

TEAM TO CLARIFY DISTINCTIONS

Team to Clarify Distinctions in Synodical Pronouncements, Decisions, Reports, Positions, and Advice

I. Background and mandate

In 2021, Classis Chatham (now Classis Ontario Southwest) overtured synod to “clarify the distinctions in categories of synodical pronouncements, decisions, reports, positions, and advice and the extent to which they bind the churches” (*Agenda for Synod 2021*, pp. 350-51). Due to COVID-19 pandemic delays and a lack of time at Synods 2022 and 2023, action on this overture was deferred until Synod 2024 (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 401-2). Synod 2024 adopted the following response:

1. That synod appoint a small group to report to Synod 2025 to clarify the distinctions in categories of synodical pronouncements, decisions, reports, positions, and advice and the nature and extent to which each is “settled and binding” on members, officebearers, and churches.

Grounds:

- a. Interpretations made with respect to the extent to which the “pastoral advice” set forth in the 1973 report on homosexuality is binding have led to turmoil and questions about the actual status of such advice.
 - b. In 1995, Overture 2 from Classis Wisconsin asked for clarification of the meaning of the phrase “settled and binding.” Synod 1995 defeated the majority report’s recommendation on what the phrase means but did not further respond to Overture 2’s request for clarification (*Acts of Synod 1995*, pp. 749-751, 753).
 - c. The statements adopted by Synod 1975 (Report 47: Synodical Decisions and the Confessions) “expressing the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters and their relation to the confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44) are not uniformly interpreted by those who read them.
 - d. The potential impact of how the above statements are understood is too important at this time in our denomination’s history to seek a quick answer even from an advisory committee of twenty-six very competent people.
 - e. Recent decisions of synod have led to uncertainty and “angst” about how to interpret pronouncements of synod.
 - f. The decisions to be made by Synod 2024 may have significant influence on how the statements of Synod 1975 are understood, so there is wisdom in waiting for these decisions.
2. That synod declare the above recommendation and grounds to be the mandate for the task force.

(*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 936)

In keeping with the Rules for Synodical Procedure, the officers of synod met in summer 2024 and appointed the following members to this task force: Drew Sweetman (chair), Josh Christoffels (reporter), Harold Caicedo, Kyle Dieleman, Sonya Grypma, and Joel Vande Werken (who served as a staff consultant after being appointed as director of ecclesiastical governance in mid-November).

When the team began to meet and digest the material, it was easy to see how clarity is needed about the settled and binding nature of what synod has decided. When Synod 1973 commissioned a study committee on this question, it said that “there is no clear understanding as to how [synodical pronouncements and declarations] fit into our confessional structure” (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 65-66). Even though Synod 1975’s ten-page report “Synodical Decisions and the Confessions” (*Agenda for Synod 1975*, pp. 595-604) sought to clarify the settled and binding nature of synodical pronouncements, questions remain. An overture to Synod 1995 sought further clarity on the matter, but synod defeated a recommendation proposing that full agreement with synodical decisions was not required by all members of the church (*Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 753).

To fulfill our mandate, we will first discuss how synodical decisions might pertain to members, officers, and churches before looking more specifically at the settled and binding nature of the various “categories of synodical pronouncements, decisions, reports, positions, and advice.”

II. Distinction between members, officebearers, and churches

Our team was asked to clarify the nature and extent to which synodical pronouncements are settled and binding with regard to members, officebearers, and churches. We note that synod has also tasked the Office of General Secretary to “provide theological reflection and advice” on church membership and to report back to Synod 2026 (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 866), so we have attempted to avoid overlap with the mandate of that task force in our own work.

Officebearers have a higher standard than other members because, to be ordained and installed, they are required to sign their name confirming that they agree with the Covenant for Officebearers. They attest that the doctrines of the CRCNA’s three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—“fully agree with the Word of God.” Officebearers promise that they “heartily believe” the doctrines of these confessions and will “promote and defend” them faithfully, conforming their “preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.” Officebearers also have rules and procedures according to the Church Order that they promise to follow in the event of difficulties.

Unordained members of the church, on the other hand, do not sign their name to a covenant, but they verbally agree to certain statements when they make profession of faith and if they present children for baptism. Because the CRCNA has a variety of synodically approved forms for baptism and

profession of faith (and because Church Order Art. 59 does not mandate profession of faith in all cases when someone becomes a member), the exact commitments inherent in these questions vary from one setting to another. In general, members agree that they acknowledge or affirm that the confessions of the CRC do indeed faithfully reflect the teaching of Scripture.¹ On these occasions members also affirm their willingness to accept the guidance and discipline of the church through its officebearers and the decisions of its assemblies. What is clear is that the confessions are seen as authoritative, and their authority requires a substantial level of agreement in the CRCNA from all members.

