Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met October 18–19, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in conjunction with the annual joint meeting of all General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council (GSC), and January 11–12, 2019, in Chicago, Illinois.

The COT is privileged to do this work for the church and grateful for the opportunity to serve in this way. The commission’s primary tasks this year were those assigned by General Synod 2018; however, the commission also continued discussion of several topics of theological significance to the church.

Referral Regarding the Interpretation of the Word “Bounds”

From General Synod 2018, TE-1 requested the Commission on Church Order (CCO), the Commission on History (COH), and the COT “to offer [their] interpretation of the word ‘bounds’ in the Book of Church Order (BCO), defining specifically its relationship to geographic boundaries and its implications for ethnic classes, for report back to the 2019 General Synod” (MGS 2018, p. 322). In October 2018, the COT met with members of the CCO and the COH, and a small task force was formed to draft an interpretation. The COH chose to offer its own paper, a historical chronicle and interpretation of the use of the term “bounds,” which can be found in their report.

The COT and the CCO thus drafted an interpretation of the term “bounds” regarding the formation and work of classes. The conclusions of the COT and CCO are that non-geographical classes are not prohibited in the BCO and that there may be warrant for the creation of ethnic/linguistic classes. However, such decisions should be made with great caution since the creation of non-geographic classes carries potential divisions and difficulties that are counter to the purpose of classes. The full paper with recommendations can be found in the report of the CCO.

Referral Regarding the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality”

General Synod 2018, after a time of debate and discussion, approved OV 18-21: “To commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry” (MGS 2018, p. 148).

In response to General Synod 2018’s directive, and in its desire to serve the church well, the COT reviewed the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” and presents the following paper.

OF CATECHISMS AND TEACHING TOOLS: THE RESPONSE OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY TO THE “GREAT LAKES CATECHISM ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY”

The purpose of Christian catechisms is to teach the Christian faith to believers. As Thomas Torrance notes in the introduction to The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church, catechisms “aim to give a comprehensive exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the context of the whole Counsel of God and the whole life of the people of God.” They take serious and complicated theological ideas and disseminate them in language that is easily applicable and relevant to a believer’s life. Though many resources could be used to catechize, the RCA historically has emphasized the Heidelberg Catechism in particular.
Beginning as a local teaching tool for the young with input from several authors, over time, the Heidelberg Catechism gained near universal embrace in Reformed communities for teaching the gospel truths in a beautiful and simple way. The RCA throughout its history has not endorsed any other catechism because none has reached the theological helpfulness or brilliance of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the RCA, a catechism is not just a mere teaching aid, it is an essential tool of understanding the truth found in Scripture.

General Synod 2018 instructed the COT to offer a response to the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” (referred to in this document as GLC). This catechism, written by Branson Parler, seeks to be a relevant teaching resource to churches and families concerning the tumultuous waters of human sexuality and marriage. There is much to commend in this resource.

First, the commission commends the author for taking the time and energy to create a substantive document. Considerable effort was put into producing this teaching resource and the commission is thankful for a minister and a classis taking the issues addressed so seriously. Second, the resource is simply written and easily accessible. This is of primary importance if a resource is to be pastorally helpful; it must be understandable, and the GLC achieves this goal. The GLC also is to be commended for its efforts to offer a holistic approach to sexuality and marriage. It seeks to give biblical answers to the realities of homosexuality, marriage, singleness, the universality of sin, and the hope found in Christ. It is not just reactive to the controversies of the day but seeks to build a positive biblical view of marriage. Finally, the GLC seeks to answer questions that countless believers in the RCA are asking. Many will experience this straightforward resource as a breath of fresh air. This commission is thankful for the author’s work on these important issues.

For all there is to commend, this commission sees significant limitations with this document as presented to the RCA.

