

Church Order II

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Overtures

I. Introduction

The concept of confessional difficulty gravamen (CDG) was created within the CRC to allow officebearers to honestly question doctrinal matters contained in our confessions, giving them space to wrestle with the biblical accuracy of these doctrines, while also ensuring that there would be a season of pastoral care provided for the officebearer in his/her struggle and search for clarification.

A CDG occurs when “a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confessions but does not call for a revision,” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, 1). This kind of gravamen is submitted by a subscriber to a church council for “examination and judgment.” A CDG is defined as “a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). Therefore, “examination and judgment” of a CDG occurs when the subscriber receives the information and/or clarification being sought – either from the church council, the classis, or concluding with synod.

Since 1) “no one is free to decide for themselves or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3), and 2) the person signing the Covenant for Officebearers must affirm “without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1), the process initiated by a subscriber submitting a CDG, should be time-bound and time-sensitive and should result in a final decision whereby some terminal action takes place. This is true because signing the Covenant for Officebearers requires all subscribers to affirm that the doctrines in the standards “fully agree with the Word of God” and that the subscriber “promises to be formed and governed by them,” and to “heartily believe... promote and defend their doctrines...” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5).

This reflects the nature of a CDG in the historical development of this gravamen in the Harry Boer case from Synod 1976. Synod 1976 understood confessional-difficulty gravamina as a personal request for help in resolving their doubts. And the way a council, classis, or synod was to do that was by providing the officebearer with the “information and/or clarification” of the confessions (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). What Synod 1976 did not say and what no synod has ever said is that this type of gravamen is a way for someone to take exception to the church’s creeds and confessions.

The CRC does not allow gravamina as exceptions to the standards. While the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA are neither inerrant or exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.

Note: We wish for Synod to recognize that Advisory Committee 8 had agreement on Recommendations A, C1, C3, and F-L.

II. Recommendations:

- A. That synod allow all office-bearers delegated to Synod 2023 to remain seated as delegates.

Ground: Prior to Synod 2023 there was confusion surrounding the nature and use of a CDG. Now that it has been clarified, each officebearer can serve until at least the end of 2023.

- B. That synod amend the Church Order Supplement to clarify the proper use of a CDG and provide a timeline for its process. (changes are underlined)
1. Amend Church Order 5 Supplement, 1
A confessional-difficulty gravamen: a temporary gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and
 2. Amend Church Order 5 Supplement, A, 1
The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. “Without reservation” means that the CRC does not allow gravamen as exceptions to the confessions themselves or to what synod has determined to have confessional status.
 3. Amend Church Order Supplement 5, B, by adding 3:
3) A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a personal request for help in resolving a subscriber’s doubts about a doctrine contained in the confessions. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber’s settled conviction that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriber from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.

Grounds:

1. There is not, nor has there ever been a provision in the Church Order allowing a subscriber to take an exception to the standards.
 2. There is already a provision in place to revise the confessions if they are found to be in error.
 3. Although the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA are neither inerrant or exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.
- C. That synod approve the following process for CDG:
1. During the time the officebearer has a CDG, the individual must teach, act, promote and defend, and live in unity with the confessions in all areas. The individual may not contradict the confessions openly and deliberately while the gravamen is still unresolved, and must diligently work towards resolving their confessional difficulty.
 2. Based on the process laid out in Church Order Article 5 Supplement B.1, a council has six months, or until the next classis meeting, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the CDG is forwarded to classis, classis shall have six months, or until agenda items for the next synod must be submitted, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the CDG appears before synod, synod’s decision is binding and the subscriber will have until the end of that calendar year to either 1) affirm the standards, 2) file a CRG, or 3) resign from office.
 3. If applicable, ministers can be honorably released at the conclusion of the CDG process.

Ground: It is necessary to have a delineated process that guides churches, classes and synod according to the purpose of gravamina.

- D. Since synod has already made a judgment regarding the definition of unchastity, that synod instruct those who have taken a CDG with respect to the definition of unchastity to resolve their difficulty by affirming the standards, resign, or be suspended from office by the end of 2023. This would also include, if applicable, their resigning from their position(s) in broader assemblies, boards, or committees.