It is also important to note the extent to which the decisions of synod are binding on the churches. Because local congregations are governed by officebearers, it might seem at first glance that the same standards of agreement would be required of churches as of officebearers. But it is also possible to recognize a distinction between the agreement required of officebearers individually and that required of churches (that is, their officebearers collectively). Thus churches submit credentials to each classis meeting, testifying that they (collectively) “faithfully adhere to the doctrinal standards” of the CRC and “diligently attend to ministry” within the classis and denomination. This statement reflects a collective commitment to the witness and service of the wider body of Christ in the CRC that goes beyond the agreement or disagreement of individual officebearers with the confessions and with decisions of the denomination, and includes even such practical issues as financial support of the CRC’s ministries (see *Acts of Synod 1985*, pp. 810-11; *Acts of Synod 1990*, pp. 704-6).

III. The role of the confessions

Our mandate from Synod 2024 does not include instructions to clarify any language regarding the confessions, confessional issues, or the like. The same is true for what it means to be credal.² Thus we enter into only a brief discussion here regarding the confessions. To frame this report on other various categories and the extent to which each is settled and binding, three main points regarding the CRCNA confessions are worth noting here.

First, the Reformed tradition has long held the books of Scripture “and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith” (Belgic Confession, Art. 5). Thus Scripture is all that is necessary for the knowledge of salvation, since “everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it” (Art. 7). As a result, “we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have

¹ See the questions asked in the following liturgical forms found on the denominational website (crcna.org): Service for Baptism (1976), Service for Baptism II (1976), Form for Profession of Faith (1932), Form for Profession of Faith (1976), Form for Profession of Faith (2013), Form for the Public Profession of Faith (2016), Form for New Members (2016).

² Subscription to the creeds may seem uncontroversial; however, that is not always the case. For example, what is meant by the statement that Christ “descended to hell” has been the subject of much theological discussion and debate.

been—equal to the divine writings” (Art. 7). The CRCNA has clearly noted this theological principle and held that “the confessions are subordinate to Scripture” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 596, 601).

Second, what is understood as confessional is subject to change and revision and, in fact, has been altered. An obvious example of an explicit change in the confessions is in Q&A 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Synod 1998 directed a study of Q&A 80, which led Synod 2004 to declare that Q&A 80 “can no longer be held in its current form as part of our confession” (*Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 629). Thus Synod 2006 directed that three paragraphs of Q&A 80 remain in the text but be placed in brackets with a footnote explaining that these parts “are no longer confessionally binding on members of the CRC” (*Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 711). Of course, other examples, such as Article 36 of the Belgic Confession on the civil government could also be cited. Therefore, because confessions are subject to Scripture and are to be read as historical textual documents, what has been considered confessional has necessarily changed over time.³

Third, the confessions serve a variety of purposes in the life of the CRCNA: expressions of faith, public testimony to the world, forms of unity, instruments for instruction, juridical functions, and missionary purposes (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 596-97). The confessions are also understood as the standard from which our other denominational decisions flow and by which they are regulated (Church Order, Art. 1-a). Thus the assumption is that all synodical decisions should be consistent with the Word of God as summarized in the confessions of the church. Within this framework, the CRC’s congregations, officebearers, and members covenant to worship, live, serve, and testify together of the salvation that is ours in Christ.

IV. Categories of synodical decisions

Before defining the various categories of synodical pronouncements, we note that any given report, and synod’s response to that report, may include a diversity of types of statements (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 600). This is particularly relevant as we seek to apply the decisions of synod today, because, for example, specific items adopted by synod as “pastoral advice” may, either explicitly or even implicitly, contain statements or assumptions that more accurately fall into the category of what we will be calling “doctrinal affirmations” (see section IV, A and the Appendix of definitions below). There is, then, always a measure of wisdom needed to interpret and apply even statements that synod has explicitly made as summarizing the church’s understanding of a particular issue.⁴

³ On the historical textual approach to reading the confessions, see *Acts of Synod 1959*, pp. 183-84; *Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 88; *Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 427.

⁴ For further examples of this point, see *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 40-41, and the discussion found in the document “Confessional Commitments and Academic Freedom at Calvin College,” *Acts of Synod 2014*, pp. 136-76.

