

Calvin University Response regarding Overture 44

Calvin University is grateful for the opportunity to respond to select overtures received by Synod 2024. We understand that the university's right of response is grounded in Appendix T of the Council of Delegates Governance Handbook, which allows the university's Board of Trustees to initiate comment, and we appreciate the invitation that was extended by denominational staff in this case.

This year Calvin has been invited to comment on Overture 44 (Classis Minnkota; *Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 529-31), which addresses expectations and practices of confessional subscription for university employees who sign the Covenant for Faculty Members. Given the aim of the overture, it is best if the comments below are read alongside our 2023 response on five overtures that sought to "clarify or revise the denomination's understanding of and approaches to confessional subscription by clarifying, changing, limiting, or eliminating the use of gravamina, or expressions of confessional difficulty" (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 755-58).¹ It is worth repeating here a statement from that 2023 comment, which applies in 2024 as well: "our concerns in this memo address not *whether* a given matter should be confessional, but *how* confessional matters are handled at Calvin University."²

Comments on Overture 44

We have serious concerns with Overture 44, which asks synod to restrict recourse to confessional difficulties for Calvin University faculty. To quote the overture, "Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2024 not to allow faculty of Calvin University to take exceptions to the Covenant for Faculty Members in the particular area of our confessional definition of 'unchastity.'" For several reasons, we believe this overture is flawed.

The university appreciates the overture's interactions with key institutional documents, such as the Covenant for Faculty Members, Handbook for Teaching Faculty, and Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom (CCAF). These are among the foundational documents for our practice of

¹ That response was considered by Advisory Committee 8 of Synod 2023. Where the work of Advisory Committee 8 touched upon the policies and practices of the university, its majority and minority reports (8D and 8E) were in agreement on one recommendation: That Calvin University should continue with its current practices for expressions of confessional difficulty. We believe the committee's recommendations for Calvin University reflected a wise path forward for the institution and were consistent with prior synodical endorsements of the university's policies and practices. Notably, Overture 21, also from Classis Minnkota, requests that these two reports be "[laid] directly before synod" as the first two items of business in 2024 (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, p. 466).

² See footnote 1, *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 755. As with last year's response, this year's response will leave aside serious concerns about operational impacts. We stand ready to address those issues should they arise in the course of deliberations at Synod 2024.

expressions of difficulty. However, we respectfully note that Overture 44's review of principles, policies, and practices in these documents is cursory and does not reflect adequate attention to the ways that the documents relate to each other or to Church Order. Nor does the overture consider the ways in which expressions of difficulty have historically been practiced or implemented at the university. Because of these oversights, there is a discrepancy between what the overture seems to demand and what it would actually require. Specifically, while the overture seems to require Calvin University to implement practices elaborated in its own documents, adopting its recommendations would in fact demand that Calvin University not only abandon its historical practices but revise its existing policies.

Perhaps most importantly, the overture does not consider the prior synodical endorsements of the university's approach to confessional subscription. As noted in our 2023 response regarding five overtures (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 757-58):

Synod has previously endorsed the university's approach to confessional commitment on at least two occasions:

- Synod 1996 declared that Church Order Article 29 “does not preclude faculty discussion, debate, or disagreement with the substance of a synodical decision or position taken.”³ This declaration was prompted by synod's acceptance of the Calvin College Board of Trustees' recommendation to retain a faculty member whose book was not entirely in agreement with a synodical position.
- Synod 2014 adopted the following motion concerning Calvin's document *Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom*: “That synod receive for information and commend to the churches the document *Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom at Calvin College* . . . submitted in response to the instructions of Synods 2011 and 2012, as being faithful to and honoring synod's own prior work on confessional subscription.”⁴ This 2014 commendation is notable for its principal nature and broad application. **Synod not only endorsed the approach outlined in the document—an approach that explicitly differs from requirements of strict subscription or the recommendations of these five overtures—as good for the university, but synod specifically commended it to the churches as consistent with the denomination's prior teachings on confessional subscription.**

It is worth expanding upon the 2014 commendation of CCAF. CCAF clearly states that Calvin University and the Christian Reformed Church in North

³ *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 528.

⁴ *Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 542.

America are not “strict subscriptionist” institutions.⁵ Indeed, the interpretation of confessional subscription offered in CCAF, including what it means to “[affirm] without reservation the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being taught in the Word of God”⁶), stands in sharp contrast to the interpretation offered in Overture 44.⁷ Yet Synod 2014 specifically commended CCAF to the churches as consistent with—indeed, “faithful to and honoring”—prior synodical instruction on confessional subscription. It seems wise to note, therefore, that Overture 44 effectively asks Synod 2024 to contradict the understanding of Synod 2014.

