

Executive Summary of the Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

I. Preamble

Sex is a good gift from the Creator, a gift that draws us to another person and can bring great physical pleasure. The sexual act also has spiritual significance and emotional weight for humans, who are both body and spirit. Although God created women and men to be physically attracted to each other, fallen humans regularly sin against each other sexually and so experience shame, anger, hurt, and loneliness. Since sexual mores have changed so dramatically in the past decades, many people have questions about sexuality and view Jesus' teaching on celibate singleness or lifelong monogamous marriage as quaint or bizarre. Tragically the church has often responded to these questions either with harsh judgment or simply with silence, while at the same time adapting to the surrounding culture's sexual practices.

In this moment of questioning, sexual turbulence, and deep loneliness, we have a historic opportunity to model and offer the intimate human community for which God designed us. In the cross, God makes us sisters and brothers, reconciles us to each other, and empowers us to glorify God with our bodies. In regular physical community we can trust each other enough to be honest about our weaknesses and care enough for each other to help. Because we constantly attend to our technological devices, we are alienated from our bodies. We need the ordinary physical connections of eating, playing with, and being affectionately touched by human sisters and brothers. Our physical communities are meant not only to heal the sin, shame, grief, and loneliness of believers but also to offer hope to skeptical and curious unbelievers. The CRCNA has a living tradition of deep love for the Scriptures coupled with a willingness to engage courageously with the ideas of our time. Because we know the Creator who made all things and the reconciler who brings all things together, we can create nurturing spaces for people wrestling with sexual identity, deep brokenness, long-term patterns of sin, and disconcerting cultural changes. Resting in Jesus, our peace, we can provide a safe harbor for restless explorers both within and outside the church.

II. A biblical theology of human sexuality

A frame of reference for a biblical theology is found in Jesus' answer to a question from the Pharisees about divorce (Matt. 19). Jesus appeals to *creation* in stating the way marriage was meant to be "from the beginning," refers to the *fall* by saying that the Old Testament provision for divorce was due to the hardness of people's hearts, and in his own authoritative "I tell you" points to the way of *redemption* for marital life. This provides the framework for the discussion of the biblical teaching concerning human sexuality, which restricts sexual intercourse to the context of a marriage between husband and wife. Accordingly, the report also discusses "Creation: Genesis 1-2," "Fall: Genesis 3," and "Redemption" as revealed in the Old and New Testaments. The discussion on redemption is by far the longest, consisting of a survey of the entire Bible in regard to its teaching concerning good and godly sex as opposed to its sinful distortions.

We learn from the story of creation in Genesis 1-2 that humanity was created male and female and that our sexuality as male and female is integral to our being made in the image of God. Eve was created to be a "helper suitable for" Adam, a phrase implying both equality and complementarity between male and female. That man and woman become "one flesh" in marriage, with the potential of producing offspring, is celebrated and declared unambiguously good. This foundational depiction of marriage as a one-flesh union between husband and wife is

repeatedly reaffirmed in the New Testament. The story of the fall in Genesis 3 shows how this creational design for sex and marriage is corrupted when nakedness is associated with shame, oppressive patriarchy takes the place of purposeful marital communion, and childbearing takes place in the context of severe and painful labor.

The rest of the biblical story shows how these themes of good creation and corrupting fall are taken up into an overall narrative of redemption. The Old Testament books of the law, for example, reveal positively how fruitfulness and salvation go hand in hand, but negatively how sexuality and marriage deviate from God's creational design in multiple ways, such as adultery, homosexual relations, divorce, and polygamy. The books of the prophets highlight the significance of human sexuality in a different way by using marriage as a metaphor for the covenant relationship between God and his people, and thus often comparing idolatry with adultery or prostitution. As for Israel's wisdom literature, it similarly describes the evils of adultery and prostitution (Proverbs) as well as the beauty and joyfulness of a healthy sexual relationship (Song of Songs). It is also noteworthy that the Song of Songs has traditionally been interpreted as a prophetic allegory of the relationship between Christ and the church.

