

Overture of Waterloo Christian Reformed Church to Classis Huron

That Classis Huron overture Synod 2022 not to adopt Recommendation D of the Report to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (HSR)

Recommendation D of the HSR asks Synod to “declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.” While the church’s teaching on these topics is of vital importance to the lives of Christians, we do not believe it has confessional status. Nor do we wish it to have confessional status. Many of the issues covered by the report are complex and unsettled, both in our denomination and in the greater church; they require continuous study and discussion. In addition, we believe the HSR fails to support its conclusions sufficiently to warrant their elevation to confessional status. Finally, to declare these issues settled by giving them confessional status would prematurely shut down meaningful conversations between Christians who sincerely and faithfully disagree. Such a teaching denies the continued leading of the Holy Spirit and would result in grave harm to churches in the denomination where disagreement exists.

Grounds:

1. The CRC’s current “position” **does not have** confessional status.

Although the Synod of 1973 offered “settled and binding” pastoral advice regarding, for example, homosexual activity, the Synod of 1975 declared, “No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with confessions” (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 598). Therefore, we find that the conclusions of 1973 are clearly not confessional.

Further, while the HSR relies heavily on the writers’ claim that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 108 refers to homosexuality, no Synod has affirmed this reading. As Calvin Seminary professor emeritus of church polity Henry De Moor wrote on *The Network*, “Only if a CRCNA synod has thus interpreted Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism can this be called a confessional issue in our denomination. It is not enough for a study committee to quote Ursinus or do anything else to argue that it is ‘already’ a confessional issue. The synod must have decided it” (November 11, 2020, <https://network.crcna.org/church-order/status-confessionis>).

For these reasons, it is evident that the denomination’s current position does not already have confessional status.

2. The positions articulated in the HSR **should not be given** confessional status.

Never before has Synod declared a moral or ethical stance to jeopardize one's very salvation. Why these ones? Why now? Why should we be required to agree on the report's specific interpretations of texts to be members in good standing or office bearers in the CRC? The writers of the report demand agreement on interpretations where we know sincere Christians disagree, putting their conclusions on par with the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt. As Reformed Christians, we confess that we are made right with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and his work for us. Synod must not add or subtract from that confession.

Further, the HSR itself does not provide trustworthy support for its own conclusions and therefore does not constitute a sure foundation for a declaration of confessional status. In particular, we find significant reasons to object to its use of science and scripture.

a. Science is both misrepresented and ignored.

When science *is* cited by the HSR, for example, beginning on p. 93, the main study to which the report refers ("How Do Genes Affect Same-Sex Behavior?," *Science* 365, no. 6456 [August 30, 2019]) is misrepresented. First, the quotes are taken from a summary, not from the article itself. Second, the HSR's claim that this article supports its position that there is no "gay gene" grossly misrepresents the study's discoveries. What the article actually says is that, as with other human characteristics, specific genes for homosexuality are hard to find. Nevertheless, the study found *many* complex genetic correlations between same-sex behaviour and at least five loci on the human chromosome, clearly indicating genetic determinants for homosexuality.

Similarly, in contrast to the HSR's conclusions on gender, we find that scientists increasingly understand the myriad differences between genders (appearance, behaviour, attractions, etc.) to be more complex than any simple binary between X and Y chromosomes. We are, in fact, fearfully and wonderfully made, just as Scripture says. Studies done by Daphna Joel and her associates over the past twenty years, which she summarizes in "Beyond the Binary: Rethinking Sex and the Brain" (*Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 122 [March 2021]: 165–75), give helpful clarity here. When ten regions of the brain showing the largest average sex differences were imaged, a mosaic of male and female characteristics were evident in each individual brain. The researchers found no consistent male or female pattern across these ten areas. It simply is not scientifically accurate to say that there are two, and only two, distinct genders. Note that this is not an argument for a gender continuum; instead, each of us has characteristics that our culture

labels variously male and female. And yet the HSR unscientifically insists there is a simple binary of male and female.

The HSR's poor use of and ignorance of science on these two issues is unfortunately representative of the rest of the report. Rather than understanding the science they themselves cite, the authors put forward a misinformed position or one completely uninformed by current science, and we cannot accept this as binding on faith. To do so would place an impossible burden on believers to choose between scientific discovery and confessional assent.

- b. Scripture is used to support presuppositions rather than to understand complex issues.

The Belgic Confession teaches that Reformed theology looks to *both* special revelation (Scripture) and general revelation (creation/science) to know God (Article 2). On pages 37–39, the HSR gives the impression that presuppositions shape science but Scripture is readily understood, and therefore that special revelation/Scripture has “cognitive priority” over general revelation/science. This may be true in a certain sense, but we do not in practice have purity in either scientific *or* Scriptural studies. Both are clearly human attempts to understand God’s revelation, and consequently both may be flawed. So while it is true that Scripture perfectly reveals God and his will, it is *not* true that anyone’s, or any group’s, *interpretation* of Scripture perfectly reveals God’s truth. Thousands of years of church history show that humans do not understand God’s Word perfectly. The very disagreement the HSR seeks to address, over what Scripture says about human sexuality, shows that humans interpret God’s Word in several ways.

