

Response to the Human Sexuality Report to the CRC Synod of 2021

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There is much in this report that is admirable, especially the advice it gives to the churches, albeit sometimes in mind-numbing detail, on how to deal pastorally with those attracted to pornography, with those of same-sex orientation, with those who suffer from one or another form of gender dysphoria, etc. The report is also to be praised for not latching onto the claim, currently sweeping through the evangelical churches, that the Bible teaches so-called gender complementarity, one of the implications of which is held to be that women are to be subservient to men in all situations. Nonetheless, I regard the report as having serious flaws. One of those flaws is the following: Whereas there are extensive passages in the report devoted to advising church members and officers on how to deal pastorally with those tempted by pornography, with those whose sexuality or gender identity is not “normal,” etc., it gives no pastoral advice to the denomination on how to deal with the fact that there are committed, thoughtful, and informed members of the denomination who disagree with the report’s interpretation of certain biblical passages and who disagree with the moral counsel the report gives to those with same-sex orientation and to those whose gender identity does not match their biological sex. The report declares, “Scripture teaches in a clear, consistent, and compelling way that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful” (112). Let’s be clear on what this declaration implies. It implies that those who disagree with the report’s interpretation of Scripture on this matter are either obtuse or perverse – obtuse, if they do not perceive what Scripture clearly, consistently, and compellingly teaches, perverse, if they do perceive that this is what Scripture clearly, consistently, and compellingly teaches but refuse to acknowledge that it does. The report recommends that synod declare that the traditional teaching of the CRC, that all homosexual acts are sinful, already has confessional status – status confessionis, to use the technical Latin term.¹ What synod’s acceptance of this recommendation would imply, as a minimum, is that anyone who expresses the contrary view concerning homosexual acts is ineligible for any office or position in the CRC. The committee is, of course, aware that these issues have split many denominations. They give no evidence of concern that their recommendation, if adopted, may well split the CRC as well. Do they regard this possibility with equanimity? They give no indication to the contrary. In any case, they offer no pastoral advice whatsoever to the denomination on how to deal with this possibility. How is one to account for the fact that they are so pastorally sensitive to those with same-sex orientation, to those tempted by pornography, etc., and so pastorally insensitive to the well-being of the denomination as a whole and to those committed, thoughtful, and informed members of the denomination who disagree with their biblical interpretations and with their ethical injunctions concerning homosexuality? ¹ I will forego commenting on the report’s defense of this claim. ² II I regard the report’s use of Scripture in its discussion of homosexuality as fundamentally flawed. The report correctly describes the 1973 report to synod as “[breaking] ground by making a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity” (93). What the present report does not note is that, in the moral counsel that the ’73 report issued to those of same-sex orientation, it failed to follow up on the significance of its recognition of that orientation. The present report likewise fails to follow up. Let me explain. The 1973 report said that while same-sex orientation is not sinful, because not chosen, it

