

Overture to Reverse Two Decisions of Synod 2022
Church of the Savior CRC
South Bend, Indiana

We, the Council of Church of the Savior CRC, overture Classis Holland to overture Synod to take the following actions:

- (A) Reverse Synod 2022’s decision to recommend the 2021 Human Sexuality Report to CRC churches as “useful information,” and
- (B) Reverse Synod 2022’s interpretation to include “homosexual sex” in the list of specific behaviors constituting “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108.

We describe the grounds for this overture in two parts—grounds in support of (A), and grounds in support of (B).

Grounds in Support of (A)

1. The 2021 Human Sexuality Report (hereafter, “HSR”) teaches doctrine on sexual sin that violates all three of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church.
 - a. Teaching #1: “Like idolatry, unrepentant sexual immorality destroys one’s place in the church and kingdom of God.” (HSR, 32)
 - i. This teaching straightforwardly implies that someone who *has* a place in the church and kingdom of God but then sins sexually and fails to repent (perhaps as a result of dying in the very act) thereby *destroys* their place in the church and kingdom of God. Against this doctrine, Article 22 of the Belgic Confession states: “For it must necessarily follow that either all that is required for our salvation is not in Christ or, if all is in him, then he who has Christ by faith has his salvation entirely. Therefore, to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most enormous blasphemy against God—for it then would follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior. And therefore we justly say with Paul that we are justified ‘by faith alone’ or by faith ‘apart from works.’” Repentance on the part of a believer in Christ in the wake of sin is, of course, a *work*. Thus, Teaching #1 commits “a most enormous blasphemy”.
 1. It may be objected that underlying this remark is the familiar idea that those who live in “unrepentant sin” are, in fact, showing themselves by their unrepentance to be non-Christians. In reply, we say the Report cannot possibly mean this, because in the invitation to confession at the beginning of the document, the authors declare (and thereby invite the rest of us, as believers, to declare) that “Instead of confessing our sins and praying for each other, we live in unrepentant sin.” (HSR, 9 - 10)

- ii. The teaching also straightforwardly contradicts the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints in the Canons of Dort, specifically at 5.9: “Concerning this preservation of those chosen to salvation and concerning the perseverance of true believers in faith, believers themselves can and do become assured in accordance with the measure of their faith, by which they firmly believe that they are and always will remain true and living members of the church, and that they have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.”
- b. Teaching #2: Commenting on Gen 2:24 and 1 Cor 6:16: “In other words, sex is of profound significance because it establishes a one-flesh union. And that one-flesh union either is or is not consistent with the believer’s bodily union with Christ. Thus sexual immorality is not simply a violation of the will of God. Much more, it is incompatible with union with Christ. To be sure, all sin is ultimately incompatible with our union with Christ, but Paul’s point here is that sexual immorality is *especially* incompatible with that union. Why? Because, as he has argued from Genesis 2:24, it involves the body in a deeply intimate one-flesh union that is of profound significance for human beings.” (HSR, 33, emphasis in original)
- i. We note first that the notion of something’s being “especially incompatible” with something else is incoherent; incompatibility does not admit of degrees. This is a minor issue.
 - ii. Part of the context for Teaching #2 is the claim that, according to Paul, “the body is not just destined for resurrection and union with Christ” but is also a temple of the Holy Spirit. (HSR, 34) The remark about our destiny is telling, however, because it indicates that the “union with Christ” that the authors are talking about is or includes post-mortem union, namely, the union we have by way of *salvation*. (This is, of course, a perfectly standard understanding of what union with Christ involves.) But if this is right, and if it is also true that sexual immorality is “especially incompatible with union with Christ”, then it straightforwardly follows that *anyone* (believer or not) who commits sexual sin is thereby deprived of union with Christ, and hence of salvation. Against this, however, witness the Canons of Dort, First Point, Rejection VII: “Synod rejects the errors of those... Who teach that in this life there is no fruit, no awareness, and no assurance of one’s unchangeable election to glory, except as conditional upon something changeable and contingent.” Obviously whether a person is or is not someone who has committed sexual immorality is a “changeable and contingent” matter; thus, Teaching #2 straightforwardly contradicts this part of the Canons of Dort.
- c. Teaching #3: The document says that “by the word ‘unchastity’, the catechism intends to encompass all sexual immorality, including homosexual activity [sic]” (HSR, 146); but it also says the following in its “word to church members who are attracted to the same

sex”: “know that your sexual attractions do not make you sinful any more than your temptations to pride, selfishness, or idolatry make you sinful.” (HSR, 122)

