

Overture in Pursuit of Church Unity and Respect for All Office Bearers  
Church of the Savior CRC  
South Bend, Indiana

We, the Council of Church of the Savior CRC, overture Classis to overture Synod to reverse Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 as including a list of specific behaviors, namely "adultery, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, polyamory, pornography and homosexual sex."

Grounds:

- 1) This list of behaviors has proven very divisive for the CRC as a whole, and has caused hurt and tension within and among many of our congregations. Rescinding the list would honor the spirit of Heidelberg Q. and A. 54, which encourages and even mandates the unity of the church. It would also give space and safety to nurture deeper conversations about Christian discipleship among diverse groups within the CRC.
- 2) It is highly unusual, and perhaps even unprecedented, for a Reformed governing body to create an illustrative list of behaviors that constitute "unchastity." This reticence is with good reason because as Reformed Christians, we have always respected the Spirit's work within individual believers and within the church to interpret what is chaste and unchaste within a particular time and a particular culture.
- 3) It is not practical to enumerate a list of behaviors that can cover the full range of unchaste activities of which fallen human beings living in a fallen world are capable. As a result, a specific list of unchaste behaviors runs the very real risk of condemning certain behaviors while condoning, downplaying, or ignoring others.
- 4) Enumerating this particular list of unchaste behaviors limits the witness and mission of the Christian Reformed Church in the context of global Christianity, as it disregards cultural differences in what is considered "unchaste."

Background:

- 1) Our primary purpose in presenting this overture is to maintain the precious unity of the Christian Reformed Church, for which Jesus prayed in John 17:20-26. The present list of unchaste behaviors divides the church and violates the spirit of Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 54 which states, "I believe that the Son of God through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith." We have already seen evidence in our churches of the divisiveness of Synod 2022's controversial decision.

Henry DeMoor, professor emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary, and an expert in CRC Church Order, summed it up this way: “Synod [2022] has squandered the unity of the church and damaged its mission.”<sup>1</sup>

Unity has long been a driving concern when Synod has had to make controversial decisions. For example, Synod 1995 approved the recommendation that “Synod recognize that there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist.”<sup>2</sup> This same concern for unity must remain front and center in present conversations concerning the HSR. Preserving Synod 2022’s affirmation of the HSR without making its conclusions “confessional” follows the wise example of Synod 1973’s decision on homosexuality, which has provided fifty years of broad unity while nurturing deeper conversations about Christian discipleship within the CRC.

- 2) One has only to consider a sample of the history of interpretation on Lord’s Day 41 to see this. For example, neither Hoeksema, Kuyvenhoven, nor Klooster<sup>3</sup> offer the kind of list that Synod 2022 did. Only Hoeksema mentions homosexuality, and that only in passing. One would never guess from these sources that polyamory might be a problem. However, both Hoeksema and Kuyvenhoven talk a great deal about divorce and remarriage (the “hot-button issue” of their day).

This brief survey illustrates how discussions of specific forms of unchastity rapidly become dated, as Spirit-filled believers wrestle with what behaviors are in and out of bounds in their unique and particular context and the challenges it faces. New generations are, sadly, always creating new ways of being unchaste (e.g. internet pornography), that cannot be anticipated beforehand. Although it is quite necessary and appropriate for the secondary sources to discuss the specifics of such context-dependent behaviors (making them very relevant for their time but often obsolete within a decade or two), it is not fitting or helpful for a primary source such as the Heidelberg Catechism to do so. Historic creeds and confessions are intended to apply and remain relevant across time and space. Getting into the “weeds” of the hot-button issues of any given age, such as Synod 2022 did, guarantees that they will become obsolete and lose their relevance, diminishing their power to speak to the church across the ages.

---

<sup>1</sup> “After Synod 2022: Discerning What’s Next,” *The Banner* (September 2022), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 727.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972), 342-376; Andrew Kuyvenhoven, *Comfort & Joy: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988), 239-243; Fred H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001), 1003-1010.

The wisdom of Gamaliel applies today, as it did in Acts 5. After Peter answers the authorities "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (:29), the authorities want to kill the apostles. But Gamaliel advises caution: "So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (:38-39).

- 3) Several examples will illustrate the point. Synod 2022 did not list bestiality among the list of behaviors that constitute "unchastity." Was Synod 2022 condoning bestiality by its lack of inclusion on the list? Or was this omission unintentional?

Synod 2022 also did not list masturbation in its list of unchaste behaviors, despite the fact that it does not conform to the norm of heterosexual marriage as laid out in creation (Genesis 1-2).<sup>4</sup> Was Synod 2022 intending to give tacit approval to (all instances of) masturbation, as a chaste way to live out our sexuality?<sup>5</sup>

Synod 2022 named "pornography" in its list of unchaste behaviors, but it did not specify which aspect(s) of pornography are to be condemned as unchaste. Giving a blanket condemnation of pornography as "unchastity" fails to recognize that many of the subjects involved in the industry (particularly women) are involved against their will or because they themselves are being exploited. Simply equating "pornography" with "unchastity" runs the very real risk of blaming the victim.

As a further example, prostitution rightly falls under the category of "extra-marital sex." But again, women and men often become involved in prostitution as a result of marginalization and exploitation. One supposes that prostituting oneself should be considered "unchaste" - but did Synod 2022 really intend to declare that all those who engage in prostitution (some of whom are sex slaves) are engaging in behavior that puts them outside the kingdom of God?<sup>6</sup> This does not seem to be a judgment that Jesus himself would make.

The problem is becoming clear. Making a list of what constitutes "unchastity," such as Synod 2022 did, creates more and worse problems than it solves. This is precisely why Reformed governing bodies, over 500 years of history, have avoided making such lists.

- 4) The specific list of unchaste behaviors provided by Synod 2022 does not take into account cultural differences in what is considered "unchaste." For example, chastity related to head coverings for women, while unimportant in most Western cultures, is very important in several Eastern cultures. Having an interpretive list is necessarily culture-specific, effectively

---

<sup>4</sup> See the Human Sexuality Report, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> HSR, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> HSR, p. 32, 103, 146, 147.

limiting the CRC to being and remaining a predominantly Western denomination, and making it less relevant and nimble in bringing Christ to other cultures that might have quite different, but still very appropriate and biblical, norms for what is considered chaste.

Conclusion: Over and over again, scripture instructs us not to judge our brothers and sisters:

“Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things” (Romans 2:1).

“Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand... We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:4, 7, 8).

Composing a specific list of sins that God condemns, as Synod 2022 did, has the potential of judging brothers and sisters in Christ who are pursuing authentic Christ-following in a rapidly changing culture, and in diverse cultures around the world. Therefore, based on the above grounds, we urge Synod to rescind the list of sins associated with “unchastity.”

Respectfully submitted,



Christina Rhebergen, stated clerk

Church of the Savior CRC

November 21, 2022