Second, the category of “report” is not included below since it is already clearly defined as a document from a committee that is legally before synod (Rules for Synodical Procedure V, A, 4). Reports are not usually adopted by synod in their own right but are received for information or recommended to the churches. While they often articulate a deeper explanation and rationale behind any given topic, only the recommendations that synod actually approves are settled and binding.

We also note that the categories of synodical decisions do not deal with ordinary items that synod might have to approve, such as board appointments, financial decisions, or commending the work of the ministries of the CRC. The focus, in line with previous synodical studies on this issue, has to do with doctrinal and ethical decisions.

As the study committee reporting to Synod 1975 observed, “Synodical decisions are as varied as the life of the church” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 597). That synod defined six different categories of synodical decisions (p. 44). Synod 2024, however, listed a different set of categories for this team to define: “pronouncements, decisions, reports, positions, and advice” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 936). Rather than using those exact categories, many of which overlap in meaning, we thought it might provide better clarity and simplicity if future synods would rely on the following broad categories and explanations of synodical decisions. The 1980 report on divorce and remarriage, for example, illustrates these categories by stating in its “Guidelines for the Ministry of the Church” that those guidelines “reflect the demonstrable teaching of Scripture” and that churches “must apply the teaching of Scripture to the specific situations and concrete cases” that come before them (*Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 41, 480-85).

A. Doctrinal affirmations

Doctrinal affirmations are official, declarative statements that affirm Scripture or the confessions in response to questions that have arisen. Not all doctrinal affirmations are “confessional,” but synods may declare or recognize them as confessional interpretations or as having confessional status. They can deepen and broaden the doctrines that are found in the confessions, or they can be additions to issues not found in the confessions (see examples in *Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 598-600). Doctrinal affirmations are settled and binding for officebearers, churches, and members, though we recognize that, over time, synod may change the level of commitment expected (including consequences for nonadherence).

B. Adjudicatory decisions

These are decisions that arise from particular disputes coming from the churches. They are decisions in response to appeals or protests or when the Judicial Code is invoked. These apply to particular situations (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44) unless synod specifically decides that they have universal and binding application. They may also provide precedent for future decisions.

C. Doctrinal applications

These decisions apply Scripture and the confessions to contemporary contexts or situations. They provide ways of further expressing the faith of the church but are not considered additions to the confessions. Doctrinal applications include guidelines for further study, contemporary testimonies (*Acts of Synod 2017*, pp. 699-700), and pastoral advice. Though rare today, some of the CRC's communications to governments (what Synod 1975 categorized as testimonies or letters) have functioned in this way as well. Doctrinal applications should be received with respect and are more than mere suggestions. Officebearers are expected to teach and guide members in line with these decisions. Members should similarly expect pastoral care consistent with the decisions. These decisions are settled and binding but allow for discernment in the way they are applied in local contexts.

V. Applying synodical decisions to the churches

Church Order Article 29 makes clear that decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies are "settled and binding" unless they conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order. We see the two words *settled* and *binding* as largely complementing each other: because synodical decisions are not intended to be debated endlessly, they obligate churches and members "to live up to the decisions"⁵ of the denomination's assemblies. As Henry DeMoor observes, this requires "respect [for] the decisions of the broader assemblies . . . publicly and privately . . ." and "especially in . . . official duties of preaching, teaching, and providing leadership."⁶

At the heart of this group's mandate, however, is a fundamental question: What do synodical decisions mean for CRC officebearers, churches, and members, and *how* do synod's decisions bind the leaders and members of our local congregations? In some ways, the framework of synodical decisions ties into questions of discipleship and discipline: from a positive standpoint, our confessions and synodical decisions should invite church leaders and members to a common set of beliefs and practices. From a somewhat negative standpoint, the church must consider the appropriate consequences when either officebearers or members undermine the beliefs or practices that connect us to one another in our denominational covenants.

Perhaps it will be helpful to offer some examples. Our confessions clearly teach the appropriateness of infant baptism (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 74; Belgic Confession, Art. 34). Officebearers should be expected to hold this teaching "without reservation" and to "promote and defend" this doctrine in their ministries. However, while officebearers should be expected to defend infant baptism as the most faithful interpretation of Scripture, this

⁵ Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Revised Church Order Commentary: An Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1969), p. 124.

