General Synod 2013 adopted R-54 (MGS 2013, p. 181): “To instruct the Commission on Theology to draft a paper on human sexuality from a Reformed perspective to be presented to General Synod 2015.” It cited these reasons: a comprehensive paper on human sexuality has not been written for the church in more than thirty-five years; the topic of human sexuality continues to be before the church; and a comprehensive paper would be helpful as the church continues to engage this topic.

As reported last year, this commission agrees that the RCA needs a new paper on human sexuality from a Reformed perspective, yet it believes that such a paper should not be produced hastily. Hence the commission indicated that it would present to this General Synod a preliminary paper designed to move toward the goal of a comprehensive paper. That preliminary paper was envisioned to review the history of the RCA’s engagement with the subject of gay and lesbian persons in the church, and then to focus on what has changed both in the church and the larger society in the last forty years (see MGS 2014, pp. 284-285).

In its meetings this term, the Commission on Theology modified its plan for this preliminary paper. We now believe a historical overview would not be as helpful as a theological statement articulating some core principals concerning human sexuality—one we hope will be broadly accepted within the Reformed Church in America. There is wisdom, we expect, in preparing for difficult conversations about our differences by first stating what we have in common. In that spirit of hope and expectation, the commission offers this paper.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH: SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE CHURCH’S DISCUSSION OF ISSUES INVOLVING SEXUALITY

At a crucial point in his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Then he adds, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1-2).

Setting the topic of sexuality within the drama of God’s rule and reconciliation in Christ might indeed enable our church to rediscover the ground of a meaningful cultural witness in the midst of wearying conflict over a variety of topics concerning sexuality. Sex is a gift, but a gift to be honored and used in the service of the life in Christ. In our late-modern context, setting discussions of sexuality in right proportion is an increasingly difficult task. In the effort to sustain disciplined reflection about Christian life in the world, this paper offers a provisional sketch of a number of theological and moral considerations necessary to understand sexuality as a divine gift to be honored and used in the service of the kingdom of God. The Commission on Theology believes that entering into this reflection upon our common commitments regarding human sexuality will assist the church when it takes up the more contentious issues of same-sex attraction and marriage.

This introduction has been written with the conviction that agreement upon the meaning and scope of the biblical witness concerning God’s purposes for human sexuality is necessary. Without such agreement, we see little hope for a more fruitful and constructive theological process for securing an understanding of what is at stake for the church to address the narrower topics of same-sex attraction and same-gender marriage. In other words, our confession of “one holy catholic and apostolic church” demands that prior to giving in to the temptation toward sectarianism, which would widen the separation between two or more parties, we first risk asking the question: Is there a biblical and theological foundation for a distinctly Christian
understanding of sexuality in general, one that provides for a renewed discovery of core Christian commitments about reconciliation, holiness, authority, personhood, vocation, community, and friendship?

This brief sketch is offered in the hope that we may prompt further, extended discussion on the nature of what it means for all of us to offer our bodies as “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” We proceed on the basis of the conviction that before the church wades into turbulent waters of controversy, it needs to recover its core convictions. This requires a rigorous assessment of the consequence of sin—understanding that the world stands under the judgment of God—and a glad acceptance of the call to holiness in Christ. At the same time, God’s covenantal faithfulness—pursuing his children in spite of their sinful rebellion—leads us joyfully to express thanksgiving for the transformative power of God’s grace and forgiveness. Apart from a concerted effort to begin our reflection upon Christian life and human sexuality within the primary context of the drama of God’s creation and reconciliation of all in Christ, there is little hope for a genuine solution to the more focused challenge of same-sex attraction and same-gender marriage.

In the face of dramatic and forceful cultural pressures, Christian reflection on sexuality must be sufficiently humble to learn from the witness of Holy Scripture. In doing so, we may well discover the resources necessary to set aside all forms of self-justification. The Holy Spirit guides the church in its reading of Scripture so that it might faithfully bear witness to the renewal of all things in Christ. Scripture leads us to see all of human life in Christ. Because the Word has become flesh and promises to raise our bodies at the last day, we cheerfully recognize that our life with God and each other is embodied. Accordingly, Christian reflection on the weakness or death of the body (cf. Romans 6:6, 7:24, 8:10-13; 2 Corinthians 4:10) should not be regarded as a refusal to grant that the body is to be cherished, protected, and honored. While we are fundamentally social creatures, known to each other bodily—with all that this entails for communication, nurture, attraction, and intimacy (for good or ill)—each of us is called to offer the totality of who we are back to God (hence Paul’s exhortation to offer our bodies and to seek the renewal of our minds). Far from denying bodily desires and needs, Paul insists that they are to be drawn into the drama of our redemption, for we are called to “glorify God in [our bodies]” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Given the bodily incarnation of the Word, we believe that the diversity of culture is a positive gift of God. Christians are called to embody unity in Christ in the midst of such diversity. However, no issue generates more controversy than the question of human sexuality. This is due, in part, to the fact that much of late-modernity remains ill-disposed to accept a classic (catholic/orthodox) Christian view of human sexuality. In this setting, we should not be surprised to find that many, in the church and beyond, lack an understanding of the moral space within which sexuality is properly ordered toward its appointed end in Christ.

