

Homosexuality and Homosexual relations

Brief explanation

Why the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken
in spite of fifteen requests for revision
upheld their declaration of 2013

A publication on behalf of the General Synod
of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands
2016-2017

Homosexuality and Homosexual Relations: brief explanation
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All Scripture quotations and references are taken from the *Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV), 2001, Crossway Bibles.

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PREFACE

In 2013 the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands came to a decision concerning homosexuality and homosexual relationships. Various churches requested a revision of this decision. The General Synod of 2016-2017, however, upheld the original decision in this matter.

Since this decision raised questions in the churches, Synod appointed a task group to provide guidance to the churches in relation to this matter. One of the tasks assigned to this group was to compile an information booklet. In addition, an English translation of part of this booklet is provided, to be included as an addendum to the study report of 2013, in order to inform sister churches abroad concerning the manner in which Synod has dealt with the requests for revision that were submitted.

This booklet is intended to briefly set out why Synod did not accede to these requests for a revision. It offers a concise summary of the Report to the General Synod of 2016-2017, compiled in response to requests for revision of Synod's declaration of 2013. The text of the decision itself, and the report that accompanies it, may be found at www.cgk.nl/project/rapporten/

This booklet invites the reader to engage in further reading of the reports themselves. References provided will assist in finding those passages the reader finds relevant.

The task group is hopeful that this English publication may also serve the churches abroad in ongoing discussion concerning homosexuality, mutual upbuilding within the churches, and pastoral interaction with homosexual brothers and sisters.

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SUMMARY OF THE REPORT CONCERNING REQUESTS FOR REVISION

The General Synod of 2016 of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken appointed a committee to prepare the discussion of fifteen requests for revision of Synod's decision in 2013, in relation to homosexuality and homosexual relations. This committee engaged in a study of these requests.

During the second week of Synod, this committee submitted an interim report to Synod, containing a descriptive summary of the requests for revision, and an evaluation of these requests. This interim report did not yet make any recommendations as to decisions that Synod might take.

In the discussion that followed, ample opportunity was given to ask questions about the committee's considerations, and after this discussion, all delegates to Synod were invited to think along with the committee, or to indicate where the committee might have overlooked something, or fallen short in giving sufficient weight to arguments that were raised. The committee took note of all contributions to the discussion, and incorporated them in a final report, which was discussed in later sessions of Synod.

The committee recommended that Synod uphold the declaration of the General Synod of 2013, on the grounds that none of the requests for revision had demonstrated that Synod's 2013 declaration was based on invalid grounds, or was one-sided in its interpretation of Scripture. Synod adopted the recommendations of the committee.

SUMMARY

This summary presents, in broad outlines, the arguments that were raised in the requests for revision of the 2013 declaration, and of the arguments that led Synod to decide not to accede to such requests. It would be impossible to present all these arguments in detail in this summary. Rather, this publication is intended as something of a reading guide, an outline that will encourage those who are interested to pick up the report and read it for themselves.

The report contains extended quotations from the submissions themselves, as well as the responses that weigh the arguments contained in these submissions. It leads to the conclusion that the declaration of 2013 ought not to be revised. This summary, therefore, contains numerous references to the report.

We realize that due to its concise nature, this summary may not do sufficient justice to all the points of view presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee).

In what follows, the objections raised in the requests for revision have been brought together.

ECCLESIASTICAL DECLARATION BY THE SYNOD

The requests for revision were raised against the declaration of the 2013 General Synod of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, concerning homosexuality and homosexual relationships:

- 1. The General Synod acknowledges that in the past, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken have, in general, failed to pay specific attention to pastoral instruction and activity with regard to homosexuality and homosexual relationships;*
- 2. Members with a homosexual orientation have the same position within the congregation of Christ as any other members. Their orientation does not diminish this position. They are full and equal members of the congregation, share in its mutual care, and with their own gifts are to be deployed in equal measure in the upbuilding of the congregation as a whole;*
- 3. Sexual activity between persons of the same gender, and relationships within which such activity takes place, are not in agreement with the Word of God, and hence are to be characterized as sin. In such situations, the church, in its pastoral responsibility, is to follow the path of ecclesiastical admonition, in accordance with Scripture, Confession and the Church Order.*
- 4. The manner in which this Biblical instruction regarding homosexuality and homosexual relationships takes place, in preaching, catechesis and pastorate, shall be according to the mind of Christ.*

For the text of the Report to the General Synod of 2013 (*Vision Document and Pastoral Guide*), the requests for revision, and Synod's response to these submissions, we refer to www.cgk.nl/project/besluiten.

