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## Submitting to Denominational Authority

In the past couple of years there has been a lot of discussion in some Christian Reformed Church councils about the authority of synod. Does synod have the authority to tell the local church what they can and cannot do?

For those who might be a little unfamiliar with the structure of our denomination, here is a brief overview. Local congregations have a council that is comprised of elders and deacons. These elders and deacons have been called by God to govern the church, and they are guided by the teachings of Scripture as they take on these positions of authority. Church members are accountable to the council for how they live and what they believe.

In the CRC, representatives from a geographical area gather together into what we call a classis. The Presbyterian churches call the same gathering a presbytery. The classis serves two functions: it enables churches of a particular area to do ministry together (e.g. campus ministry or church planting) that a local congregation may not be able to do by itself. The classis also serves to provide accountability to the churches that belong to it. Thus, if a particular congregation starts to do or believe something that is not biblical, the rest of the churches seek to correct that church and its council and pastor. Or, if a church and a pastor are struggling in their relationship, the classis steps in to provide support and guidance for that church and pastor, seeking to bring resolution to the problems. When local congregations belong to a classis, in a very real way, they are voluntarily agreeing to submit to the authority of classis, or, to put it another way, to be held accountable to the other churches in that classis. Classis, thus, has what we might call a delegated authority, meaning that the local churches give authority to the classis over themselves by being members of that classis.

Synod is much the same as classis except it operates at a denominational level. The CRC is considered a binational denomination in that we have churches in both the USA and Canada. Each classis delegates representatives to go to synod, which meets once per year. Synod has a double purpose, the same as a classis. Synod enables the entire denomination to do ministry together. Thus, our denomination has been able to send and support missionaries to other countries, planting churches and developing church leaders. And, like a classis, synod is also called to hold churches accountable to ensure that they are holding to the teachings of Scripture both in belief and practice. Sometimes synod is also called to make decisions about what the Bible says about a particular topic. A few years ago, a local church and its pastor had begun to teach and practice Kinism. Kinism is the belief that people should marry only within their ethnic community, meaning, for example, that a white man should not marry a black woman. Synod was asked to determine what Scripture teaches on this matter, and synod determined that the Bible is clearly against Kinism, and the church and pastor were instructed to cease teaching and practicing ethnic separation. Synod had the task of determining what Scripture says, and it has the authority (also a delegated authority) to call local congregations to account.

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In the past few years there has been much discussion about human sexuality. About a decade ago a question was presented to synod: what does our church believe about human sexuality. Synod put together a study committee, and that study committee spent a great deal of time asking people what they believed concerning human sexuality. Their work was put into a report that was presented to synod. Synod did not accept the report, primarily because it asked people what they thought, but the report did not spend much time asking what Scripture teaches. Synod recognized that popular opinions might differ from the teachings of Scripture, and so synod put together a second committee that was tasked with seeking to understand the teachings of Scripture. What does the Bible say about human sexuality?

The committee came back with a report that was biblically based, and it was presented to synod. Synod, comprised of delegates from across the denomination, by a very strong majority, accepted this report as being a faithful analysis of the teachings of God's Word, and it presented it to the congregations of the denomination as being the standard by which we think about and practice human sexuality. It was more than just pastoral advice; it was a statement that reflected the teaching of Scripture. In our denomination we believe that Scripture is the final authority for belief and practice because, as we believe, Scripture is given to us by God in special revelation.

Now, of course, we recognize that while Scripture is infallible, our interpretation of it may not be. We might misunderstand the teaching of Scripture, and we may make errors when it comes to what we believe and how we live. But this is precisely why we have a synod. A local congregation may make errors in interpretation (Kinism, is a good example), but if we work together, the chances of us making errors is lessened. Synod may make mistakes as well, and if it does, its decisions can be appealed.

When synod accepted the report which says that human sexual activity is to be reserved for a man and woman who have become husband and wife through the covenant of marriage and that all other sexual activity is aberrant, and when synod presented that to the churches, this became (or, rather continued to be, for this is what our denomination has always taught) the standard by which all churches, councils, and members are expected to live. Some protested the findings of the report, saying that it was not a correct understanding of the Bible, but synod continued to uphold what it had previously declared. Still, even though by implication of belonging to a denomination in which local churches delegate authority to synod the rulings of synod are authoritative, some churches refused to recognize the standard of Scripture and made allowances for other forms of sexual experience to be practiced. Now there were churches and councils and members of the denomination refusing to live by the standards of Scripture as understood by the denomination, and this led to a quandary: what do we do now?

Synod then took a further step, and it made the statement that the teachings of the Human Sexuality Report be considered to be confessional. It said that the word, "unchastity," in Q&A 109 of the Heidelberg Catechism included any sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Making this confessional has significant implications, for when pastors, elders, and deacons are ordained to their office, they sign what is called a "Covenant of Officebearers" in which they say that they will hold to the teachings of Scripture as articulated in our confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism being one of those confessions. By saying that unchastity includes all forms of sexuality that are not between a woman and man who are married to each other this meant that if someone does not hold to this, they cannot become or continue to be an officebearer in the Christian Reformed Church. To put it another way, anyone who continues to espouse or even accept behaviour that has been deemed sinful cannot serve as a leader in our denomination. Synod went on to say that all those who hold office in our denomination must be

able to re-sign the Covenant of Officebearers, thus signifying their willingness to submit to the biblical teaching as articulated in our confessions as understood by our denomination. Many felt that this re-signing was important because it would create an atmosphere of trust and assurance that all who are leaders in our denomination will submit to the authority that we have given to synod to guide us in our teachings and practice.

Some have balked at this idea that all those in leadership positions much reaffirm their willingness to submit to the teachings of Scripture as presented in Scripture, saying that synod overstepped its authority in asking for this reaffirmation. Further, there are some churches which have decided that its officebearers do not need to sign the Covenant of Officebearers before they can hold office, allowing people who may not hold to the teachings of our denomination to become leaders in its churches.

The question is this: does synod have the authority over churches and their councils to make this ruling? It would seem that synod does, simply because its authority originates in the local church (through classis), and synod has been given the authority by the churches (through classis) to hold the members of the denomination accountable. We live in a time when many are anti-authority, but as believers, we also attest that we want to be held accountable by other believers. Thus, we have given synod authority, and because we have, we ought to submit to that authority as our fellow believers, through synod, hold us accountable to profess and practice the teachings of God's Word.

Pastor Gary