- i. If “unchastity” includes gay and lesbian sexual acts, then Q&A 109 of the Heidelberg Catechism forbids gay and lesbian sexual attractions, as follows: “We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul, and God wants both to be kept clean and holy. That is why he forbids everything which incites unchastity, whether it be actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires.” If it be objected that “attractions” do not include thoughts or desires, we reply that the Human Sexuality Report itself rebuts this objection. In talking about the world’s view of sexuality, the document says “In the world’s eyes, it is outrageous to expect those who are attracted to the same sex not to express those desires in a sexual relationship...”. (HSR, 113) In this remark, the term “those desires” refers back to sexual *attractions*; thus, sexual attractions include desires.
 - d. In sum: The HSR has managed to include remarks that violate the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, *and* the Heidelberg Catechism. This by itself is sufficient to disqualify the report as, on the whole, “useful information” to churches in the Reformed tradition.
2. The teachings on gender identity are so irresponsible as to be harmful rather than useful.
- a. In commenting on Genesis, the document says that “to be male is to possess male sexuality and to be female is to possess female sexuality.” (HSR, 17) Importantly, the terms “male sexuality” and “female sexuality” are left undefined. Gender is defined as “categorization of humans as male and female based on culturally sanctioned roles, behaviors, expressions (sometimes also labeled as masculinity and femininity)” and gender identity is defined as “a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or other”. (HSR, 61) Transgender is defined as “a broad term that includes persons who define themselves as a gender other than their sex”. (HSR, 62) This terminological scheme is both nonstandard and incoherent.
 - i. Consider Sophie, a transwoman who was assigned the sex “male” at birth and has not transitioned (so, among other things, she has a penis). Standard usage would say that what it is for Sophie to be transgender is for her to identify with a gender (in this case, “woman”) other than the one that corresponds with the sex she was assigned at birth. But the HSR can make no sense of this. On their terminological scheme, if Sophie is trans it is because she identifies as *female*. But to be female is to possess female sexuality; so the Human Sexuality Report is committed to understanding Sophie as thinking of herself as possessing female sexuality. Sophie obviously recognizes that she has a penis (and, let us suppose, she has no other anatomical features that would mark her as female). So she cannot possibly think that she possesses *anatomical* female sexuality. What, then, could it possibly mean for her to think she possesses female sexuality? The terminological scheme

suggests that, in addition to anatomical female sexuality there is also “cultural” female sexuality—namely, femininity. But if femininity is a form of female sexuality, then to be female is *either* to be anatomically female or to be feminine, in which case either Sophie is mistaken in thinking she is feminine (an unlikely possibility) or she *really is female* **and** she is also *genuinely male* (by virtue of her male anatomical sexuality). This makes no sense by anyone’s lights.

- b. The document grants that the Bible doesn’t really speak to issues of gender identity since the sex-gender distinction would have been alien to the writers of the biblical texts. Specifically, it says:

“Central to the discussion of sex and gender identity is the distinction between sex and gender. Yet, as we have seen, this distinction is a relatively recent one, and it is unknown to the Bible. For most of Western history, male and female would have included the biological realities of those terms as well as all of what is now included in the term gender. Needless to say, there is very little that the Bible explicitly says about these issues.” (HSR, 75)

Since the primary goal of the document is “to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality,” (HSR, 3) the best move at this point would have been to end the discussion of gender and move on to other topics. Instead, it speculatively notes that the discussion of eunuchs in Matt 19:11 - 12 “may shed light on the topic of gender identity and DSD” (HSR, 76), and proceeds to identify as the general upshot of that discussion the notion that for many Christians it is better not to marry, and this is a praiseworthy path that leads to great reward. The clear suggestion, then, in light of the claim that Matt 19:11 - 12 may shed light on the topic at hand, is that it may well be better for trans people and intersex people simply not to marry. In a context like this one, where there are significant quality of life issues at stake and real people can be harmed (even to the point of being driven from the church) by false claims about what the Bible says about an entire class of people, it is exceedingly irresponsible to speculatively *suggest* that there are biblical grounds for depriving trans and intersex individuals of the great goods of marriage after previously acknowledging that, strictly speaking, the Bible does not speak to their condition.

- c. In a similar vein, the document says “We do not help people to flourish when we encourage them to transition from one sex to another.” (HSR, 81) Quoting Kevin Vanhoozer approvingly, it goes on to say that “in refusing one’s biology, the creature refuses what is ultimately not merely a natural given but a gift of God,” and “our true vocation is not to reject our physical bodies. It is to discern, deliberate on, and do those possibilities that are given to us with our biological sex.” (HSR, 81) But, again, with so much at stake and an open acknowledgment of the fact that the Bible does not speak to

matters of gender, claims like this wholly untethered as they are from clear biblical guidance are absolutely irresponsible.

