

Confessional-Revision Gravamen

(In accordance with Supplement Article 5 of Church Order and its Supplements)

This Gravamen was submitted to the council of New Life CRC and was referred to Classis Huron.

Submitted to: the Council of New Life Christian Reformed Church, Guelph, Ontario, CANADA and Classis Huron, for decision at Synod 2023

By: Officebearers of New Life Christian Reformed Church

- James Bryson (deacon), Dirk Kroon (deacon; representative on Council), Patricia Vanderkooy (pastoral elder), Jacinda Wallace (pastoral elder), Kathy Zettler (deacon)

Date: January 2, 2023

Acknowledgements:

- The signatories to this Confessional-Revision Gravamen are current Officebearers of New Life Christian Reformed Church (“NewLifeCRCGuelph”) which is a church in Guelph, Ontario, CANADA, within Classis Huron of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (“CRCNA”).
- By an Act of Synod 2022, Synod 2022 moved the following: “That Synod affirm that “unchastity” in the Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extra marital 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.”¹
- This gravamen is submitted out of concern and love for the Christian Reformed Church, which has by its own admission declared “we have failed each other”².

Gravamen Request:

That Synod 2023 rescind the decision by Synod 2022 to declare that its synodical interpretation of Q&A 108 Heidelberg Catechism has “confessional status”.

¹ Acts of Synod 2022. 2022 Christian Reformed Church in North America.

https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2022_acts.pdf

² Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/human_sexuality_report_2021.pdf

Grounds:

1. The interpretation of “confessional status” is based on theological arguments from a report (Human Sexuality Report/HSR³) that was written by a selected committee of CRC members “who adhere to the CRC’s biblical view on marriage and same- sex relationships”. This interpretation was limited to exclude discussion of broader context and interpretation regarding many aspects of human sexuality and especially committed same-sex relationships.
2. Synod 2022 took an unprecedented step in the matter of declaring its synodical interpretation of the act of homosexual sex to have “confessional authority”. As such, it is not applicable for a revision of the Confession and should not be used with such authority. A rescinding of the “confessional status” will provide important clarity in this matter of authority within the CRCNA.

Further Implications:

1. The decision of Synod 2022 to entrench its interpretation as "confessional status" has already resulted in deep division and sorrow within the CRCNA membership and effectively requires some congregations to limit hospitality and grace historically extended to the LGBTQ+ community. This interpretation will severely limit any future denominational guidance provided for pastoral counsel.
2. The Synodical decision regarding "confessional status" limits local congregations in their search for office bearers, since many members are unwilling to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, given this interpretation of “confessional status”.
3. The history of decisions made within the CRCNA provides alternatives to the present situation, such as provisions made for churches and classes in response to the Position of the CRCNA on Women in Ecclesiastical Office⁴. It is our hope that the CRCNA denomination will in future be able to provide generous space for local churches and regions/classes to proceed with actions believed to be consistent with Biblical principles, despite different perspectives and convictions within the denomination.

³ Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.
https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/human_sexuality_report_2021.pdf

⁴ <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/women-ecclesiastical-office>

Additional explanation and references for Grounds 1 & 2:

Ground 1:

Previous Synods have made revisions or added footnotes to Confessions of the CRCNA following comprehensive study of broader contextual interpretation. Synod 2022, in its discussions about the HSR recommendations, acknowledged but did not recognize or include concerns about the limited scope of the HSR (e.g., a minority report, overtures) in its adoption of recommendations. Nevertheless, some recommendations were postponed on the grounds “Congregations and classes need time to reflect on the implications of this year’s decisions” and “Future synods can prioritize which of the many suggested tasks related to human sexuality...will be most urgent”. We suggest that our request to rescind the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 is indeed urgent, to allow for a more gracious space within our midst.