First, the document, at times, embraces theological language that is contentious, perhaps unintentionally so. Here, the commission is not referring to the conservative ethical stance of the document. Instead, the GLC seems built upon some theological assumptions that might not be easily embraced by the entire denomination. A clear example is the use of the term “creation order” in Question 1. Historically, the appeal to creation orders has been a way of setting up an authority independent of Scripture, so that the church no longer needs to return to Scripture as the primary source of God’s revelation. Given the reality of sin and its devastating effects on creation and human reason, it seems hard to imagine that we could ever ascertain the purposes of God in sexuality or marriage by seeking them in the “creation order” outside of the witness of Scripture. Further, appeals to “creation order” have been used to support things such as apartheid and misogyny. In appealing to a “creation order,” the commission believes that this document distracts from its goal of “bearing witness to the kingdom of God.”

Second, in many cases, the verses offered in support of various “answers” within the document do not seem relevant. An example can be found in the answer for Question 10. In one section of the answer, the author asserts that marriage is a means of sanctification. He then provides eight supporting Scriptures in footnote 17. None of the biblical texts provided explicitly or implicitly gives any support to the assertion that marriage is a vehicle of sanctification, except perhaps one, 1 Corinthians 7:4-5. These proof texts do not “prove” the answer provided. The commission does not have problems with proof texts per se, although ideally the use of Scripture would rise above mere proof texting. Scripture ought to support, deepen, and illumine the answers given in this document, helping the reader relate the questions and answers to the more important realities of the redemptive
purposes of God through Christ in the world. The commission believes that the author desires to be faithful to the Scriptures. Faithfulness (and pastoral helpfulness) requires a carefully engaged reading and use of Scripture. Even if one agrees with the ethical and relational assertions of this document, the Scriptures given do not always bear the weight of the answers offered.

Third, the theological anthropology of the document is underdeveloped and in need of refinement. The GLC is clear concerning its views of sexual ethics and the purpose of marriage, but it is quite opaque on the meaning of gender itself. At the foundation of sexuality is the human body—male and female. A teaching tool on sexuality ought to place the body into the story of God and redemption. The absence of such material is a serious deficiency of the document.

Finally, and most basically, the commission does not believe that this document rises to the standards of being a “catechism.” It is narrowly focused on one particular area. It does not seek to present “a comprehensive exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Following careful and extended deliberation, the Commission on Theology strongly suggests removing the name “catechism,” so as not to give it the weight that word implies. While the document might therefore helpfully be called a teaching tool, it is not a catechism.

The commission therefore recommends that the General Synod adopt the following recommendation:

TH 19-1
To decline to receive the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” as a “catechism”; and further,

To change the name of the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” to the “Great Lakes Teaching Tool on Marriage and Sexuality” in all future denominational references.

The following motion was made and supported:

To refer TH 19-1 to the Commission on Theology, instructing the commission to engage with the author of the Great Lakes Catechism for report back to General Synod 2020.

VOTED: To not adopt the motion.

A motion was made and supported to amend TH 19-1 as follows (deletions are stricken):

To decline to receive the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” as a “catechism; and further,

To change the name of the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” to the “Great Lakes Teaching Tool on Marriage and Sexuality” in all future denominational references.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

VOTED: To adopt TH 19-1 as amended.
The final version of TH 19-1 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

**TH 19-1**
To decline to receive the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” as a “catechism.” (ADOPTED)

**Ongoing Work**

The COT engaged the items assigned to it as well as items the commission considers to have theological significance for the church. During its October and January meetings, the commission continued examining the roles and training available for commissioned pastors. The COT hopes to serve as a support and a resource for those involved in training commissioned pastors and other leaders in the church. The COT also continued discussing the presence and nature of theological statements and positions presented on the RCA website.

The commission always welcomes appropriate inquiries of theological significance from members of the RCA, and it continues to trust that its work serves the RCA, specifically the General Synod, and brings glory to the Triune God.

**Acknowledgments**

In closing, the commission offers thanks to Jaeseung Cha, associate professor of foundational and constructive theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Tony Chapman, an elder from Fremont, California, for their six years of faithful service. Their membership on the Commission on Theology is ending, and the commission is deeply grateful for their gifts, perspectives, and contributions to the ministry of the RCA. The commission also offers thanks to Terry DeYoung, staff to the commission, for his constant and effective guidance of its work.

Respectfully submitted,
Laird Edman, moderator