- d. In sum: Some of what the HSR has to say about gender identity is incoherent; some of it is objectionably speculative, untethered from biblical moorings. In consequence, it runs grave risk of seriously harming the members of the transgender community within our midst. Such a document cannot be recommended to CRC churches as containing “useful information” on this subject.

Grounds In Support of (B)

1. The HSR offers two pieces of evidence in support of the claim that “unchastity” in Q&A 108 includes gay and lesbian sexual acts: (i) in 2017, the Reformed Churches of America offered the same interpretation; and (ii) Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, states in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism that “unchastity” is to be understood in this way. Plausibly, the first piece of evidence here is derivative upon the second; but even if it isn’t, the teachings of the Reformed Churches of America are not normative for our Synod, so that is further reason for treating the second piece of evidence as primary. But in this matter we should follow the “spirit” of Ursinus’s commentary rather than the letter (as we shall argue below), and doing so would lead to the rescinding of Synod’s decision to interpret “unchastity” in the way that it did.
 - a. As noted earlier, there is tension between the following claims: (i) “unchastity” includes gay and lesbian sexual acts; (ii) Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 are equally normative for CRC churches; (iii) “homosexual desire / attraction” is not sinful. *At least one of these claims must be rejected*, otherwise the CRC position is incoherent.
 - b. Ursinus, in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (cited here as “Comm.”), is deeply committed to both (i) and (ii). Commenting on Q&A 108 and 109, he writes: “When one thing is specified, all those are understood which are closely allied or connected with it. Therefore, when adultery is prohibited, as the most shocking and debasing form of lust, we are to understand all other forms of lust as forbidden at the same time.” (Comm., 590) He then goes on to identify among the various forms of lust “the corrupt inclinations to which good men give no indulgence, but which they resist, and from which they cut off all occasions, so that their consciences are not troubled...”. (Comm., 591) Immediately following this sentence, he calls these sin: “Marriage was instituted after the fall as a remedy against these sins.” (Comm., 591) To be sure, this passage is not talking specifically about homosexual desire; but what it does make clear is that the Ursinian concept of *lust* encompasses not just the objectifying gaze that the HSR characterizes as lust, but *any* inclination or desire contrary chastity, even those that otherwise “good men” have and do not indulge. Therefore, if Ursinus is treated as authoritative for the interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism, it is (iii) above that should be rejected, not (i) or (ii).

- c. The view that both (ii) and (iii) above are true is affirmed in the 1973 synodical report on homosexuality and reaffirmed in the HSR. It has been the consistent position of the CRC for almost 50 years. In taking this position, *the CRC has effectively rejected the authority of Ursinus on the interpretation of Q&A 108 and 109*. Moreover, they are right to do so. Ursinus is clearly a product of his time. In the quotation above, we see Ursinus saying that adultery is “the most shocking and debasing form of lust” which we expect is a claim that even—and maybe especially—the most conservative among us will find implausible at best. More strikingly, we find remarks like these:

“Fornication takes place when those that are unmarried have connection with each other. Magistrates ought by virtue of their office to punish severely fornication and adultery. God appointed and required capital punishment to be inflicted upon adulterers. And although he did not appoint death as the punishment of fornicators; yet, when he frequently declared in his word that no whore should be found among his people, he signified that it should be punished according to its heinousness and aggravated nature.” (Comm., 591)

This is perhaps standard fare for the 16th Century (though it is worth noting that the Thomistic view on these matters is not nearly so severe); but, despite its reference to Old Testament law, it does not reflect what most of us nowadays would regard as a properly biblical way of dealing with sexual sin. Nor is it how the CRC has thought about sexual sin for at least the past 50 years.

- d. There is an obvious resolution here in the quotation from Ursinus about marriage: “Marriage was instituted after the fall as a remedy for these sins.” Ursinus, of course, thought that marriage was, by definition, a “union between one man and one woman”. Then again, Ursinus wasn’t the most coherent thinker on the subject of marriage: just one page after saying that “marriage was instituted after the fall as a remedy for [various] sins”, he says that marriage “was instituted by God himself in Paradise, before the fall of man” for a variety of purposes, only one of which was that “wanton and wandering lusts might in this way be avoided”. (Comm., 592) But, in any case, it seems clear that the CRC might have some claim to following the spirit of Ursinus if they resolved the longstanding tension between their position on same-sex relationships and the Heidelberg Catechism by *rescinding* the 2022 interpretation of “unchastity” and recognizing gay marriage as a remedy parallel to heterosexual marriage for “wanton and wandering lusts”.

Respectfully submitted,



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Church of the Savior CRC

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