⁶ Henry DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive, 2020), p. 167.

does not require that they completely deny that biblical arguments can be made for credobaptism (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 2). Members in general, however, are bound to a somewhat different standard. In expressing a “commitment to” the creeds and confessions of the CRC (Church Order, Art. 59-b), confessing members believe that the doctrines “faithfully reflect” the teachings of Scripture (as one early Reformed theologian put it, “insofar as you have heard, learned, and confessed them”⁷). But in at least in one case, synod gave the right for a local consistory to allow a couple of Baptist persuasion to remain members in good standing in the CRC, provided they did not undermine the beliefs and practice of covenant baptism in their local context (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 63). Similarly, we recognize that many of our Hispanic churches are currently wrestling in a similar way with the validity of Roman Catholic baptism for their members, despite our “settled and binding” position that recognizes such baptisms (Church Order, Art. 58; Belgic Confession, Art. 34).

Similar examples could be given for other categories of synodical declarations. On matters that are subordinate in authority to the confessions, even officebearers have permission to disagree with a particular synodical proclamation (as evidenced by their ability to record a negative vote). While these statements remain binding, in the sense that officebearers and members must “abide by . . . synodical deliverances” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44), and churches are expected to participate collectively in the work done by the denomination whose name they bear, cooperation with such synodical pronouncements is governed by a sense of mutual respect and trust (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17) rather than the “agreement” required by the confessions.

Because both the original overture (*Agenda for Synod 2021*, pp. 350-51) and the mandate for this task force (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 936) mention recent synodical decisions about human sexuality, it seems important to briefly address those decisions here. As with many other synodical pronouncements, the statements of synod on matters of sexuality contain a mixture of decision types. Some of the decisions related to sexuality matters are “pastoral advice.” Other decisions, such as the understanding that same-sex sexual activity is an example of the “unchastity” condemned in Scripture, or the assertion that temptation to a particular sin is not in itself sinful, flow from our interpretation of the confessions as the biblical and theological “baseline” which define the CRC’s understanding.⁸

It should be noted, however, that a particular doctrinal affirmation, though binding on all officebearers, need not dictate the same pastoral application in every situation. Similarly, a confessional commitment that views all same-sex sexual activity as sinful does not lock the church or individual members into a particular course of pastoral care in matters beyond those

⁷ The original quote comes from Jacobus Koelman (1632-1695); it was adopted by the CRC as part of its General Regulations of 1881, Art. 59.

⁸ For further discussion of this point, see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 363, 365-66.

on which synod has specifically spoken⁹ any more than the CRC's decisions on divorce require the same approach to every remarriage (see *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 40-41). Because Synod 2022 saw its decisions as consistent with the declarations of past synods, it can be assumed that the pastoral advice of those synods still holds and that local churches have significant freedom for pastoral engagement, provided the specific decisions of synod are heeded.

We believe this approach does justice to both the expectation that churches, officebearers, and members should respect all synodical pronouncements while still recognizing the very real distinctions that exist between categories of synodical decisions as well as between officebearers and members of the church. The principle of the original authority of the local assemblies (Church Order, Art. 27-a) dictates that local leaders do have significant authority to disciple members in ways that make sense in a particular situation, and should be able to do so with the trust of fellow officebearers and members of the CRC. But in the end, as synod has previously said, both officebearers and members *are* expected to “abide by . . . synodical deliverances” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44) as an expression of our common witness to Jesus Christ in our contemporary world.

VI. Conclusions

Synod has requested that this team provide some additional clarity to the definitions of synodical pronouncements, and to their relative binding weight on officebearers, churches, and individual members. We believe that such clarity is indeed important for the CRC to better understand what, precisely, we have covenanted to believe and to do together for the kingdom of God. To summarize, it is the conclusion of this group that matters that are “settled and binding” are those which have been discussed, debated, and adopted by synod and therefore obligate the churches to live up to the decisions the churches have made together. Local churches and classes “abide by” these decisions—that is, they act in conformity with them and use them as guides for their ministry. Officebearers covenant to teach, preach, and act in alignment with synodical pronouncements, even if they are only obligated to agree with the doctrines taught in the creeds and confessions. Individual members agree to accept the spiritual guidance of the church as part of their commitment to respect their leaders and join with them in carrying out the ministry of the church, and they agree to “acquiesce” in those decisions which they cannot actively support.

We also want to recognize that this team assignment comes, in part, because of an increasing number of relational challenges that cannot be met with administrative solutions. As our recent history demonstrates, even categories requiring little formal agreement can feel like a betrayal of denominational unity if a spirit of mutual trust is not present.

⁹ Matters that do bind churches and officebearers can be found, for example, in the list presented in the *Acts of Synod 2024* on page 891.

