020-2021*, p. 523). These

troubling health outcomes give us great pause, and suggest, even more urgently, the need for further grace-filled conversations as a people of God within the CRCNA.

5. Reflections on divorce

We are also troubled by the HSR's reflections on divorce. The HSR encourages the church "to act more intentionally to call married partners to reconciliation and renewed commitment" and reinforces the 1980 guidelines on divorce which encourage churches to exercise "formal discipline when persons in hardness of heart refuse to heed the admonitions of the consistory and do not acknowledge and repent of their sins involved in divorce and remarriage" (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 451). While we affirm the significance of the covenantal commitments of marriage, this strong encouragement to preserve the marriage relationship is given without qualification. Our concern is for those who experience intimate partner abuse in their marriage. The report's reflections imply and communicate to church leaders and abused spouses that both leaving the marriage and remarrying is a sin worthy of church discipline, thus encouraging those who are being abused to remain in abusive relationships.

6. Confessional and Church Order Article 69-c

In terms of the teachings of the confessions regarding human sexuality and relationships, and the matter of the confessional status of the HSR's understanding of the biblical teachings on human sexuality, we highlight the following comments and concerns reflected in various Overtures before Synod 2022.

Overture 28 reminds us that "the CRCNA is what is known as a 'confessional church,' meaning that 'professing members of the CRC claim to believe not only that the Bible is the Word of God but also that 'the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation.' The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, and our belief in them, stand as a statement of unity" (Overture 28, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 551).

The overture goes on to claim that declaring that the teachings *already* have confessional status does not align with our understanding of decisions of previous synods, particularly the denomination's teachings on homosexuality as defined as "pastoral advice" in the *Acts of Synod 1973*.

The overture concludes that "given that the teachings were not designated as an interpretation of the confessions at prior synods, we believe that disagreeing with the report's conclusions does not violate our affirmation of the Three Forms of Unity, and in particular the Heidelberg Catechism. We understand that synodical decisions "shall be considered settled and binding" (Church Order Art. 29), but we also emphasize Synod 1975's point that "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'" (Overture 28, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 551-52).

In applying Church Order Article 69-c, Ministers of the Word have the freedom to discern what would constitute a marriage that is “in conflict with the Word of God” (Art. 69-c). The recommendation of the HSR would limit their discernment process. It is unclear how far the implications of this decision would go (e.g., Would ministers be required to not marry a couple where one partner is engaging in pornography?). As Overture 24 states, “It would be irresponsible for synod to accede to a recommendation that has potentially far-reaching implications that are not even discussed in the report” (Overture 24, *Deferred Agenda 2020-2021*, p. 530).

Because there is sufficient reason to question the interpretations and claims made in the report, we present to you, the body of synod, an alternative voice in the form of the following recommendations.

C. Recommendations

1. That synod urge churches to prayerfully reflect on the trauma experienced by many in our congregations (ex. LGBTQ+, divorced, single, abused, and addicted individuals) as we struggle to live out our call to love God and love our neighbors.
2. That synod receive the report for information, but not adopt it.

Grounds:

- a. The interpretations of key texts (namely Gen. 1-2 and Matt. 19) that inform the theology of human sexuality in the report are not the only or even the most compelling and faithful way to interpret these texts. Applying a Reformed hermeneutic, those who hold to a high view of Scripture could come to different conclusions about what God ordains as normative for human relationships.
- b. The confessions proper do not speak explicitly against faithful same-sex relationships and therefore do not necessarily support the conclusions of this report.
- c. The report’s engagement with scientific evidence is insufficient and raises significant questions.
- d. This recommendation creates space requested by many in our denomination to keep the door open to dialogue and grace-filled conversations and demonstrates our commitment to love and respect those in the LGBTQ+ community and those who support them who are wrestling with the church’s stance on same-sex relationships.
- e. The report’s discussion on divorce conveys that abused spouses are to stay in harmful and dangerous relationships. This would be a significant step backwards in the church’s efforts to prevent and respond justly and compassionately to abuse.

3. That synod not accede to recommendation D of the report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation–laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

Grounds:

- a. “The denomination’s position on homosexuality does not hold confessional status via the word ‘unchastity’ in Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 108 because a previous synod has not declared such an interpretation of the word” (Overture 25, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 547).
 - b. Several overtures and communications which affirmed the HSR urged synod not to make a determination about its confessional status until greater clarity could be provided about the wording of the recommendations, and until churches could more clearly discern the implications of this decision for church life (e.g., discipline, office bearing, profession of faith, etc.) (2022 Overtures 44-47, 56; 2020-2021 Communications 1).
4. That synod not accede to Recommendation E of the report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation–laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

Grounds:

- a. Since the biblical interpretation (Recommendation B) is not being adopted in full, then E cannot be adopted.
 - b. The implications of this decision are unclear.
5. That synod encourage denominational ministries to intentionally support the churches and classes by developing/sharing resources as well as providing training and consultation as churches/classes work to:
- Enfold, support, and love those who identify as LGBTQ+.
 - Walk alongside those experiencing the harms of pornography, intimate partner abuse, and questions of gender identity.

Grounds:

- a. Those who identify as LGBTQ+, regardless of whether they hold a traditional or affirming position regarding human sexuality, have noted that the church is often a challenging and inhospitable place. Various denominational ministries have resources and competence to help churches better understand the needs of the LGBTQ+ community and guidance in creating more hospitable environments.
- b. Churches can feel at a loss of how to respond to the vast variety of needs that may present themselves in relation to human sexuality. Denominational ministries can help people with resources and guide them as they access others within the continuum of care.

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