declared that, nonetheless, all same-sex activity is sinful. What reason did the report give for that declaration? “The Bible tells us so,” it said. The present report gives the same reason for the same declaration. This claim, that the Bible declares all same-sex acts to be sinful – a claim made not only by the authors of these two reports but by a number of other writers as well – has evoked a great deal of dissent. Some writers have tried to interpret the relevant biblical passages in such a way that, in spite of appearances, they do not really condemn same-sex activity. Those interpretations seem to me implausible. The more common rejoinder has been to argue that the biblical writers, when condemning same-sex activity, were condemning specific forms of such activity, not such activity in general. For example, Paul, in the first chapter of Romans, clearly has in mind homosexual acts as part and parcel of the orgiastic, licentious lifestyle of idol-worshipping pagans. It was that sort of homosexual activity that he had in mind and was condemning. It is untenable, so many writers have claimed, to interpret Paul, in Romans, as condemning all same-sex behavior. This claim seems to me correct. However, in the Romans passage, Paul describes the homosexual activity he has in view as “unnatural,” indicating thereby that he did not regard it as sinful only because it was part of a pagan lifestyle. There has been a great deal of discussion as to what, exactly, Paul meant by “unnatural.” We should not assume that he meant by it what we would mean by it. In I Corinthians 11:14 he writes, “Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him?” What Paul seems to have in view here is a deeply entrenched social practice of men having their hair short. Scholars tell us that a widely held view in the ancient world was that it was shameful for a man to be the passive partner in the sexual act (and for a woman to be the active partner); only a person of lower social status would willingly submit to it. Perhaps that’s what Paul had in mind when he called homosexual acts “unnatural.” But it doesn’t matter, for our purposes, what Paul meant by “unnatural.” Here’s why: In condemning homosexual activity as sinful, Paul would have had in mind homosexual activity as he knew it and understood it. What else could he have had in mind? Nobody can leap outside the contours of their knowledge and understanding. But the report does not understand homosexual activity as Paul understood it. As the report remarks when discussing Paul, “It is doubtful whether people in the first century were familiar with the concept of sexual orientation as we understand it today (that is, an involuntary disposition to be attracted to people of one’s own gender)” (108). And concerning Genesis, the report says, “it is safe to say that the very distinction between sex and gender would be alien to the text in its ancient Near Eastern context” (17).³ By contrast to the biblical writers, the present report does recognize the phenomenon of same-sex orientation. It regards the understanding of the biblical writers as limited in this respect. We have learned things from present-day science that the biblical writers did not know. This implies that, in determining the moral stance that we should take to same-sex activity, 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. Or more precisely: the present report does do that when offering pastoral advice but does not do that when issuing moral counsel. When offering pastoral advice, the present report employs a holistic understanding of human sexuality; when issuing moral counsel, it employs a reductionist, purely biological, understanding. All that counts is

biology; the psychic and emotional constitution of persons is treated as irrelevant. The report just says, "The Bible tells us so" – even though it acknowledges that the biblical writers had no knowledge of same-sex orientation. Responding to the claim of some writers that "there is no reason why a person's gender identity should not be accepted as just as clear an indication of God's will for them as their body" (80), the report says, "The problem with this argument is that it is dualistic. At the heart of the biblical understanding of humanity is the teaching that our bodies matter....Scripture presents the human being as a holistic, interdependent unity of body and soul....This means that we cannot treat a person's subjectively experienced gender as a fact of their existence independent of their biological sex" (80- 81). Excellent words. But when the committee moves from pastoral advice to moral counsel for those with same-sex orientation, it falls into the opposite reduction: only the body matters. Strange conjunction: pastoral advice informed by an admirably holistic perspective on human sexuality, combined with moral counsel informed by a reductionist, purely biological, perspective. The result is that the report reads like two reports stitched together: a report offering pastoral advice, employing a holistic perspective on human sexuality, and a report issuing moral counsel, employing a reductionist, biologicistic, perspective. In thinking for itself on these matters, the church must, of course, give prime consideration to the requirements of love and justice. A striking feature of the moral counsel that the report issues to those of same-sex orientation is that the requirements of love and justice are never mentioned. The talk is all and only about creation mandates. Love is invoked in the pastoral advice that the report offers; it plays no role in the moral counsel it issues. A distinctive feature of ethical reflection in the Reformed tradition has been that it takes the creation narrative seriously. But in its ethical reflections, the tradition has never ignored God's command to seek justice, nor the second love-command of Jesus to love one's neighbor as oneself. Of course, this present committee was destined to fail us when issuing moral counsel. The mandate for the committee specified that only persons who committed themselves in advance to accepting the ethical injunctions of the '73 report were eligible for appointment to the committee. Lawyers talk about "result-oriented jurisprudence." Result-oriented jurisprudence occurs when a judge has a view in advance as to the judgment he wants to render in the case before him and proceeds to interpret the law in such a way as to reach that result. The committee's mandate insured that it would engage in result-oriented interpretation. 4 III An important point to take away from this analysis of the report's line of argument is the following. On the one hand, the report adopts an admirably holistic understanding of human sexuality. Human sexuality is an inextricable blend of biology, psychology and social norms. We are not mere animals. On the other hand, the report's biblical exegesis leads it to the conclusion that Scripture forbids all homosexual activity. An implication of regarding all homosexual activity as forbidden is that psychology is irrelevant to sexual ethics; all that counts is biology. One has to choose. Will one interpret Scripture as authoritatively forbidding all homosexual activity and therefore adopt a reductionist, biologicistic, perspective when developing a Christian sexual ethic, or will one interpret the biblical writers as only condemning homosexual activity as they knew it and understood it and employ a holistic perspective when developing a Christian sexual ethic? One has to choose. One cannot combine interpreting the biblical writers as authoritatively forbidding all forms of homosexual activity with employing a holistic perspective when developing a Christian sexual ethic. The report chooses to combine interpreting the biblical writers as authoritatively forbidding all forms of homosexual activity with employing a reductionist, purely biological, perspective when developing a Christian sexual ethic. I regard that as a fatefully wrong choice. We should combine

