

Confessional-Revision Overture
Church of the Savior CRC
South Bend, Indiana

We, the Council of Church of the Savior CRC, overture Classis to overture Synod to alter the interpretation given to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 by Synod 2022, specifically to remove “homosexual sex” from the list of sins that constitute “unchastity.”

Our difficulty with Synod 2022’s interpretation is on several fronts. What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but will, we hope, illustrate the tremendous difficulty we have with Synod 2022’s interpretation of Q&A 108.

- 1) 1. Our most pressing and urgent objection is that this interpretation teaches “the sinfulness of desire,” the idea that not just homosexual sex, but same-sex attraction and desire itself, are sinful. This effectively overturns the CRC’s position on homosexuality laid out in Report 42 from the Committee to Study Homosexuality,¹ namely, that same-sex attraction and desire are not in themselves sinful - a position which has been taught in the CRC since 1973 and with which we heartily agree.²
- 2) Our second objection is that we are not convinced that scripture teaches that all homosexual sex is wrong. There are good arguments to be made, including by Reformed scholars, that the handful of verses in the New Testament forbidding homosexual sex have to do with exploitative homosexual sex. They don’t speak to (nor could they even know about) homosexual sex within a committed, lifelong Christian marriage. The Human Sexuality Report (HSR) gave short shrift to these alternative interpretations, claiming that scripture was “clear, consistent, and compelling” on this issue - when it is anything but for many readers and scholars.
- 3) Our third objection has to do with the semantic and hermeneutical contortions required for Synod 2022 to interpret Q&A 108 as it did. Q&A 108 has to do with the seventh commandment: You shall not commit adultery. The plain meaning of this commandment is that the sexual relationship within a marriage is to be respected and protected. Yet Synod 2022’s interpretation of Q&A 108 serves to *forbid* sex within gay marriages. Whatever one thinks of gay marriage, marshalling the seventh commandment in particular to forbid married people from having sex is far afield from its original intent.

Homosexual sex is not named specifically in Q&A 108; Synod 2022 brought it in by interpreting “unchastity” to include homosexual sex. The plain meaning of the word

¹ https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/1973_report_homosexuality.pdf.

² Lord’s Day 41 Overture.

unchastity has to do with “sexual suggestiveness, transgression, or excess; lascivious; bawdy.” A person who has sex only with one’s marriage partner would never aptly be described as “unchaste,” according to any plain and commonly understood definition of the term. The ironic upshot of all these contortions is that a married gay couple in which each partner remains faithful to the other for a lifetime is both breaking the seventh commandment (“Don’t commit adultery”) and living unchastely. This strains common sense to the breaking point.

If HC Q&A 108 is the best we can do for declaring that opposition to (all) homosexual sex is “confessional,” that is a shaky foundation indeed. Such semantic and hermeneutical contortions indicate that opposition to homosexual sex is not a “confessional” matter at all. It is simply not to be found in the CRC’s creeds and confessions, unless artificially forced into them.³ If homosexual sex was so clearly forbidden at this point in the Heidelberg Catechism, why was it not brought into the 1973 report on homosexuality?⁴ Why is it only now entering into the denominational conversation? We realize that there are some people within the CRC who want opposition to homosexual sex to be a confessional matter. We are in a cultural moment when emotions in the church are running high over various aspects of the culture war, and most especially over gay marriage. However, to shoehorn this interpretation into the Heidelberg Catechism does not serve the church well. It simply demands compliance on a very complicated and controversial issue, about which there clearly is disagreement among people of good faith in the church.

- 4) Our fourth objection is that this interpretation shows a lack of faithfulness to what scripture actually says, with the result that male experience is privileged and female experience is marginalized. Synod (following the HSR) failed to account for the differences between how male homosexuality and female homosexuality are treated in scripture. Even after explicitly citing sources that show how the male experience is privileged and preferred in studies about homosexuality in the research (and the problems that result when one tries to extrapolate research results to include female homosexuality),⁵ the HSR proceeded to do the very same thing in its treatment of homosexuality in scripture! The HSR looked almost exclusively at what the Bible had to say about *male* homosexuality, and then extrapolated its findings to include *female* homosexuality.

³ Ursinus, one of the Catechism’s framers, no doubt had homosexual sex in mind with Q&A 108. However, we are not confessionally bound to Ursinus’ opinions, but to the text of the Catechism.

⁴ The framers of the 1973 report were tasked with advising synod on what the CRC’s position on homosexuality ought to be. If it was so clear that homosexual sex was forbidden in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, why did they not say so? How could they have missed that? If it wasn’t so clear, then Synod 2022 did indeed give HC 108 a novel interpretation (as far as the CRC is concerned). Either the framers of the 1973 report didn’t know their Catechism, or Synod 2022 was introducing something new. We can’t have it both ways.

⁵ Appendix A, p. 159.

Quite possibly, this is because if one takes female homosexuality on its own terms in the Bible, there is hardly anything to find at all. Female homosexual sex is possibly addressed in only one verse in the entire Bible (Romans 1:26⁶) - and (since it is not named directly) that is only *if* we assume it is included as one of the types of “unnatural” intercourse women can engage in.⁷ And yet, on the “evidence” of one ambiguous verse, the HSR (and Synod 2022) made sweeping declarations about all homosexual sex, female homosexual sex included. That is not good Reformed hermeneutics!⁸ And it is certainly not a good basis for making something “confessional.” It is simply not possible that scripture speaks in a “clear, consistent, and compelling”⁹ way on lesbian relationships, when scripture devotes (at most) one verse to the subject. This is a clear case where our prejudices have shaped our interpretation of scripture, instead of letting scripture speak (or not speak, as the case may be) on its own terms.