REQUESTS FOR REVISION

Fifteen requests for revision of this declaration were received by Synod, varying in length and content. Some were only a few pages long, others up to forty or more.

Some church councils indicated that they had great difficulty with the declaration that homosexual relationships are sinful. They expressed the view that relationships conducted in love and faithfulness are not sinful.

Other church councils expressed agreement with the declaration of the 2013 Synod. They too hold that homosexual relations do not fit with God's original purpose. They assert, however, that homosexual orientation is a manifestation of the brokenness of creation, which we are to deal with as best we can. Would a homosexual relationship not be a possible means of support, an accommodation to this brokenness, so that believers are not crushed by it? Hence, these church councils have difficulty with the exercise of church discipline. Should we not be much more patient? Does God not show patience with all of us?

Next to these differences (actually, there were other differences, also), there were also many points of agreement in the requests for revision. The committee examined all of the objections raised, placing them within the framework of the following key issues:

1. What Scripture says
2. Hermeneutics and cultural distance
3. Relationships in love and faithfulness
4. The gift of abstinence
5. Neurobiological aspects
6. The exercise of discipline
7. The relationship between the church federation and local congregations
8. A doctrinal statement

1. What Scripture says

The requests for revision:

The requests for revision identified all the Scriptural givens that the 2013 Synod had brought forward:

1. Creation and Fall (especially Genesis 1-3)
2. The Epistle to the Romans (ch 1:26-27)
3. Two admonitions (I Corinthians 6:9-10; and I Timothy 1:9-10)
4. Provisions from Leviticus (ch 18:22; 20:13)
5. The crime of Sodom (Genesis 19)
6. The shameful atrocity at Gibeah (Judges 19)

The chief point in the requests for revision was that the 2013 Synod left room for only one exegesis (interpretation) as being the correct one. This was seen as infringing the freedom of exegesis. Synod's interpretation was characterized, not as incorrect as such, but as not the only one possible. It would have been better if Synod had said: we don't really know. Local churches could then, with their own insights into the relevant Scriptural givens, have sought their own way in the pastorate involving homosexual relationships.

By presenting a certain exegesis as the only correct one, the 2013 declaration has brought church councils into a crisis of conscience: you must exercise church discipline, because Scripture says that homosexual relations are wrong. According to

most of the requests for revision, however, one cannot make such a statement stick. There is a variety of views within our churches about the understanding of Scripture passages dealing with homosexual relations. This fact alone should lead us not to make firm statements about the meaning and intent of these parts of Scripture. The Bible passages referred to do not address homosexual relationships conducted in love and faithfulness. Texts such as those in Leviticus and Romans deal with homosexual debauchery, and indeed, such behaviour should be condemned. However, these texts cannot be applied without qualification to homosexual brothers and sisters who, in love and faithfulness, have undertaken a homosexual relationship.

The Synod report:

The Synod report indeed affirms that we may not infringe the freedom of exegesis. However, anyone who has an objection to the exegesis of the 2013 Synod ought to advance strong arguments against it. Freedom of exegesis does not mean that we must always remain uncertain about what the Word of God says in any particular place. The fact that there may be differences of view about the meaning of a certain text is in itself not enough. In this case, we must present an argument why a text such as Leviticus 18:22 has no relevance to present-day homosexual relations, and why Romans 1:26-27 should only condemn sexual debauchery, and not homosexual relations as such.

Taking all the arguments brought forward into account, the Synod committee re-examined the exegesis of the texts in question, considering whether there might not be more uncertainty about their interpretation than Synod thought in 2013. The committee (and subsequently the Synod) came to the conclusion that the exegesis advanced in 2013 may be confidently affirmed as correct. The arguments brought forward in the requests for revision do not provide sufficient grounds to leave room for a different interpretation.