Grounds:

1. The process explained above has already happened in part during 2022-2023.
2. The decision regarding the definition of unchastity has already been examined and judged by Synod 2022. Therefore, the above amendment and timeline do not apply.
3. There is no need to file a CRG unless new grounds are provided, since synod has affirmed the definition of unchastity as settled and binding.

- E. That synod instruct councils to begin special discipline of officebearers who are suspended from office at the end of 2023 if they refuse to adhere to the definition of unchastity reflected in the standards.

Grounds:

1. Church Order Articles 82-84 and their Supplements state the appropriateness and process for the special discipline of officebearers.
2. "Special Discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct" (CO Art. 83).
3. Not adhering to the definition of unchastity reflected in the standards is a serious deviation from sound doctrine.

- F. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to send a special communication to the churches detailing the proper use and timelines for CDG, including the process for those who took a CDG for the definition of unchastity.

Grounds:

1. Not all churches pay close attention to the *Acts of Synod*.
2. This is an important decision with time-bound implications for those who took a confessional difficulty gravamen based on the definition given by the denominational FAQ.

- G. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to amend the "Frequently asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report" to accurately reflect the use of a gravamen.

Ground: A retraction is in order when something is mistakenly printed.

- H. That synod instruct classes to help churches implement discipleship for their congregations in the teachings of the standards.

Grounds:

1. This allows the CRC to grow in unity around what truly unifies it, namely, the standards that locate the CRC within the larger body of Christ.

2. This allows churches to build up future officebearers who can wholeheartedly agree to the standards.
- I. That synod allow Calvin University to continue their current course of action with respect to their faculty taking exceptions to their Covenant for Faculty, while encouraging Calvin University to diligently oversee alignment with our confessional standards.
Grounds:
 1. While Calvin University is an educational institution of the CRCNA, their faculty do not work directly under the Covenant for Officebearers.
 2. There is a one-hundred-year history of allowing exceptions to the Covenant for Faculty. And the Faculty Handbook has specific processes already laid out.
 3. There are considerations of academic freedom and tenure that do not apply in a church setting. "The Faculty member shall be judged only by the confessional standards of CU, and by the professional standards appropriate to his or her role and discipline." (Calvin University Faculty Handbook 3.5.4)
 4. "When the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church has issued a formal interpretation of the confessions, that interpretation shall be binding for Calvin University." (CU Faculty Handbook 3.5.1.1)
 - J. That synod instruct the Council of Delegates to review its practices regarding the Statement of Exception in light of decisions made by Synod 2023 to the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, and revise their practices and handbook regarding guidelines for exceptions (Appx Q, COD governance handbook) as necessary to fully align with the spirit of the use of gravamina.
Grounds:
 1. Since the COD is an interim committee of synod, synod needs to provide clarity to the Executive Committee of the COD in evaluating exceptions to the creeds, confession, and contemporary testimonies.
 2. The COD should reflect as closely as possible the same standard for subscription as the churches.
 - K. That synod encourage Calvin Theological Seminary to clarify its position on synod's decision regarding the confessional status on same-sex marriage by December 2023.
Ground: This will help build trust among the churches and institutions.
 - L. That synod defer to Synod 2024 the creation of any Task Force, Study Committee, or ad hoc committee as proposed by overtures 68, 75, and 76.
Grounds:
 1. Our desire is that no churches leave the denomination but be reconciled back into covenant with the churches of the CRCNA. Our desire is for reconciliation, not disaffiliation.
 2. In light of recommendations being made to Synod 2023 by Advisory Committee #8, it is important wait to see if these proposed changes and mechanisms are effective, thus changing the need or direction for any Task Force or committee.
 3. Synod already has authority to intervene in a lower assembly if the well-being of the churches in common is at stake (Church Order Art. 27-b and

28- b). According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section V, B, 12, "All other matters may be considered which synod by a majority vote declares acceptable."

4. Synod may (or may not) need to revisit the need in a year, but it seems wise to wait at least a year.

M. That this be synod's response to Overtures 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 69, 73, 74, 75, 76

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