

## OVERTURE

The council of Waterloo CRC overtures Classis Huron to overture Synod 2023 to rule and declare that the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 adopted by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, 922) has the weight of synodical authority but does not have confessional status.

### Background

The 2022 study committee on human sexuality (HSR) recommended “that synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extra-marital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status” (*Agenda of Synod 2022*, 461). The HSR based this recommendation in part on a passage from the commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism by one of its authors, Zacharias Ursinus, arguing that the church has always included these things in its interpretation of what “unchastity” means in the catechism (*Agenda of Synod 2022*, 457–58).

Synod 2022 wisely did not follow the study committee’s reasoning. A commentary on the catechism, even if written by one of its authors, does not have confessional status. The church has adopted the catechism, not every thought of its authors.

Nevertheless, Synod 2022 did accept the study committee’s interpretation of Q. and A. 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism and declared it to have confessional status, citing different grounds. One of these grounds is a decision on synodical authority from Synod 1975. Unfortunately, Synod 2022 misread and misapplied this 1975 decision in ways that have consequences far beyond the immediate decision of Synod 2022.

First let us look at what Synod 1975 decided, and then we will turn to what Synod 2022 did.

### Synod 1975

Synod 1975 was presented with a study committee report on “Synodical Decisions and the Confessions” (*Acts and Agenda of Synod 1975*, 595–604). This report was commissioned by Synod 1973 “to study the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters, and their relation to the confessions.” Clearly, as Synod 2022 noted, this study is directly relevant to the question of whether a synodical interpretation of a creed itself has confessional status. This study is indeed relevant, but Synod 2022 misreads and misapplies it.

In the study report (Report 47, *Acts of Synod 1975*), the committee distinguishes the relative authority of scripture, creeds and confessions, and synods:

The authority of the confessions is subordinate to the Scriptures. The authority of synodical decisions is subordinate to the confessions and the Scriptures as the authority of the confessions is subordinate to the Scriptures. Subscription to the confessions is

required of all office-bearers and agreement with the confessions is expected of all members of the church. Synodical decisions are "considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order." They must be in harmony with the Reformed creeds which the Christian Reformed Church accepts "as a true interpretation of this Word" (Church Order, Arts. 29 and 1). *Thus there is a difference in the nature of the authority of the confessions and synodical pronouncements. (Acts of Synod 1975, 601; emphasis added)*

The report illustrates this last point—the “difference in the nature of the authority of the confessions and synodical pronouncements”—by reviewing how earlier synods handle the relationship between confessional authority and synodical authority. On this basis, the committee concludes that synodical decisions have not been given confessional status, “even when the particular decision involved was an interpretation of the confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1975, 599*). The report makes it very clear that synodical decisions do not have confessional status.

The difference can be expressed in terms of the latitude given to those who hold church office. The confessions require *subscription*. If one cannot give full consent on a given point taught by a confession, one must follow the procedures for dissent prescribed in Article 5 of the Church Order. Synodical decisions, in contrast, require *obedience* but not agreement. Unlike a confession, those who hold office in the church are not required to *subscribe* to the pronouncements of synod.

The 1975 study committee also distinguished among the different kinds of authority that synodical decisions possess. This part of the 1975 report and the decisions made by Synod 1975 seem to have confused Synod 2022. The 1975 committee sorted through various synodical pronouncements and distinguished how those pronouncements should be taken by the church. They identified six kinds of synodical pronouncement: (1) interpretation of a confession, (2) extension of church teaching into a new area, (3) adjudication of doctrinal or moral disputes, (4) public testimony, (5) guidelines for further study, and (6) pastoral advice. Each of these has its own kind of authority, but each remains synodical authority, not confessional authority.

Most of these different uses are transparent. The church knows to take pastoral advice differently than a public testimony supporting a teaching of the church. The point is that the church should use each synodical pronouncement as it is intended.

Synod 1975 adopted the committee’s understanding of synodical decisions. First, it made clear the inherent difference between synodical authority and confessional authority:

Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions. . . . The confessions and synodical pronouncements have nuances of differences. They differ in the extent of their jurisdiction, in the nature of their authority, in the distinction of purposes, in the measure of agreement expected, and in their use and function. (*Acts of Synod 1975, 603*)

Further, in enumerating the six kinds of synodical pronouncement, Synod 1975 made clear their purposes, noting first among these an interpretation of a confession:

The use and function of synodical decisions are explicitly or implicitly indicated by the wording of the particular decision itself:

- 1) When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function. (*Acts of Synod 1975*, 603)

Crucially, as this makes clear, the interpretation of a confession does not mean, as Synod 2022 takes it, that the interpretation becomes confessional, but rather that a synodical interpretation of a confession is just that, a synodical interpretation. The interpretation comes with the authority of the synod, not with the authority of the confession.