In the New Testament it should be noted first of all that a new emphasis emerges on the value of celibate singleness in the kingdom of God. Jesus speaks in positive terms about people who "live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12), thus embracing people who had been excluded from the temple in the Old Testament. Christians who choose the unmarried state follow the example of Jesus and the apostle Paul and anticipate aspects of the eschatological future, in which there will be no marrying or giving in marriage (Luke 20:35). The unmarried apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:7: "I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God." The "gift" that Paul has in mind is best understood not as the gift of celibacy but the gift of self-control—a gift that all Christians need with respect to sexual faithfulness. Paul also points out that believers who are married are not able to focus on the work of the kingdom in the same way that single people can (1 Cor. 7:32-33). Our identity is in Christ, not in our marital or any other kind of social status (Gal. 3:28).

The New Testament, in comparison to the Old, also has a greater emphasis on the binding character of the marriage bond. Jesus himself stressed emphatically the permanence of marriage. Even the "except for sexual immorality" passage in Matthew 19:9 does not provide "grounds" for divorce but reasserts the binding character of the creational norm.

Further, Jesus warns not only against outward acts of sexual immorality but also against the inward disposition of sexual immorality. "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). This does not refer to simply being attracted to a woman but to looking at her with lustful intent. Overall, the net effect of Jesus' teaching is to call believers to reserve sex for marriage, as God intended from creation.

The apostle Paul reinforces Jesus' teaching regarding sex and marriage. For example, he writes: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:3-5). Sexual purity is to be a distinctive mark of the people of God. This is in line with the decree of the Jerusalem Council, which specified that among the requirements that Gentile converts to Christianity were expected to observe was that they should "abstain . . . from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:20). It is a mark of the Spirit's work to repent of sexual sin, not to excuse it. Elsewhere in his letters Paul calls for the expulsion of a man guilty of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5). In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul

refutes the claim made by some Corinthians that Christians have sexual freedom because what they do with the body does not matter. Paul's response is that the body does matter because it is destined for resurrection and communion with Christ, and sexual immorality is incompatible with this reality.

In one respect, Paul goes beyond Jesus, and even beyond the Old Testament, in articulating the supreme significance of marriage. This is found in his instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33, where he repeatedly invokes the relationship between Christ and the church as the model for marriage. Speaking of Christ's love for the church as a model for a husband's love for his wife, Paul writes, "For we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:30-32). The basic purpose of God for marriage was especially illumined and enriched by the revelation of Jesus Christ. The creational institution of marriage, which affirms that husband and wife become one flesh, contains a mystery or secret. This mystery has now been revealed in the union of Christ and his church. Thus marriage is fully understood and achieves its deepest meaning only when it reflects this spiritual union of Christ and his church. In line with Paul's usage elsewhere, the word "mystery" here refers to that which was previously unknown but which has now been revealed in Jesus Christ.

This truth is of the profoundest significance for a biblical theology of sexuality and marriage. God's creation of human beings in his image as male and female was designed to point toward the ultimate purpose for human beings in communion with God in Christ. Thus sexuality was designed all along to reflect this communion. Marriage itself will pass away, but its ultimate meaning will endure in the kingdom and family of God. One need not be married in this life to enjoy this ultimate reality.

III. Science and general revelation

The committee's mandate calls for it to take into account not only the biblical evidence with respect to human sexuality but also the relevant "conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 920). This raises the question of the relationship of Scripture and science.

As Article 2 of the Belgic Confession reminds us, God reveals himself in two ways: through his written Word and through creation. Although these two revelations of God—special and general—must be read in the light of each other, *special revelation has a cognitive priority* because it is couched in human language. In terms of a striking image presented by John Calvin, we can say that the special revelation of the Scriptures functions as a pair of eyeglasses without which we cannot properly read the book of creation. Science can be understood as a cultural response to the creational data and phenomena that general revelation makes available, but it must not be equated with general revelation itself, and thus given divine authority on a par with Scripture.

IV. Pornography

Pornography is widely used and accepted in contemporary North American culture and has permeated the church. Most men and growing numbers of women and children are or have been regular porn users. In a 2016 Barna study the majority of pastors reported being former or current porn users, most practicing Christians felt no guilt about their porn use, and few of those had made any attempts to stop using porn.