interpreting the biblical writers as condemning homosexual activity as they knew and understood it with developing a Christian sexual ethic from a holistic perspective. IV I have been discussing the report's way of treating the biblical passages condemning homosexual activity. Let me now briefly address its way of treating the creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis. The report purports to extract from these chapters what it calls the creation mandate for our sexual lives. I did not find any clear statement of what the report takes that creation mandate to be. But as best as I can make out, it's something like this: human beings are divinely mandated to propagate by engaging in sexual activity within the context of monogamous heterosexual marriage. It's open to debate whether this mandate really can be extracted from the text of Genesis. But suppose it can be. Further, the report claims, without evidence, that same-sex orientation is a disorder resulting from the fall. This too is open to debate; but let that pass. The creation mandate for sexual activity that the report claims to find in Genesis was issued to humankind before the fall, when, in the report's view, there was no same-sex orientation. So why does the report hold that the "creation mandate" issued to those with heterosexual orientation also applies to those who find themselves with the post-fall "disorder" of same-sex orientation? The report never answers this question. It just assumes that the mandate applies to them as well. We could all cite many examples of an obligation which holds for those without some disorder that does not hold for those with that disorder. There's another point worth making about the report's use of the creation stories. In its exegesis of Genesis, the report places heavy emphasis on the command to propagate. It comes as a surprise then – a welcome surprise, let me say – to find the report devoting a rather extensive 5 discussion to the celebration, by Jesus and Paul, of celibacy. The report emphatically joins Jesus and Paul in that celebration. To those with a same-sex orientation the report says that, rather than lamenting the fact that their "disorder" requires foregoing the joys of marital intimacy, they are to rejoice in the fact that their "disorder" represents God's calling them to the higher vocation of evangelical celibacy. But it's not only those with a same-sex orientation who are called to celibacy; some of those with a heterosexual orientation are also called. It turns out that the creation mandate to propagate does not apply to each and every. It's been abrogated. I fail to see how this does anything other than cast the report's use of the creation stories in Genesis into chaos. What we need for Christian ethics is a much more nuanced employment of the creation stories than the report gives us. V In concluding this response to the report, let me note that when the report offers moral counsel to those who find that their gender identity does not match their biological sex, it employs the same reductionist, purely biological, perspective that it employs when it gives moral counsel to those of same-sex orientation. The report declares, "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" (81). Nonetheless, "Scripture calls us to live in accord with our male or female sex" (81). "Those who are transgendered or are experiencing gender dysphoria should be encouraged to be reconciled to their created self" (84). What the report means here by "their created self" is their body. They are to "shape up" by getting their gender identity to conform to their biological sex. Those who find themselves, through no fault of their own, with a same-sex orientation, should accept that this is who they are; those who find themselves, through no fault of their own, with a gender identity different from their sexual identity, are not to accept that this is who they are. The report says, "We do not help people to flourish when we encourage them to transition from one sex to another. To transition is merely to intensify the problem" (81). So what is to be said to those – of whom there are a good many – who

testify that they finally felt at peace with their bodies when they transitioned? Note: This essay is a general white paper written as a response to the CRC's Human Sexuality Report. Feel free to use its ideas in more particular ecclesiastical communications (overtures to classis, letters to council), but please reference this white paper as the source when doing so.