This is an important and fundamental principle of Reformed polity. If synodical interpretations of a confession are themselves confessional, then what is confessional can be extended infinitely. Each synod could make an interpretation of a confession, and the confession would grow each time, changing the meaning of one's subscription to the confession. For this reason, Reformed polity distinguishes between the authority of the confessions and the authority of synods.

## **Synod 2022**

Synod 2022, however, did not observe this difference between confessional and synodical authority. Among its decisions on human sexuality, Synod 2022 declared:

That synod affirm that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation “an interpretation of [a] confession” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status. (*Acts of Synod 2022*, 922)

This “therefore” seems to be based on the citation of Synod 1975 in the previous sentence. So too is the first ground for the decision:

### *Grounds:*

- a. “When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). (*Acts of Synod 2022*, 922)

As has been shown, however, this statement from 1975 does not mean that a synodical pronouncement is given the same authority as a confession; rather, it indicates how the pronouncement is to be used—that is, as an interpretation of a confession. The synodical

interpretation is not the confession itself. The confession has confessional status; the interpretation does not.

This means the “therefore” of the Synod 2022 decision is incorrect. Synod argues its case for giving its interpretation confessional status on the basis of a misreading of Synod 1975, which in fact says quite the opposite.

### **Redressing the Wrong**

The Church Order sets a high bar for reconsideration of synodical decisions: “The decisions of synod shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order” (Church Order Article 29). Is Synod 2023 permitted to reconsider the decision of Synod 2022?

We think so. Synod 1975 clearly said that synodical pronouncements do not have the authority of confessions, even if a synodical pronouncement is an interpretation of a confession. Synod 2022 assigned confessional status to its interpretation of a confession, thereby contradicting Synod 1975 and making an error that should be corrected.

Further, Synod 2022 violated Church Order Article 29 by in error reversing the decision of Synod 1975. Synod 1975 clearly said that synodical pronouncements do not have confessional authority. Synod 2022, misreading Synod 1975, in effect reconsidered the actions of Synod 1975 without giving reasons for doing so. Synods of course can and often do change the decisions of previous synods, so Synod 2022 could have changed the level of authority given to interpretations of confessions. But that is not what Synod 2022 did. Instead, Synod 2022 claimed to follow Synod 1975 when in fact it altered a longstanding and important principle: synodical decisions do not have confessional authority.

To make this kind of change without prior consideration by the church and on the basis of what appears to be faulty reasoning is not wise. If synodical interpretations of the confessions can claim confession status, the church has in effect extended the confessions to whatever the next synod or the synod after that decides is the correct interpretation, subordinating the authority of confessions to that of synods and undermining a long-held principle of Reformed polity.

The effect of this change would be to throw the process of subscription to the confessions into confusion. If office-bearers are to subscribe not only to the confessions as written but to synodical interpretations of the confessions, then they cannot be certain to what they are subscribing. The confessions could conceivably change from year to year.

This has been the effect already of the decision of Synod 2022. Suddenly, those who opposed the actions taken by Synod 2022 are uncertain what their previous subscription to the confessions now means. Must they resubscribe? Is their previous subscription invalid? These questions were not adequately addressed by Synod 2022, nor can they be. Synod 2022 changed

what it means to be confessional, and this change came without due consideration and on the basis of an erroneous reading of a previous synod.

For these reasons, it seems prudent for Synod 2023 to reconsider the decision of Synod 2022 to declare as confessional their interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108. Synod 2023 should reinstate the principle of Synod 1975 that synodical pronouncements, even when they are interpretations of a confession, do not themselves have confessional status.


### **Therefore**

We, the council of Waterloo CRC, overture Classis Huron to overture Synod 2023 to rule and declare that the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 adopted by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022, 922*) has the weight of synodical authority but does not have confessional status.

### Grounds

1. The declaration of Synod 2022 that its interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 has confessional status is based on a misreading of the decisions of Synod 1975.
2. This misreading materially changes the relationship between confessions and pronouncements of synods so that any synod can declare that its interpretation of a confession has confessional status, thereby extending and altering confessional status in ways that are inherently unpredictable and unmanageable for anyone who in good faith has subscribed to the confessions.
3. Synod 2022, by redefining the relationship between the authority of the confessions and the authority of synods, has made a fundamental change in the polity of the church without prior notice to the congregations and classes and without providing a clear rationale for doing so, thereby violating Article 29 of the Church Order.
4. The decision of Synod 2022, for the reasons given above, violates the good order of the Christian Reformed Church, constituting grounds for reconsideration.
5. The declaration of Synod 2022 that its interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 has confessional status has unsettled the denomination and forced office holders in good standing to leave the Christian Reformed Church, thereby diminishing the peace and orderly life of the denomination.

Council of Waterloo Christian Reformed Church, Waterloo, Ontario  
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