To claim that Scripture is clear on every topic, or even that “Scripture teaches in a *clear, consistent, and compelling way* that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful” (HSR, p. 112), denies the significant disagreements of hundreds of years of church history, often leading to denominational splits, including the Reformation itself. We do not wish to deny the reality of faithful disagreement, whether on homosexuality or any other issue outside the saving work of Christ. To do so impugns the faith of numerous Christian scholars who conclude that Scripture is *not* clear on these issues. As such, we find the HSR’s prejudicial dismissal of contrasting scholars and their work by labelling them “revisionists” unhelpful and akin to name-calling, which should be beneath us.

In addition, we are concerned by the HSR's fluid use of a variety Scripture translations, seemingly choosing whichever one best supports a particular argument. Our greatest concern regarding choice of translation comes in the significant argument based on Matthew 19:12 (HSR, p. 24). The HSR uses the NIV to buttress its belief that sexual behaviour is simply a matter of self-control, because, according to the NIV, "there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." The report claims, without support, that "most scholars" agree that this verse is metaphorical, referring to personal self-control rather than physical alteration. But the NIV stands almost alone in this interpretation (even including a footnote acknowledging that the translators made a choice). Most other reputable translations treat this verse literally, saying, for example, that "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (NRSV). A eunuch's sexual behaviour after such surgery is, clearly, no longer a matter of self-control. And eunuchs, therefore, are hardly reasonable behavioural models for physically intact men, whether gay or straight.

The writers of the report are, of course, free to put forward their readings of certain passages, but we cannot accept their claim that theirs are the *only* possible faithful interpretations of such biblical texts. The conclusions of one small and unrepresentative group of biblical scholars, chosen because they already adhered to the CRC's view on marriage and same-sex relationships (HSR, p. 3) before the study began, are not a strong enough foundation for a binding confession in the CRC.

c. The theology and hermeneutics employed are not faithfully Reformed.

Reformed hermeneutics tells us that all Scripture is completely inspired by God and completely written by humans. It must be read as a whole, verses must not be taken out of context, and study of Scripture must include study of grammar, historical context, and literary genre in order to understand, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what a text is teaching for all time.

The HSR does not do Reformed hermeneutics well. It does not take seriously the historical context, recognize the human limits of the authors, or allow the Holy Spirit much room to help readers discover the text's meaning.

For example, the report places much emphasis on the writers' interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, claiming from these two stories of creation a mandate for our sexual lives. It ignores questions about the literary function and historical context of these stories. It ignores the simpler reading that males

and females are each created in the image of God. It doesn't ask what the text is teaching; it uses the text to prop up a vague "creation mandate" in opposition to same-sex relationships.

That mandate is never spelled out. In his December 2020 white paper, "Response to the Human Sexuality Report to the CRC Synod of 2021," Nicholas Wolterstorff says the best he can figure out is that the writers of the report think "human beings are divinely mandated to propagate by engaging in sexual activity within the context of monogamous heterosexual marriage" (p. 4). Apparently, however, the creation mandate doesn't apply to everyone. It didn't apply to Paul, for example, given that he demonstrated no need to propagate. Perhaps it does not apply to LGBTQ+ persons either.

In our view, this is yet another example of the church misunderstanding the literary genre of Genesis 1 and 2, ignoring the culture in which these chapters were written, and reading current biases into the text. These chapters reveal much about what it means to be children of God, but we disagree with the narrow mandate for a theology of human sexuality that the HSR seems to discover.

In the New Testament, Paul would have written about homosexuality as he knew and understood it, as a behaviour, not as a genetic predisposition or sexual orientation. This is what he knew. The report ignores the Reformed hermeneutic that human writers wrote from their own understanding of the world and could not have known things that we have learned since. As Wolterstorff writes, "We cannot just quote Bible verses that condemn same-sex behavior as the writers knew and understood it. We have to think for ourselves—as the church has done throughout the centuries on other issues, for example, on the fact that the Bible implicitly condones slavery. Think for ourselves not as 'freethinkers' but as committed Christians, integrating deep themes from Scripture with what we know from present-day science into a holistic understanding of human sexuality and its implications. The present report does not do that, nor did the 1973 report. Both reports fail the church" ("Response to the Human Sexuality Report," p. 3).

3. The HSR does not represent the denomination.

Our youth, families, churches, classes, and denomination are divided on the issue of same-sex behaviour. A study committee made up of scholars only on one side of the discussion does not represent the disagreement of faithful Christians within the CRC and cannot lead us forward to truth.

Jesus prays that we might remain united in John 17. To close the door on further discussion, insights, science, and particularly on the people who think and feel differently on this issue is to sever the unity of our churches. It would be painfully unjust, premature, and counterproductive. We ask Synod not to impose such harm.

Council of Waterloo Christian Reformed Church, Waterloo, Ontario

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