The HESD Project includes extensive analysis of the HSR in broader biblical and current context and cites many concerns about and potential errors in the HSR.⁵

Other Reformed authors⁶ have built strong arguments based on historic context, wherein same sex acts described in the Bible were deemed to be cultic or temple prostitution, sexual debauchery, pederasty and/or controlling acts of power. The Bible does not provide explicit advice on committed relationships/faithful marriage between same-sex partners. “[A]ny use of the text [referring to Romans 1:26,27] that fails to take the context of the Biblical texts into consideration is deeply suspect. Faithful reading always occurs in the context of the whole narrative, centred on Jesus...In biblical times the idea of same-sex orientation would not have made any sense”.⁷

“...Paul is not making a point about the creational normativity of heterosexuality...Paul is attacking erotic practices that transgress what is known about God from the very creation of the world, not what is known about human gender identity and reproduction. Sexual lives that are steeped in infidelity, injustice and insatiable consumption are brought under judgment because they fall so short of our calling to image God in faithfulness, justice, and love”.⁸ The latter statement about sexual lives is very much congruent with Q&A 108 in the Heidelberg Catechism. We believe that committed same-sex relationships/marriages are neither inconsistent with the teachings of Scripture, nor in contravention to the Heidelberg Catechism.

⁵ Wise Words from Church Members. https://www.hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/news/#a13lightbox-work-11929 ; 16 Reasons to Reject the HSR. https://www.hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/news/#a13lightbox-work-11614 ; Wise Words about Chastity. https://www.hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/learn/#a13lightbox-work-11970 ; Clay Libolt, 2022. <https://peripateticpastor.com/2022/07/18/reading-scripture-through-the-eyes-of-paul/> as referenced in https://www.hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/learn/#a13lightbox-work-11886

⁶ For example, Reformed authors Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh discuss their theological interpretation in historic context for key texts in Romans within their 2019 book, *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice*.

⁷ Sylvia Keesmaat, as quoted in <https://empireremixed.com/2019/06/26/what-ever-happened-to-the-bible-in-the-marriage-canon-debate-a-look-at-the-classic-texts/>

⁸ Brian Walsh, as quoted in <https://empireremixed.com/2019/06/28/the-good-news-of-romans-1-for-same-sex-marriage/>

Ground 2:

A critical difference in the authority of a Synod vs the Confessions has been explained as follows: "Synods do adopt confessions (Church Order Article 47)...Synods can also change the confessions. For example, [Synods 1958, 1985, 2010]...All of these are changes in the confessions made by synods. But this is not what Synod 2022 did. It didn't claim it was changing anything in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108; it claimed that it was merely explaining what the catechism had always meant and that its interpretation of the catechism answer was confessional. It did so on the basis of a decision about the authority of synod made in 1975....Synod 1975 did not say what Synod 2022 says it says. Quite the opposite, Synod 1975 said that a synodical decision *never* has the authority of a confession. So, Synod 2022 declared its interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 to be confessional on the basis of an egregious misreading of an earlier synodical decision. Synodical decisions deserve respect, but when they are wrong, they are wrong. Synods make mistakes....The 1975 decision does not say that a synodical interpretation of a confession is itself confessional. It says that a synodical interpretation of a confession is just that: a synodical interpretation. It comes with the authority of the synod, not the authority of the confession it interprets....Synod 1975 recognized that decisions of that kind are not actually confessional. They don't express our joint faith...They have the authority of the synod, but not of the confessions. It's important in this time that we observe this difference between what a synod does and what's actually confessional." ⁹ Similar concerns have been raised by others, acknowledging that the HSR's "conclusion about "confessional status" appears incorrect or at least significantly misleading" ¹⁰.

We believe this misinterpretation by Synod is damaging and divisive within the CRCNA in its unauthorized, yet authoritative, use of the Synod 1975 decision and we therefore ask for a rescinding of this "confessional status" declaration in 2022.

Additional explanation and references for Further Implications 1, 2 & 3:

Implication 1:

A church congregation must be a place of fellowship and hospitality, supported by gracious space and pastoral counsel. While the adoption of the HSR was intended to provide guidance for CRCNA congregations, we note this is not mentioned, nor is the HSR referenced, in the Position Statement section of the CRCNA website¹¹. We agree with the observation of the Reverend Clay Libolt, in which he asks, "But what happens if a synod takes a part of a confession and narrows it down to specific and controversial

⁹ Clay Libolt, 2022. See <https://peripateticpastor.com/2022/10/14/hold-those-gravamina-why-filing-a-gravamen-might-not-be-the-right-move-for-those-who-disagree-with-synod-2022/>

¹⁰ Matt Lundberg. "Confessional Status" in the CRCNA: Church Polity and the HSR. Hekman Library, Calvin University. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/hfbzy8op0t0g17m/Confessional%20Status%20in%20the%20CRCNA.pdf?dl=0>

