

CLASSIS GRAND RAPIDS EAST—SSM STUDY REPORT 2016

On January 21, 2016 Classis Grand Rapids East accepted the “Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage” as a helpful resource, and recommended it to all its member churches for study and discussion within the context of the education, fellowship and worship activities of the churches, also in relation to the 1973 report of Synod with regard to homosexuality.

Classis Grand Rapids East also approved sending the following Communication to the 2016 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

COMMUNICATION FROM CLASSIS GRAND RAPIDS EAST TO SYNOD 2016

Classis Grand Rapids East wishes to communicate to Synod 2016 the availability of the *Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage*. We offer this report to Synod and member churches of the CRCNA as an additional resource for ongoing study and discussion regarding pastoral guidance for dealing with same-sex marriage and related matters.

The full report is available at <http://classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf>

Background and purpose of the report:

The biblical and theological basis for the CRC’s official position on same-sex marriage comes from a report to Synod 1973. This year, a synodically-appointed Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re: Same-sex Marriage has submitted their report for consideration at Synod 2016. That synodical committee was instructed not to revisit the theological/biblical basis for the CRC’s current stance on same-sex marriage.

There has been significant theological consideration of these issues since 1973, both in the Reformed tradition and in the wider Christian church. Scientific understanding of same-sex attraction has grown during that time. In recent years, the social and legal landscape has changed considerably, with same-sex marriage becoming legal in Canada in 2005 and in the U.S. in 2015. The CRC’s latest official statement regarding biblical teachings on this issue is now more than forty years old. Classis Grand Rapids East has on two recent occasions unsuccessfully asked Synod for a re-examination of the biblical/theological arguments in the Synod 1973 report. In January 2014, in response to an overture from Sherman Street CRC citing these factors, Classis Grand Rapids East appointed its own study committee to produce this report.

The Classis Grand Rapids East study committee worked independently from the synodically-appointed committee. The two committees neither compete with nor duplicate the other’s work.

Summary of the report:

When arguments in favor of same-sex marriage focus exclusively on the life experiences of individuals with same-sex attraction, as powerful as those stories might be, they often fail to convince Christians who hold traditional views because those with traditional views believe that the Bible clearly teaches against same-sex marriage. When the debate is framed this way, it can

seem like Christians face an over-simplified choice between obedience to God's law versus compassion for individuals with same-sex attraction. This is a false choice. Individuals on each side can be compassionate. Individuals on each side believe that their position is biblically sound and obedient to God's will.

When arguments in favor of same-sex marriage focus exclusively on alternative interpretations of particular biblical passages, as plausible as those alternative interpretations might be, they often fail to convince Christians who hold traditional interpretations of those passages. This is because it appears to them that those alternative interpretations allowing for same-sex marriage, taken only by themselves, are not preferable or conclusive compared with the traditional interpretations that oppose same-sex marriage.

The most convincing arguments made by Christian proponents of same-sex marriage come from weaving together multiple strands. The strength of the overall argument comes from how these different strands reinforce each other. This report has ten sections (summarized here) which examine in detail particular strands of argument and how that strand reinforces the other strands. The eleventh section offers additional pastoral advice on maintaining unity within churches.

1: The Holy Spirit and the reinterpretation of Scripture. At various times in history, the Holy Spirit prompted and guided the church into better interpretations of some parts of Scripture through a variety of means, including the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the suffering caused by social evils, the good that came out of social innovations, and science. Comparing the issue of same-sex marriage to other historical cases suggests that this might be another occasion in church history when the Holy Spirit is prompting a re-examination of Scripture.

2: Advances in scientific understanding. The science of sexual orientation and gender has proliferated since the Synod 1973 report. Most of the current science acknowledges that sexual orientation and gender identity are influenced by a complex and indeterminable number of biological and social factors that are often intertwined. Further, while most people are unambiguously male or female biologically and psychologically and are heterosexually attracted, not everyone is. Some individuals are born anatomically and hormonally intersex, due to chromosomal or genetic factors. Some are transgender, biologically one gender but psychologically identifying with the other gender. Attempts to assign intersex and transgender individuals to be unambiguously male or female—through medical intervention, therapy, or social pressure—often lead to destructive results. The fact that male and female exist on a spectrum, rather than as a dichotomy, has profound implications for our understanding and definitions of same-sex marriage.