- 5) Our fifth objection has to do with the application of scripture. It is one thing to know what scripture says, and another thing entirely to know how and when to apply what scripture says. The HSR did a dubious job telling us what scripture says in the first place, and compounded the problem by ignoring entirely the question of how and when to apply that scripture.

To give an obvious example: Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22), and Peter told them to submit to their master’s beatings (1 Peter 2:18-20). It is not hard to understand what these texts say; anyone who can read can do that. The difficult thing is to know how and when to apply them. Were white preachers in the antebellum South (United States) honoring scripture by quoting and applying these verses to African American slaves? Of course not; they were abusing scripture, using it to uphold an evil institution. Simply knowing what scripture says is not enough; we need to think carefully about how and when to apply it, lest we use scripture to the opposite end of its Author’s intentions.

This is not an idle example. Reformed Hermeneutics, for all that it serves as an aid to help us rightly interpret scripture, also has the potential to lead to the wrong conclusion. In Calvin Theological Seminary’s own journal, a Reformed scholar made the case that there is nothing inherently wrong with the institution of slavery, provided that both slave and master (and

⁶ “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural...”

⁷ It has been well documented in other places that there were a myriad of ways that women could engage in “unnatural intercourse,” including with male partners.

⁸ On p. 165 of *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, Berkhof notes that the greater the number of books and authors in scripture who treat a particular topic, the more compelling the case. Specifically, he notes that 12 texts are more compelling than 6. What would he say about making a point “confessional” (not to mention deposing a deacon!) based on a mere one verse of scripture...?!

⁹ HSR, p. 112.

especially the master) obey the law of neighbor-love within the constraints of the institution.¹⁰ It is incredible to us (and to many) that anyone could believe that *owning* one's neighbor is consistent with *loving* one's neighbor - yet in recent memory Calvin Seminary itself published this perspective in its peer-reviewed journal. Among other things, this shows that simply applying "Reformed Hermeneutics" as a tool to interpret scripture does not necessarily lead us to an obvious, we-all-agree-on-this conclusion. It leads some to accept the institution of slavery, and some to reject it.¹¹ Clearly, much depends on the assumptions and prejudices of those who are using the tool.¹²

Real people are being harmed by Synod 2022's interpretation of scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism. The damage done by the church to those who identify as LGBTQ+ is well rehearsed: depression, suicide, leaving the church and the Christian faith entirely. This "fruit" of our blanket opposition to homosexual sex must not be ignored. It is a real life example of Jesus' sober warning in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

In this parable, a priest and a Levite choose to pass by on the other side of the road rather than offer aid to a suffering man. It's not because they are cruel or uncaring people. It is because if the man is dead, or dies under their care, they will be unclean according to the law, and they care very much about abiding by the law. When push comes to shove, they care more about abiding by the law than the life and wellbeing of the suffering man. It is the Samaritan, who is not so caught up with law observance, who is free to stop, and show compassion, and tend to the man. Jesus does not leave us in any doubt about who chose the better part: "Go and do likewise," he says - about the Samaritan.

The message is clear: there are times when our attempts to honor the law actually cause us to go contrary to the (heart of the) law, which is to love our neighbor as ourselves. We believe this is what Synod 2022 did in its interpretation of HC Q&A 108. Wholeheartedly and sincerely attempting to abide by the law, it went contrary to the heart of the law. Synod chose to maintain purity according to (its perception of) the letter of the law, and passed by on the other side of the road. Not content with that, it is making it compulsory for the whole Christian Reformed Church to do the same.

¹⁰ Guenther Haas, "The Kingdom and Slavery: A Test Case for Social Ethics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 74-89.

¹¹ See, for example, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, where William J. Webb marshals the abolition of slavery as an obvious and "neutral" example, which he uses as a foil for the more controversial example of women's equality and as the obvious and opposite (to him) example of homosexual practice in the New Testament.

¹² We are not in the dark about what the assumptions and prejudices of the HSR committee were: only those who were already opposed to gay marriage were allowed to serve on the committee. It is no wonder that the application of Reformed Hermeneutics brought them to that conclusion. The tool can only be used according to the hands that wield it.

The reality is that even if the framers of the Heidelberg Catechism intended to include “homosexual sex” in their definition of unchastity, that would not solve the problem we have here. The Christian church has always held to a sexual ethic in which (consensual) sex within marriage is acceptable, but sex (whether consensual or not) outside marriage is not. When the Heidelberg Catechism was written, all homosexual sex was by definition outside marriage, and so could be condemned as unchaste without having to give it much thought. We now live in a cultural moment when something new has emerged that the Heidelberg Catechism knew nothing of, and probably couldn’t have imagined: legal gay marriage. Instead of giving this new situation careful and thoughtful consideration, Synod 2022 chose to side-step the whole discussion by claiming that married homosexual sex was somehow addressed and condemned by a document written hundreds of years before there was such a thing as married homosexual sex. This is simply nonsensical, and agreement with nonsense cannot be forced, even by a Christian Reformed synod.

For these reasons, we are asking for a change to the interpretation of HC Q&A 108 put forward by Synod 2022.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CRhebergen', written in a cursive style.

Christina Rhebergen, stated clerk
Church of the Savior CRC
November 21, 2022