¹¹ <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/homosexuality>

interpretation. The “us” is gone. It no longer speaks for us; it speaks for some of us and not for others. It drives a wedge into denominational life.”¹²

Indeed, New Life CRC, Guelph has asked in its overture that Synod direct the denomination “to affirm our commitments to manage disagreements within our congregations, and amongst churches, with love, charity and grace, and ensure that all who seek to follow Christ are afforded a safe place to honestly share their views and listen to those of others; and to develop resources and tools to equip congregations to minister pastorally with and to LGBTQ people”.¹³

Implication 2:

The misuse of the synodical interpretation regarding “confessional status” of Q&A 108 in the Heidelberg Catechism further limits potential officebearers in their willingness to serve amidst tensions and divisions. We quote further, “The signatory [to the Covenant for Officebearers] is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines” (Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church, Supplement, Article 5).....By declaring sex in a same-sex marriage as unchaste by definition and then declaring that declaration to be confessional, Synod 2022 suddenly put many holders of office in the CRC on the wrong side of ecclesiastical law.”¹⁴

We note that the CRCNA website’s “FAQ about the Human Sexuality Report”¹⁵, provides some discussion of options for office bearers such as the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen. However, the CRCNA website appears to provide only one article¹⁶ as a resource to guide decisions of potential office bearers. Members are welcomed to hold office, even if with a gravamen of confessional difficulty, yet comments in response to the online article suggest that such use of a gravamen is not meant for consistent practice.

Implication 3:

Historically, the CRCNA has sought to make provisions for churches and classes, to honour local differences in the characters and makeup of congregations. We note, for example, in the Position of the CRCNA on Women in Ecclesiastical Office, that such recognition and flexibility was provided wherein “[t]he CRC recognizes that there are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God”. Indeed, there is even allowance provided for

¹² <https://peripateticpastor.com/2022/10/14/hold-those-gravamina-why-filing-a-gravamen-might-not-be-the-right-move-for-those-who-disagree-with-synod-2022/>

¹³ New Life CRC Overture to Classis Huron 14 December 2022.

¹⁴ Clay Libolt, 2022. See <https://peripateticpastor.com/2022/10/14/hold-those-gravamina-why-filing-a-gravamen-might-not-be-the-right-move-for-those-who-disagree-with-synod-2022/>

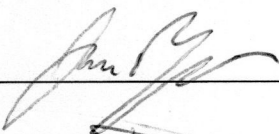
¹⁵ <https://www.crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq>

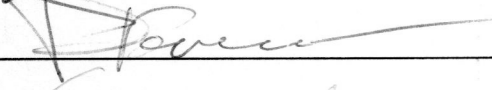
¹⁶ <https://network.crcna.org/topic/leadership/classis/dont-say-no-yet-encouragement-future-office-bearers-crc>

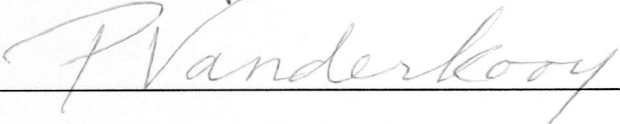
regional differences wherein classes may declare limitations on officebearers delegated to their classis and churches may exercise an option "to move to the classis in closest proximity that is willing to receive them and which they are willing to join".¹⁷

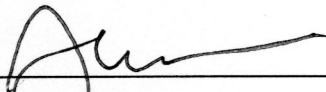
The CRCNA does not currently support such local/regional options to address differences in Biblical interpretation regarding homosexual sex specifically and human sexuality in general. It is our hope that the CRCNA, in its church order and supplements, can provide direction that sustains unity and grace within our denomination in the future, while also acknowledging and providing space for important matters of difference in perspective and conviction.

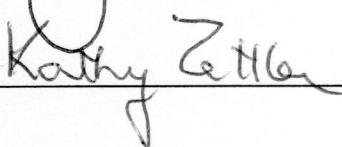
Respectfully signed:


_____ James Bryson (deacon)


_____ Dirk Kroon (deacon; representative on Council)


_____ Patricia Vanderkooy (pastoral elder)


_____ Jacinda Wallace (pastoral elder)


_____ Kathy Zettler (deacon)

¹⁷ <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/women-ecclesiastical-office>