3: Same-sex attraction and gender variance: disorder versus creational variance. Because of various genetic and hormonal influences, biological sex is not a simple binary but exists on a spectrum. As with other congenital features which exist on a spectrum (e.g. height, eyesight acuity, eye color, handedness), identifying what constitutes a “defect” as opposed to “normal variation” is problematic. These variants arise naturally in human and animal populations by the ordinary operation of genetic and other biological processes. Theologians of disability, who reflect on the experiences of individuals who are part of a marginalized minority because of a condition that the majority find undesirable, offer helpful perspectives for this discussion. Thus,

advances in science lead us to reconsider whether various forms of same-sex attraction and intersex conditions should be seen as “creational variants” rather than “disordered.”

4: Guidelines for interpreting Scripture. Reformed hermeneutics, affirming the inspiration and authority of Scripture, seeks the best interpretation of Scripture by taking into account the literary, linguistic, historical, and cultural context of passages, using knowledge gained from the study of God’s general revelation, acknowledging God’s accommodation to human limitations, taking into account Scripture’s progressive revelation, and remembering Scripture’s overall purpose, which is the redemptive revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

5: Examination of various interpretations of biblical passages. Some scholars for a “traditional” interpretation see gender differentiation (male and female) as associated with the creation of humanity in God’s image. Some traditional scholars believe procreation is fundamental to the governance of creation to which humanity is called, and gender differentiation is a necessity for marriage. Some scholars for same-sex “affirming” interpretations question whether gender differentiation can be seen as necessary for the full bearing of God’s image. Affirming scholars also reject procreation as a requirement for fulfilling God’s mandate to govern creation, since not all people who carry out this mandate reproduce. Biblical references to “male and female” were a common way of speaking in the culture of the original authors and audiences, and are not intended to teach “gender polarity” or “gender essentialism.” Therefore, a marriage of one man and one woman will be the most common creational pattern but need not be considered a prescriptive creational norm. Same-sex practices in ancient cultures typically involved pagan temple prostitution, pederasty, or high-status males using their power to convince or coerce low-status males (youth, poor, slaves, war prisoners, etc.) into submitting to exploitative sex. These practices constitute sinful disobedience to God and a disordering of the creational purposes for sex. The idea of life-long same-sex unions of equal partners was rare in ancient times: biblical writers assumed gender hierarchies and did not have the benefits of modern scientific understandings. For those reasons, when biblical writers justly condemned same-sex practices of their times, they were teaching against, or motivated by, the common practices with which they were familiar and had no way of considering the possibility or the potential benefits of life-long same-sex unions of equal partners who are innately same-sex attracted.

6: Quotations of contemporary authors. We have compiled a collection of direct quotations from biblical scholars and other authors on contested passages of Scripture that address gender and same-sex intercourse, and a bibliography of references that our committee has found useful.

7: Historical, biblical, and theological foundations for marriage. In our tradition, marriage is an earthly ordinance intended to promote human flourishing. Two individuals leave their birth families and form a new family, creating a “kinship bond” with all of the mutuality and obligations that implies. For many married couples, marriage is the correct setting for procreating and raising children. But marriage is not limited only to couples who can procreate, and raising children well is not limited only to such families. Scripture’s allusions to husband-wife relationships to describe God’s relationship to his people and Christ’s relationship to the church made use of common imagery with which people were familiar, but these allusions were not intended to be prescriptive. Across history, people of faith have changed assumptions about marriage several times (e.g. from favoring arranged marriages to expecting romantic choice,

from allowing polygamy to mandating monogamy, from viewing marriage as inferior to celibacy to seeing it as an equal calling, from shunning interracial marriage to accepting it). Allowing same-sex individuals to share the benefits of marriage with same-sex partners could be another such occasion of changing biblical assumptions about marriage.