The biggest contribution of this report, then, might be to ask the question, What can we do to build mutual trust so that the body of Christ (or at least the part of Christ's body that is the CRCNA) can move forward to do the ministry God requires of us? Our denominational structure teaches us to consider the decisions of assemblies with respect and humility, and our conscience guided by the Holy Spirit constrains us to seek points of agreement that foster our unity and strength as the body of Christ. There is great value in the CRC understanding that does not force agreement with every doctrine or practice but allows for continued learning and growth into the matters we confess for both officebearers and other members. Identifying categories of synodical pronouncements cannot create those conditions; they can only be helpful insofar as those categories serve the goal of identifying our common areas of ministry. That task, in turn, requires mutual submission to one another that can come about only when we have first of all submitted ourselves to Christ. We must patiently and humbly seek the wisdom that comes from the Spirit to recognize how we can faithfully apply the shared understanding of Scripture that our confessions offer to us.

VII. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Drew Sweetman (chair) and Joshua Christoffels (reporter) when the report of this team is discussed.

B. That synod take note of the challenge of maintaining trust in the churches in our present cultural context, recognize the inadequacy of administrative categories to maintain harmony in our collective ministry as a church, and encourage all churches, officebearers, and individual members to seek those things which lead to peace and mutual edification (Zech. 8:16; Rom. 14:19).

C. That synod recognize the three broad categories of doctrinal affirmations, adjudicatory decisions, and doctrinal applications as defined in this report and encourage future synods to utilize these categories.

Ground:

Using these broad categories will provide clarity and uniformity around our settled and binding positions.

D. That synod receive this report and its definitions, commend these items to the churches as a faithful explication of the various categories of synodical pronouncements, and dismiss the team with thanks.

Team to Clarify Distinctions in Synodical Pronouncements,
Decisions, Reports, Positions, and Advice

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Definitions of Terms Used in This Report

Doctrinal affirmations (sometimes called pronouncements, positions, decisions, and deliverances): An official statement or declaration made by synod, which expresses decisions on matters of doctrine, ethics, church policy, or other important issues. Doctrinal affirmations are authoritative and are meant to guide the beliefs and practices of the church community.

Adjudicatory decisions: Decisions that arise from particular disputes coming from the churches in response to appeals or protests or when the Judicial Code is invoked. Synod may decide that an adjudicatory decision has a universal and binding application.

Doctrinal applications (includes what synod has called guidelines for further study, contemporary testimonies, or pastoral advice): Decisions that apply Scripture and the confessions to contemporary contexts or situations. Doctrinal applications are ways of further expressing the faith of the church but are not considered additions to the confessions. They are settled and binding but allow for discernment in the way they are applied in local contexts.

Advice (also called “pastoral advice”): Strong recommendations provided to help guide, counsel, or support churches. This term is used to describe three types of advice, with distinct purposes. First, advice for providing *pastoral counseling* and care of members (e.g., regarding marital divorce, same-sex attraction). Second, advice for supporting members with *pastoral concerns* (e.g., persons struggling with faith concerns and the authority of Scripture regarding a new societal trend). Third, advice on how to provide advice in a *pastoral manner* (e.g., how to provide a caring posture in controversial discussions). Synodical advice carries the weighty authority of the expertise of the authors of a study report, for example, as well as of synod’s adoption. While it is not strictly mandatory for churches to follow synodical advice, they are to receive it with due respect, and they normally act in harmony with it. However, when the purpose of the synodical advice is to provide the scriptural or confessional basis for the advice given, the statements are binding.

Report: A report is a document submitted by a board, committee, or agency of an assembly indicating the work performed in response to assembly mandates and presenting recommendations for assembly action (Rules for Synodical Procedure V, A, 4).

Settled: A matter is settled when it has been discussed, debated, and adopted by synod. The settled matter is considered final. It is not subject to reversal or modification unless new and sufficient grounds are presented to demonstrate that it conflicts with Scripture or the Church Order.

Binding: When decisions are made by ecclesiastical assemblies, the church community is obligated to adhere to those decisions. Those decisions are binding.

Abide: To act in conformity with a synodical decision, via one's personal conduct, teaching, preaching, publishing, discipleship, pastoral care, and church discipline.

Acquiesce: To commit to abide by a synodical decision, even when in personal disagreement with that decision. Officebearers and church members are duty-bound to respectfully receive synodical decisions as bearing the weighty authority of synod, recognizing that "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).