Porn may not be new, but contemporary internet porn is distinct in these ways:

- People do not merely simulate but engage in actual sex with other people in online porn.
- The most frequently watched online porn involves men using women in what could best be described as sexual assault or torture.
- Internet porn reinforces crude and degrading racist stereotypes.
- Contemporary pornography is designed to create habitual users.
- As a multibillion dollar industry that fuels other industries such as banking, porn shapes our culture's sexual practices, politics, and law.
- Virtually all of today's porn can be thought of as filmed prostitution and commodified sexual violence.

Since porn consumption has now become so routine, its victims are many:

- women prostituted into, and violently abused by, the porn industry
- children trained by porn's violence to enact or receive violence
- baffled, angry, and hurt parents and families
- intimate partners of porn users betrayed by their partner's virtual infidelity
- porn users, many of whose brains begin to crave the stimulus of violence
- male porn users suffering erectile dysfunction
- women conditioned to be objects of men's violence and men primed to be sexually violent

The Bible addresses the attitudes and actions fostered by online porn that harm the bodies and spirits of imagebearers and destroy sexual intimacy.

Violence: God hates violence, especially that done to the vulnerable (Prov. 3:31; Ps. 11:5; Isa. 59:1; Jer. 22:3; Ezek. 8:17; John 3:8). When we use porn, we participate in this violence against women and girls, and studies show that we tend more toward violence ourselves.

Exploitation of the poor: Calling us to practice justice and mercy, and consistently warning against oppressing and abusing the needy and vulnerable (Mic. 6:8; Prov. 22:22-23; Amos 8:4), God confronts the exploitative nature of a mostly male audience that sexually uses anonymous poor and marginalized women.

Racism: In Christ's death, God reconciles hostility between peoples (Gal. 2:1-14; Eph. 2:11-22; Col. 3:11), whereas porn cultivates the worst racial stereotypes, degrades people based on ethnicity, and promotes division and contempt.

Sexual sins: While consuming porn, we indirectly cause the people who are filmed to commit adultery or sexual immorality. If we're married, we introduce other sexual partners into our marriages, destroying the oneness of our intimate physical union. Jesus' challenging

proclamation that “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28) means that even imagining a sexual act with someone to whom we are not married is sin because we have no marriage covenant with that person.

Deceit: God’s holy people are to speak and live honestly to reflect the God of light (1 John 1:7). Hiding porn use brings darkness into relationships.

Relationships redeemed: To our porn-saturated culture, which objectifies people and encourages women’s domination for men’s sexual pleasure, Jesus comes to restore relationships to their creational intent: men and women created in God’s image and sent together to rule over creation as God’s representatives (Gen. 1:26-31). Jesus tells us to serve, not to dominate each other (Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45). God commands all believers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21).

At this moment when pediatricians, psychiatrists, and politicians identify porn use as a health crisis, the church can model living in the light. In God’s redemptive light, we can face the connection between porn and human trafficking; the relationship of porn to the increasing numbers of women and girls reporting male violence; the extent of the harms to porn users of all ages and to their intimate partners. We can admit that porn makes inequality sexually arousing. Our porn usage may well be a personal issue, but as churches we can no longer allow it to be a private issue. Together we can do the following:

- Regularly teach children, youth, and adults the good news about sexuality found throughout Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, including the Song of Songs with its beautiful depiction of a healthy sexual relationship.
- In public worship, acknowledge our porn use and intercede regularly for porn users, their families, and people who suffer abuse because of porn.
- Care for people abused in porn with nonjudgmental presence and support; help with undeserved shame; model lament and seek God’s nurturing love.
- Comfort spouses feeling adulterously betrayed and also give support to elders and small groups as they confront the porn user.
- Give porn users hope for healing and practical help to repent of and to leave their sin with the help of an accountability partner.
- Support parents of porn users who need help in loving their child as God loves and in enabling their child to recover from the effects of porn use.

V. Gender identity

As we studied questions of gender identity, our committee listened to stories from trans, gender nonconforming, and queer people, and their families. We read in the fields of theology, including queer theology, as well as in the biological and social sciences, including queer studies. Because gender studies is such a new field and the science remains in its infancy, the body of conclusive scientific research is smaller than in other areas pertaining to sexuality. Transitioning can include various medical treatments, many of which remain largely experimental. At the same time, few theologians have reflected deeply on questions revolving around gender identity or disorders of sexual development (DSD). Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature in all of these fields that can help the church to discern how it should navigate questions of gender identity in a manner that is faithful to the gospel, consistent with the best science, and life-giving for persons who are struggling with questions related to gender identity.