8: Social and psychological goods typically enabled by marriage. For many married individuals, the marriage relationship is the source of many psychological, physical, social, and spiritual benefits. Our society organizes many social goods ordinarily through marriage, including care for spouses, care for children, care for members of their extended families, financial support and stability, emotional support, sharing of insurance, sharing of economic costs like housing and transportation, legal support, sharing of inheritance, tax benefits, shared property ownership, power of attorney, and many more. While most of these goods can be obtained with greater difficulty without marriage, and while legal marriages without sexual intimacy are possible, it is still the case—for a variety of biological, psychological, and sociological reasons—that life-long committed relationships which include sexual intimacy are the means by which most of these creational goods are obtained by most people most of the time.

9: Psychological issues involved in full inclusion versus non-inclusion. The church's current treatment of LGBT Christians has caused suffering. Research shows that sexual orientation is beyond the individual's control in all but a few cases. Given that gays and lesbians have the same emotional, intimacy, and social needs as heterosexuals, many experience great psychological harm from enforced lifetime celibacy, which denies them any possibility of the flourishing that is enjoyed by heterosexuals in relationship with a loving, affirming spouse and supported by the church. Depression and suicidal ideation is a consequence of feeling rejected by God, the church, family, society, and friends while being forbidden a cherishing partner. Empathy for those who are suffering has led the church to reinterpret Scripture in the past. Some conservative, evangelical, and Reformed church leaders (e.g., Brownson, Smedes, Wilson, Gushee, Johnson, Pauw, etc.) are beginning to step forward, many of them after their conscience demanded they acknowledge the pain suffered by LGBT Christians at the hands of the church, to reexamine Scripture, and they find it does not condemn Christian gays in committed relationships.

10: Personal stories of LGBT Christians. The church's traditional treatment of same-sex attracted, transgender, and intersex individuals has caused a great deal of pain. Some of these individuals share that when they saw their gender identity as a variation which God created rather than a disorder, and when in some cases they entered into a life-long committed relationship, this brought about flourishing in their lives and enabled them to better use their spiritual gifts for God's kingdom. These stories add weight and urgency to the other arguments.

11: Pastoral advice on maintaining unity. There is a range of views within the CRC on this topic. Concern and love for the CRC runs deep in many of us, and none of us wants this debate to create differences such that we cannot listen to and dialogue with one another with the care and respect that is due to brothers and sisters in Christ. This may be a situation where all continue to grow and learn, but where full agreement at a foundational level will not be achieved this side of heaven.

This report comes as a result of much study, dialogue, and writing. Our study committee members came to the same-sex marriage issue from several perspectives. Some believe that marriage is ordained by God to be between one man and one woman. Others desire to see our LGBT sisters and brothers have the opportunity to experience committed marital relationships. Still others support some portions of each of the above perspectives. All views arise out of sincere prayer, study of God's word, and review of the writings of current authors, heart perspectives, and meaningful life experiences. The variations in perspective reside in people who are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Bible as God's Word to God's people. Our discussions have, through prayer and God's mercy, been open, respectful, and grace-filled.

Congregations need, also, to struggle honestly with a response to life-long same-sex relationships. In the congregation there will be families at many different places on the path of seeking God's will relative to their loved ones, and many members may have personal struggles or family members struggling who are unknown to the congregation. There will be perspectives on LGBT persons and same-sex relationships that differ widely, as wide as the continuum of possibilities. The arrival at unity may well need to arise from much prayer, listening, storytelling, and study, all in the context of extreme grace, mercy, and respect.

For some, this document may be a step on that journey and may direct God's people in a congregation to other resources that may be helpful. The outcome of such dialogue may not be a baseline level of agreement, but rather a broader perspective and understanding that relates to the image of God, God's grace and mercy, the complexity of Scripture, genuine pastoral care, acceptance and embracing of differences. This may be a situation where all continue to grow and learn, but where full agreement at a foundational level will not be achieved this side of heaven. And, we trust that our loving God, who knows we do not know all things (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12), will extend grace to us in our finite knowledge of his will in this matter.

May you be blessed as you prayerfully study, discern and discuss the content of this report, so that "speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:15-16).

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