Moreover, it is not clear whether Overture 44 intends (a) to single out for special attention the denomination’s confessional definition of unchastity or (b) to extend a principle of strict subscription to all confessional teaching. While this lack of clarity makes it difficult to interpret the overture, we do not see the wisdom in either option:

- a. We are wary of singling out the definition of “unchastity” for special limitations. Such a revision would not only elevate the definition of “unchastity” above more plainly foundational (e.g., creedal) doctrinal concerns, but the precedent could also open the denomination to a destabilizing future of arbitrary, ad hoc interventions focused on select narrow slices of either our ecumenical foundations or Reformed distinctives. Rather than reinforce confessionalism, this could undermine confessionalism by inviting the creation of standards within standards for every passing generation. Calvin desires to be robustly confessional, and we believe that robust confessionalism is better preserved by our current practices than by singling out some issues within the confessions for special treatment.⁸

⁵ See, for example, *Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom*, p. 28.

⁶ Church Order Article 5.

⁷ The contrast is marked in several parts of the overture. These include: point 1, which seems to describe any disagreement as “disingenuous and . . . a violation of the ninth commandment”; point 2, which suggests that “‘without reservation’ does not allow for differing opinions”; and point 4, which suggests that “no exceptions are allowed in this particular area.”

⁸ To the extent that the overture gives a rationale for singling out sexuality/unchastity for special treatment, it seems to be in point 5, a, which reads, “The longstanding exceptions policy for faculty was often over issues such as disagreeing with the language of detesting the Anabaptists in our confessions, infant baptism, or teachings on reprobation. We should not allow exceptions for matters of sin that would endanger someone’s salvation (1 Cor. 6:9-10), whether that is a private or publicly held belief.” While we acknowledge and appreciate the attempt to provide a rationale for singling out this issue, we believe that the one provided reflects an inadequate theology of sin and salvation. Sin is not only behavior but includes every way in which we fall short, and Scripture also suggests that other sins put salvation at risk. A proper understanding of those matters would require either a more expansive application of Overture 44’s logic or a different rationale for singling out this particular issue.

- b. We are also wary of extending a principle of strict subscription to all confessional teaching. Such an approach is not only inconsistent with both CCAF and Synod 2014's read of prior synodical teaching on confessional subscription, but it is also inconsistent with Calvin University's generations-long practice of employing faculty who may have difficulties with, reservations about, or exceptions to some aspect of confessional teaching. Historically, these have frequently related to reprobation or the sacrament of baptism, but other confessional issues have also been raised from time to time. For example, at least one person has recently considered submitting a confessional difficulty concerning Belgic Confession Article 4, which claims that the apostle Paul wrote Hebrews. Generalizing the approach that Overture 44 suggests would exclude people who struggle with reprobation, paedo-baptism, or Pauline authorship of Hebrews. We do not believe that this approach to confessional subscription is necessary or helpful for the preservation of our identity as a vibrantly Christian and seriously Reformed institution.

Our concerns with Overture 44 notwithstanding, Calvin University genuinely desires to have a close relationship with the denomination, to be teachable, and to submit to synodical authority. Over the past two years, these commitments have been reflected in clarification and promulgation of the university's position on sexuality, strengthening of our hiring process, and reinforcement of our policies and practices for expressions of difficulty, among other developments.

Furthermore, the decision of Synod 2022 to classify select denominational teachings on human sexuality as interpretations of the confessions has changed how we treat the issue. When the denominational position on sexuality was classified as pastoral guidance, disagreement with it was not subject to the confessional-difficulty processes required by the Covenant for Faculty Members and elaborated in our Handbook for Teaching Faculty. Now the teachings that have been classified as interpretations of the confessions are subject to those requirements and processes. Those processes require any who disagree to share their difficulties with our Board of Trustees (through the Professional Status Committee) and submit to guidelines for teaching, scholarship, and conduct related to sexuality.

It is clear that Synod 2024 will continue Synod 2023's work of wrestling with the approach to confessional subscription taken by the churches, classes, agencies, and educational institutions of the denomination. As we did last year, we welcome the opportunity to inform those discussions with our understanding that Calvin University's current practices are both within the bounds of institutional and denominational precedent and consistent with approaches that have previously received synodical endorsement. We understand that this matter may require further conversation with an advi-

sory committee or additional study. We stand ready to supply further information or perspective upon request and will keep the Synod 2024 deliberations in prayer over the coming weeks.

The Calvin University Board of Trustees
Bruce Los, chair