Although it is generally accepted today that sex and gender are distinct from one another, this understanding is relatively new. It was only in the 1960s that people began to use the word *gender* to refer to something other than sex. *Gender* is generally used to refer to socially defined roles, whereas *sex* refers to one's biological makeup—however, even these descriptions are controversial. The full report offers a comprehensive set of definitions associated with gender identity. We recognize that the terms cannot do justice to the complexities, pain, and difficulties of persons who experience the various conditions that these words attempt to convey.

It is also the case that the questions of sex and gender that we struggle with today are in part the result of the particular cultural moment in which we live. Long-standing beliefs and practices surrounding sex and gender are being challenged by Christians and non-Christians. Health, education, and social services have had to adapt to complex dilemmas pitting the claims of people who have transitioned against the safety and well-being of others, specifically women.

The changes we have witnessed in everything from beliefs to public policy have not happened in a vacuum. They are not simply rooted in science. They rest on assumptions about the nature of the world, how we know what is true, and how we should live and act. It is therefore impossible to negotiate competing claims about the relationship between sex, gender, and gender identity from any sort of objective, neutral, or scientific standpoint. We cannot escape questions of worldview.

Further complicating the issue of gender identity is the widespread confusion between two significantly different experiences: gender dysphoria and disorders of sexual development (DSD). The latter, DSD, are congenital (biologically based) conditions in which the development of a person's chromosomal, gonadal, and internal and/or external anatomical sex is atypical. This condition may be accompanied by feelings of anxiety, or it may not. Gender dysphoria, by contrast, is a condition that is characterized by stress and anxiety when a person perceives their gender as not aligning with their biological sex.

Part of the problem with questions of gender identity is the lack of scientific evidence for what actually causes gender dysphoria. Evidence of some differences between the brains of males and females does not provide any conclusive evidence about where such differences come from or what they mean. Claims that persons are transgender or have gender dysphoria because their physical sex doesn't match their "brain sex" often rest on cultural stereotypes of what constitutes "typical" male and female characteristics. Yet these cultural stereotypes have no basis in neuroscientific evidence, let alone in Scripture.

In fact, there is very little that the Bible explicitly has to say about these issues. Consequently, when we seek biblical insight on questions pertaining to both gender identity and disorders of sex development, we must rely on the broad scriptural story that includes creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. With respect to humanity, we affirm that God created humanity as male and female in the image of God and declared creation "very good." Due to human disobedience, humanity, along with the rest of creation, is now distorted by sin. Thus whatever we observe about humans after the fall into sin is inevitably distorted by the fall in various ways (Gen. 3:14-23). Salvation in Christ entails restoration of all things, including humans, to God's creational intentions. We experience this restoration in part now, while awaiting full restoration at the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. As Christians, we believe that the body is a gift from God. Tragically, due to the fall, through no fault of their own, some people experience a disconnect between their gender identity and their sex. Nevertheless, there is no redemption in embracing this disconnect as a sign of God's good intent.

While the details of pastoral care will vary case by case, generally pastoral care should be modeled after the example of Jesus, the good shepherd, who feeds his flock, cares for the wounded, protects the vulnerable, carries the young close to his heart, strengthens the weak, brings back the straying, and seeks out lost sheep. Thus pastoral care involves nurture, healing, guidance, admonition, discipline, reconciliation, comfort, diaconal care, and support. It includes reaching out; visiting; reading Scripture; prayer; listening; being a compassionate, empathic presence; and working to restore relationships. The main goals of pastoral care for people affected by gender dysphoria and disorders of sexual development must be to help them enter or regain a healthy relationship with God and others, and to be at peace within themselves as whole persons: heart, mind, soul, and strength.

VI. Homosexuality

The Christian Reformed Church's 1973 synodical report on homosexuality made an important distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity: "We must distinguish between the person who is homosexual in [their] sexual orientation and the person who engages in explicit sexual acts with persons of the same sex." It also noted that "homosexuality is not the result of any conscious choice or decision on the part of the person" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 612-13). In other words, there is no sin in being attracted to the same sex. We only sin if we act on our sexual attractions.