Central to the Christian faith is the confession that the divine Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus Christ inaugurated the dramatic liberation, renewal, and exaltation of humanity. In him we meet our maker and our match, our beginning and our true end. For Jesus Christ is the appointed covenant partner with God, and the ground of our deepest identity and calling. In turn, this confession closes the door upon every attempt to construct a vision of human identity, personhood, and flourishing apart from Christ. In him we come to know God and ourselves truly.

None of us, however, has fully come to terms with the pervasive disorder brought about by original sin. In painful ways, we resist the hard truth of our condition. Refusing to see the world
and ourselves in light of the biblical drama, we imagine that we cannot possibly be as broken
and alienated as Scripture claims (cf. Romans 3:9-18). Our tendency is to make either too much
or too little of sex, thereby refusing to come to terms with who we truly are. When the first path
is taken, sexuality is asked to carry a burden that it was never intended to bear. Alternatively,
whenever people treat sex and sexuality too lightly, they are tempted to engage in casual sex,
pornography, or prostitution without fully realizing how profoundly damaging and disordered
such behavior truly is. When we ask sexuality to bear the full weight of personal identity, we
quickly lose our grasp of the abiding Christian truth that our life (and thus our identity) is truly
hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3). Each of us is called to honor God’s revealed purposes for
human sexuality.

Corresponding to the lifelong covenant faithfulness of God is the call to honor and protect the
binding character of sexual intimacy, openness to the gift of children, and the care and nurture
of families capable of embracing the widow, orphan, and sojourner. Like all good gifts, the gift of
human sexuality is to be honored, cherished, and used in ways that bring glory to God. It is
against this backdrop that sexual promiscuity of any sort is always wrong. It is precisely for this
reason that Paul exhorts us to offer our bodies back to God as a living sacrifice “holy and
acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). This call to offer our bodies back to God is, at the same
time, an invitation to enter upon the path toward the gift of true identity, forgiveness, healing,
renewal, and freedom.

Capable of redemption, human sexuality is a crucial setting in which we are called to bear
witness to God’s forgiveness and saving grace. Given that Christ alone “fills all in all”
(Ephesians 1:23), marriage and singleness point, in their differing ways, to the “fulfillment” of all
creation in Christ. Such fulfillment does not require the exercise of every desire, power, or gift
we may possess. Instead, the proper exercise of desires, powers, and gifts is realized within the
drama of God’s reconciliation of the world in Christ. Following Jesus in the way of the cross,
we discover the calling and strength to enact a chaste and disciplined life. Contrary to our culture’s
assumptions, our desires are not the final determinants of our life or identity, though they may
well be taken up and made holy through God’s sanctifying and redeeming love.

When we actively share in the misdirection of erotic powers, we fail to respect and honor the
divine purposes for human sexuality. In effect, disordered sexual life, affections, and acts
constitute a tragic rebellion against the goodness of creation and the promise of freedom and
renewal in Christ. When erotic powers are misdirected, we painfully rend covenantal faithfulness
and destroy the creaturely gifts of intimacy, respect, mutuality, and love. Aware of the horizontal
and vertical dimensions of such rebellion, we must resist the temptation to reduce sexual sin to
the internal domain of dispositions and attitudes. By way of contrast, we affirm that God’s
purposes for sexuality locate us within a given, objective order with clear purposes and goals,
not only for us, but for the whole social order. Thus, when we sin, we not only harm ourselves,
but wound and threaten our bond with God and neighbor. Whenever we use others for our
selfish ends, we refuse to nurture faithfully and fully inhabit the concrete world of community,
friendship, and family.

Sexual desire is enormously complex. Nevertheless, we reject the view that sexual desire is a
wearisome taskmaster that must be obeyed at all costs. As Paul declares, “those who belong to
Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24). The
journey of sanctification is never to be traveled alone. None of us has been called to mortify the
flesh on the basis of resolute self-determination. For we all live in constant need of the gift and
sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit. In the Spirit, we not only find emancipation from self-
indulgence, but are drawn forward into lasting friendship with God and neighbor. Despite our
manifest brokenness, the triune God calls and brings us into freedom. As Paul teaches: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13-14). Thus, the call to chastity and obedience requires, at the same time, resolute commitment to seek and nurture friendship—particularly friendship with those on the margins, whose hunger for belonging, intimacy, and love would otherwise remain painfully unsatisfied.

Conflicts surrounding same-gender marriage are currently at a high pitch, with legal issues under rapid inquiry and change. Fractured debate over individual rights threatens the church’s grasp upon the larger drama of God’s reconciliation and renewal of all. In the midst of this intellectual and moral fragmentation, it becomes all the more difficult for the church to clearly understand and affirm the unique gifts of homosexual persons. Positively, these conflicts provide us with the opportunity to rediscover the meaning and purpose of human life revealed by the Word made flesh. Furthermore, they constitute a significant prompt for the church to exercise its public ministry and witness in calling all persons to holiness, reconciliation, covenant, and life in Christ.

To conclude, obedience to Christ must be our chief aim, for he alone pronounces words of life. When faced with complex and difficult questions, we would do well to step back from the brink, and once again listen with keen determination to the still, small voice of our Lord, for he alone “will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40:11).