The requests for revision devoted much attention to the interpretation of the texts mentioned above, and much less to what – in the judgement of the 2013 Synod – is at least as significant: the continuing positive line in Scripture in relation to marriage and sexuality. God created mankind male and female, and instituted marriage as a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. Some of the requests for revision questioned whether we do not proceed too exclusively from a certain creation order. However, when we oversee the whole of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, we consistently note the unique character of marriage. Possibly for this reason, none of the requests for revision contained a request to allow the church solemnization of a same-sex marriage.

The Bible texts that explicitly reject homosexual relations (the negative line) must be read against the background of what the Bible says positively about marriage and sexuality (the positive line). It is clear that taken as a whole, the Bible consistently speaks negatively about homosexual relations. Even if there is a degree of uncertainty about the interpretation of ‘negative’ texts regarding homosexuality, we must still give account of how we deal with the clearly positive line when, next to

what the Bible says about marriage and sexuality, we leave room for homosexual relationships.

Regarding the Scripture passages themselves: in this summary we will only address those in Leviticus and Romans. As to the other Bible texts, we are pleased to refer to the Report itself.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13:

'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.'

'If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.'

The requests for revision:

Various requests for revision stated that Leviticus was written in a very different time and culture from our own. At that time, homosexual activity within a relationship simply did not occur. The laws of Leviticus probably referred to prostitution, taking place within a pagan temple. Hence, the sexual activity that Leviticus has in mind is quite different from a homosexual relationship today.

It is questionable whether Leviticus 18 can be applied to homosexual relationships, undertaken in love and faithfulness today. Isn't it quite understandable that brothers and sisters who live in such a relationship do not at all recognize themselves in the language of the texts?

The Synod report:

The Synod report argues that it is unlikely that Leviticus 18 only addresses homosexual temple prostitution. Current Bible scholarship questions the likely connection between such prostitution and pagan worship. But even if the first readers of Leviticus did make this direct connection, then the question must still be asked whether homosexual activity was only condemned because of the pagan context in which it took place.

The prohibition is expressed here in very general terms: "*You shall not lie with a man as with a woman*". Taken at face value, this text seems to say: the sinfulness of this behaviour is not just found in the pagan context of temple prostitution (assuming that this is what the reader would think), nor in the casualness of such sexual activity. More than that, it flies in the face of God's intention: sexuality is to be experienced only within a marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Homosexual relations depart from the norm that God has set.

That is why the prohibition of Leviticus 18:22 (and 20:13) still has something to tell us today, even though homosexual relationships as we know them today might (still) have been unknown in the time of Leviticus. The message about homosexual relationships that proceeds from this text is a clearly negative one. We may not ignore this prohibition, as deeply as it is embedded in the Old Testament, because it was expressed and recorded in another time and context.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp56-65.

Romans 1:26-27:

‘For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error’.

The requests for revision:

Paul sharply condemns this ever-increasing wickedness. God has given up mankind, which does not want to know Him, to themselves and the lusts of their hearts (v.24). It is completely understandable that homosexual brothers and sisters, who experience their love for someone of the same gender to be completely pure and natural, do not recognize themselves at all in these verses. After all, Paul uses expressions such as ‘passions’ and ‘shameful lusts’, and he adds that people who have given themselves up to such desires have turned away from God. This simply does not apply to brothers and sisters who live in a loving and faithful homosexual relationship. Paul, then, is not referring to relationships conducted in love and faithfulness. What he has in mind is the debauchery that was so prevalent in the Roman empire at that time. Even the emperor himself took part in such excesses. Paul is thinking of the debauched, perverse, and often pagan character of such homosexual activity. In it, the progression from bad to worse becomes clearly visible. It is especially apparent in the pagan world.

The Synod report:

Synod could not be persuaded by this interpretation. Romans 1 does not speak only of what can go wrong in the pagan world; rather, it shows how all people stand guilty before God. The essence of sin is that we worship creatures rather than the Creator. In Romans 1, Paul shows the ever-increasing proliferation of wickedness. That is in itself a judgement from God, who has given up mankind to its own lustful desires. Paul points to homosexual activity as an illustration of such depravity. And that is why he uses such strong language. Of course, this does not make homosexual activity *the* sin, but Paul does see a great evil in the ‘overturning’ of God’s purpose. Paul is not thinking of homosexual acts taking place in pagan temples. That is clear from the fact that he also writes about relations between women. And in his time that kind of activity was quite unknown. In Romans 1, the emphasis falls on the character of homosexual relations as ‘contrary to nature’. This does not imply (as some have suggested) that heterosexual men and women have set aside their own (hetero)sexual orientation in order to indulge in homosexual acts. That is a far too individualistic and modern conception. As did the Jews of his day, Paul used the expression ‘contrary to nature’ to point out that homosexual relations ran counter to God’s purpose.