Yet many church members cannot imagine denying anyone the intimacy of a sexual relationship. Indeed, humans need the intimacy of regular human touch and strong social networks for health and resilience. All of us long to be deeply known and accepted as we are. Jesus taught and modeled a radically new kind of intimate community—sisters and brothers caring for each other daily in practical ways. But the church has not provided intimate community for people attracted to the same sex, nor indeed for most single people. Instead, it has condemned people in gay relationships while ignoring premarital sex, pornography use, and adultery throughout the church. *We note, therefore, that for many people, no repetition of biblical teaching on homosexuality will be persuasive unless the church repents of this hypocrisy and becomes the loving, supportive community of Christ.*

Although there continue to be debates about the interpretation and application of certain Old Testament texts (Gen. 19:1-19; Judg. 19:1-29; Lev. 18:22; 20:13) concerning homosexual acts, the evidence of the New Testament is clear, consistent, and compelling.

With regard to the testimony of Jesus, revisionists often appeal to his silence on this subject, arguing, "If homosexual activity is so bad, why didn't Jesus say anything about it?" Careful reflection reveals how weak this argument actually is. First, *all* Jewish writings from the ancient world uniformly rejected gay and lesbian behavior. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Jesus as a Jew differed from that view. Second, Jesus never says anything against other sexual sins such as prostitution, incest, pederasty, or bestiality. Yet no one concludes from Jesus' silence that he was tolerant of such behaviors. Third, in Mark 7:21-23 Jesus lists several things that defile a person, and at the head of the list is the plural term "sexual immoralities." Jesus, as a rabbi who knew the Old Testament well, was likely referring to many different sexual sins forbidden in texts like Leviticus 18 and 20—texts that condemn *all* kinds of unlawful sexual relations, including homosexual relations (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). Fourth, in answering a question from the Pharisees on divorce, Jesus cites not just Genesis 2:24, which would be sufficient to answer their question about divorce, but also Genesis 1:27: "'Haven't you read,' Jesus replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female'" (Matt. 19:4-5; see also Mark 10:6-8). The fact that Jesus included this Old Testament quote in his answer reveals that he

considered sex difference (“made them male and female”) to be important and that Jesus did, in fact, expect marriage to be between a man and a woman. The appeal to Jesus’ silence, therefore, is contradicted by the available evidence.

With regard to the testimony of Paul, there are three key texts in which homosexual conduct is explicitly addressed. The two shorter texts are 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The first text addresses homosexual activity by using two Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. Some revisionists claim that it is impossible to determine the precise meaning of these two Greek words with certainty, and therefore we should not draw any conclusions about homosexuality from them. More revisionists claim that these two Greek words refer narrowly to *abusive* forms of homosexual activity—namely, man-boy relationships (pederasty) and prostitution. According to this view, Paul is rejecting the exploitative nature of these specific kinds of homosexual acts that were common in his day. The second text, 1 Timothy 1:10, also uses the term *arsenokoitai*. It is commonly claimed that 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 cannot be used to condemn the consensual, monogamous same-sex relationships found in our contemporary age.

This interpretation suffers from at least three major problems. First, if Paul had in view only exploitative same-sex relationships like pederasty, he could have easily made this clear by using any one of several Greek words that refer specifically to man-boy relationships. The fact that Paul did not use any of these terms, all of which were commonly known and used in the writings of his day, suggests that the apostle was not thinking only of abusive forms of homosexual activity but of any type of homosexual activity.

Second, there is the allusion to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in Paul’s use of the word *arsenokoitai* in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The standard academic Greek lexicon defines this word as “a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [University of Chicago Press], p. 135). Since the two Leviticus texts deal with *all* types of same-sex acts, not just exploitative ones like pederasty and prostitution (note Lev. 20:13, which explicitly states, “*both* of them have done what is detestable”), Paul’s use of this word indicates that he is thinking of the Mosaic law in which any kind of sexual relationship between two males is forbidden. In fact, in 1 Timothy 1:8-9, just before he mentions *arsenokoitai*, Paul refers twice to the “law,” suggesting yet again that he has the Old Testament comprehensive prohibition of homosexual intercourse in view.