However, would Paul have known about homosexual love, orientation or relationships? The degree to which Paul understood this cannot be decisive. For us, his words in Romans 1, read in the light of the whole of Scripture, must suffice. In those words, it is clear that Paul, as did all Jews of his time, regarded homosexual relations as a sin, that one must break with. That is also the way Synod reads I Corinthians 6:10 and I Timothy 1:10.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp12-51.

After consideration of all the Scripture givens, along with the relevant commentary provided in the requests for revision, Synod concluded that no sufficient grounds had been brought forward in these requests to reverse its declaration that homosexual activity is to be characterized as sin.

2. Hermeneutics and cultural distance

Interpretation:

When drawing on Scriptural givens, it isn't just the exegesis of the text itself that is important. Of course, this is where listening to Scripture begins. However, next to that, the fact that the Bible was written in another time and culture also comes into play. God revealed Himself to people *at that time*. And yet His words were not just valid in that time and culture; they are the canon for today also: they are the standard and rule for life and faith today. How should we come to grips with ancient texts concerning homosexual relations in their own culture and context?

The requests for revision:

The time we live in is different from that of the Bible. The relevant Bible texts do not address contemporary relationships, and therefore cannot be directly applied to the church today. In Moses' time (Leviticus) and in Paul's time (Romans) homosexual relationships in love and faithfulness as we encounter them today were unknown. For example, if Paul had known how love and faithfulness are central to many homosexual relationships today, wouldn't he have expressed himself differently (less sharply, less disapprovingly) about homosexual relations?

The Synod report:

The 2016 report to Synod conceded that the 2013 report could have shown more sensitivity to the hermeneutical questions surrounding this subject. Still, such sensitivity was present, and even though it could have been more clearly expressed, this need not lead to a revision of the declaration of Synod.

For example, Synod 2013 could have emphasised more strongly that many regulations in Leviticus no longer apply in our time and culture in the same way as they did in ancient Israel. One such instance is the prohibition to interweave two kinds of material into one piece of cloth. Such a prohibition must be seen in the context of

its own time, and further examined to see what it tells us about our relationship to God and our fellow man. Commands that relate directly to the breadth of human existence are less able to be restricted to the concrete situation of the people of Israel.

The prohibition concerning homosexual relations must also be interpreted against the background of what then, at the time the Lord issued these commands, was current. Why did God, by the mouth of Moses, prohibit such acts? Even though we do not assert that the truths expressed in the Bible are 'timeless' (in the sense that these truths are completely divorced from the time in which they were written down), we may still acknowledge that texts in for example Leviticus provide direction from God for us today.

We may also not claim that Christ's 'love command' has become a substitute for all other commands. Christ did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. True, we are to read all of these commands in the light of their fulfilment in Christ, but this does not mean that they no longer have anything to say to us.

However, did God, in His patience, not sometimes accommodate His people where they indulged in practices that did not align with His creation purpose? Ought we not, in our time, show the same spirit of accommodation to brothers and sisters who struggle with their sexual orientation, and who yearn so strongly for a relationship? True, the church must be compassionate to these brothers and sisters. But this does not yet mean that we may call a sinful practice 'not sinful'. The church also has the calling to do justice to the way of sanctification of life that the Lord Himself points out.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp73-82.

3. Relationships in love and faithfulness

The requests for revision:

According to most requests for revision, the sharp language Scripture uses against homosexual practices is not about relationships 'in love and faithfulness'. Of course, homosexual licentiousness and casual sexual activity must certainly be condemned, but relationships in love and faithfulness are permissible.

The better way is to permit such homosexual relationships, because Christ's love command transcends concrete commandments. Love is the standard. That must be the starting point for guidelines for all of life, also with regard to homosexual relationships. If we truly want to love our homosexual brothers and sisters, we may not deny them a relationship in love and faithfulness.