Third, the pairing of the two words *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is significant. There is widespread agreement among scholars that the first term refers to males who allowed themselves to be penetrated by other males, while the second term refers to males who penetrate other males. This consensus is reflected in the NIV 2011 and ESV translations, which both have exactly the same textual note on this verse: “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.” Paul, by pairing these two words, is referring not narrowly to pederasty or prostitution but comprehensively to both the passive and active partner in any same-sex relationship.

The third key text that refers to homosexuality in Paul’s writings is Romans 1:24-27, and this is the most important of the three because of its length, its explicit reference to both gay and lesbian conduct, and its argumentation. Revisionists commonly argue that the apostle is not addressing all forms of homosexual activity but only a specific type of homosexual conduct characterized by excessive desire and a lack of self-control. Straight women were so filled with sexual desire—that is, lust, the argument runs—that they had sexual relations with other

women. Similarly, straight men were so filled with lust that they had sexual relations with other men.

However, the problem that the apostle identifies involves not one of wrong *degree* (excessive desire) but of wrong *object*. The preceding verses of Romans 1:19-23 deal with the sin of idolatry, and Paul's argument here does not involve degree (as if normal idolatry is acceptable but excessive idolatry is wrong) but object: people worship created things rather than the Creator. Similarly, the sin of lesbian and gay sex discussed in 1:24-27 does not involve degree (the idea that normal desire for same-sex sex is acceptable but excessive desire or lust is wrong) but object: women are having sex not with men but with women, and, conversely, men are having sex not with women but with men.

Further, the revisionist interpretation is contradicted by Paul's key argument in these verses: homosexual activity is wrong because it violates God's *created order* for male-female relationships. The word "unnatural" (Rom. 1:26) refers not to heterosexuals acting against their natural desire for the opposite sex but to homosexual conduct that violates one's *created nature*—God's design for men and women established in creation. That Paul does, in fact, have the Genesis creation account in mind is obvious from his multiple allusions to it in Rom. 1:24-27. Paul's argument, therefore, is clear: sexual acts between a female and another female or between a male and another male are "unnatural" and wrong, because such conduct goes against one's *created nature*.

A survey of relevant biblical texts shows that *Scripture teaches in a clear, consistent, and compelling way that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful and not in agreement with God's will*. The debate about same-sex sex, therefore, is not a situation in which there are two equally valid interpretations of the biblical evidence. Although a variety of revisionist arguments have been made, none of them are convincing but, rather, ought to be judged as what even self-proclaimed progressive scholars declare to be "strained and unhistorical" and evidence of the "extraordinary maneuvers" involved in the attempt to reread Scripture.

Scripture's clear prohibition of homosexual acts is accompanied by its equally clear exhortation to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of all who struggle with sexual sin. Since the church, including the CRCNA, has all too often ostracized, shunned, or ignored some sisters and brothers, and not treated them as equal and valued members of the body of Christ, the church's response to homosexuality must begin with confession. The church's response must continue with good teaching about human sexuality, including the reminder of the important distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity, as well as the dangers of promoting the false expectation of orientation change. The church must demonstrate in a myriad of concrete ways to those who are same-sex attracted that it is a grace-saturated community that equips all of its members, both heterosexual and homosexual alike, to walk in sexual holiness.

VII. Reflections on singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, polyamory, and divorce

A. Singleness

For a large part of church history, especially the first few centuries, unmarried persons were held in high honor. To encourage and validate singleness, leading church figures invoked Jesus' words about the end of marriage after the resurrection (Matt. 22:29-32), his reference to people who become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 19:12), and Paul's affirmation and even promotion of singleness (1 Cor. 7:25-35). Drawing specifically on 1 Corinthians 7, the

early church recognized that people who are married will have divided interests with respect to the Lord. By contrast, single people are less restricted by “the affairs of this world” and are free to pursue “the Lord’s affairs” (1 Cor. 7:32, 34). The church today ought to recognize that its overemphasis on marriage and family has been hurtful and has marginalized people in its fellowship who are single. The church also can offer helpful teaching in the area of sex and singleness by approaching this important topic as a matter of virtue, specifically contrasting lust with chastity. The vice of lust makes sex primarily about oneself and one’s own pleasure, whereas the virtue of chastity involves using one’s sexuality in a way that results in the flourishing of a relationship with God and one’s neighbor.

B. Premarital sex and cohabitation

In contemporary North American culture, where casual sex is commonplace and premarital sex is assumed to be part of a dating relationship, most young people considering marriage are already sexually involved and would not consider marrying without first living together. Similarly, older divorced or widowed people, now accustomed to sexual intimacy, choose to have sex with their dating partners. Premarital sex and cohabitation are increasingly the norm not only in the broader culture but also in the church. At odds with these increasingly popular practices, however, is the clear teaching of Scripture that sex creates a unique intimate bond between a man and a woman; that this good gift belongs in marriage and only in marriage; and that being born again by the Holy Spirit makes both holiness and joy outside of marriage possible.

C. Polyamory

Polyamory refers to a mutually agreed upon sexual relationship between three or more people. Within the different types of polyamorous relationships that have developed, there are varying degrees of commitment and exclusivity. Most of these polyamorous relationships, however, expect the different members to be sexually active only with the members of their group. The biggest feature that all polyamorous relationships have in common is a commitment to openness and honesty about expectations and about the setting of ground rules with which everyone agrees. Polyamory may sound strange and puzzling to many people. Nevertheless, polyamorous relationships are quickly becoming more common, not only in the broader culture but even among some Christians. A variety of different arguments have been forwarded by people who identify themselves as Christians to defend the practice of polyamory. There is a widespread consensus among biblical scholars and church leaders, however, that none of these arguments faithfully reflects the teaching of Scripture on proper sexual relationships.

D. Divorce

The synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1980 received a study report on divorce and remarriage. As a committee dealing broadly with matters related to human sexuality, we call upon the church to recover the teaching of that report and to hold one another accountable to practicing the teachings of Jesus on divorce and remarriage. The CRCNA must act more intentionally to call married partners to reconciliation and renewed commitment to the marriage covenant.

VIII. Sexual desire: Bodies, bonding, and boundaries in the Song of Songs

As it evokes the intensity, longings, delights, and pleasures of sexual love, the Song of Songs deepens our understanding of the Creator’s intent for sexual intimacy. The Song of Songs

- helps us recover a theology of the body rooted in creation and resurrection theology.
- addresses the intense longing we feel for a beloved when we are apart.
- focuses on the uniqueness and value of the beloved one.
- highlights equity between female and male lovers.
- portrays the passionate exclusivity of sexual love.
- sings the depth of God’s love for his people.

IX. Confessional status

Our committee was asked to evaluate “whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider . . . declaring a *status confessionis*” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 920). To raise the question of *status confessionis*, which means “confessional status,” is to wonder whether some teaching or ecclesiastical practice, if adopted, would contradict the teachings of the confessions of the church. To put it another way, is it a violation of our confessions to teach that it is acceptable for Christians to use pornography or to engage in premarital sex, extramarital sex, or homosexual activity?

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, which explains the meaning of the seventh commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”) states that “God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage.” By the word “unchastity” the catechism intends to encompass all sexual immorality, including homosexual activity. Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, confirms this in his commentary on Q&A 108. He writes that the first class of lusts included in unchastity “are those which are contrary to nature and from the devil. . . . The lusts of which the apostle Paul speaks in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans are of this class, as the confounding of sexes, [and] also abuses of the female sex.” Ursinus goes on to say that unchastity includes incest as well, even though this sin is not mentioned in the catechism by name (Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 1043). Therefore, pornography, polyamory, and all forms of premarital and extramarital sex as well as homosexual sex are encompassed in the catechism’s condemnation of unchastity.

We conclude, therefore, that *the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status*. As such, there is no need for a new declaration. We also conclude that this status is warranted because these sins threaten a person’s salvation. The Scriptures call the church to warn people to flee sexual immorality for the sake of their souls and to encourage them with God’s presence and power to equip them for holy living. A church that fails to call people to repentance and offer them the hope of God’s loving deliverance is acting like a false church.

In coming to this conclusion, we observe that we stand with the majority church worldwide, including the Roman Catholic Church, all branches of Orthodoxy, the non-Western global church, and a majority of active Protestants in North America and Europe. Indeed, the global church finds the Western church’s challenges to biblical teaching on human sexuality incomprehensible and offensive. To refuse to uphold Christian teaching on sexual immorality would signal that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is deviating not only from Scripture but from the shared confession of the historic and worldwide church.

Committee to Articulate a Foundation–laying
Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

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