Another argument sometimes advanced is that such a relationship is much to be preferred to a sinful lifestyle (such as in the gay scene), one that is more likely to occur where a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness is prohibited.

In addition, an appeal is made to ‘Christian freedom’. To be in Christ is to be set free from oppressive bondage. Is it consistent with Christian freedom to lay such a heavy (too heavy a) burden on brothers and sisters?

The Synod report:

Almost all of the requests for revision make reference to homosexual relationships ‘in love and faithfulness’; none of them, however, describe precisely what that means. Of course, it is not hard to imagine that these are understood to be lasting relationships, not rapid successions of casual sexual contacts.

Still, this is a matter about which questions can be asked. Our churches have always upheld a clear marriage ethic, and in this line have made statements about *de facto* relationships (couples living together outside of marriage), divorce, and remarriage. Earlier Synod declarations have always taken the clear position that marriage is to be regarded as a life-long bond between one man and one woman. The public ‘I do’ is spoken before the civil authorities, and in the church promises of life-long faithfulness are made before God and His congregation.

None of the requests for revision contained a plea for the solemnization of same-sex marriages. There was, however, a plea for permitting relationships of love and faithfulness. But is such a relationship the same thing as that of a marriage? Is there an entity that sees to it that such lifelong faithfulness is upheld? Is such a relationship really any different from a *de facto* relationship? Should church discipline be applied if such a homosexual couple wishes to separate? Must permitting such a relationship not necessarily lead to a request for church solemnization of a same-sex marriage? If that is not the case – and not one submission expressed thoughts in that direction – doesn’t the acceptance of homosexual relationships in love and faithfulness necessarily imply the acceptance of *de facto* heterosexual relationships also? For in these cases too, the argument of the brokenness of this world could just as well apply.

The fact that Christ commands love does not mean that He has not given other concrete commands. Obedience to His commands is inseparable from the totality of following Christ. Such obedience is not always easy. Following Christ means bearing one’s cross, including the cross of surrendering to His will and commands. That is how our love for the Lord finds expression. Following Christ means living in love, and at the same time bearing one’s cross. When Paul says that for him ‘all things are lawful’ (I Corinthians 10:23), he does not mean that there are no longer any commandments that he must and should want to keep.

The call to love God and our neighbour may also exert a profound appeal to brothers and sisters to set aside their own longings, and to surrender their will to the will and leading of the Lord.

We may not undertake our struggle with sin by using means that do not have the Lord’s approval. The thought that a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness is to be preferred to casual sexual contacts, is chiefly based on the conviction that

homosexual activity is not in itself sinful. But where we, on the basis of God's Word must determine that homosexual activity as such bears God's disapproval, we cannot assert that a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness is a suitable means to fight sin. We may not combat sin with sin. It is especially in this severe struggle against sin that we may expect the help of the Lord in following the way He shows, even when the cross weighs most heavily on our shoulders.

Where God's Word shows us the way, a difference of view concerning this way may not lead to leaving each other the freedom to act as we wish, with an appeal to Christian freedom. In the end, Christian freedom exists within the framework of obedience to God's and His commands. True freedom is living by the ordinances which God has intended.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp83-96.

4. The gift of abstinence

The requests for revision:

Five of the requests for revision pointed to the 'gift of abstinence'. Not all homosexual brothers and sisters share in this gift. Where the Lord has not given them this gift, we may not require them to live in abstinence. To do so would be to ask too much of them.

The Synod report:

In I Corinthians 7:7-9 Paul writes that "*each has his own gift from God*". In the particular circumstances in which some of the members of the church in Corinth found themselves, Paul urges them to 'remain single'. He adds, however, that where people are unable to control themselves, it is better for them to marry: "*For it is better to marry than to burn with passion*". In connection with this passage, some speak of the 'gift of abstinence', which one may or may not have received.

It is open to question, however, whether this Scripture passage ought to lead to such usage. Paul used his singleness in the service of the Gospel. There were others in Corinth who wanted to remain unmarried, because of some perceived spiritual mission. Don't do that, says Paul, if you are not certain that you can keep it up: remaining unmarried for the sake of a special spiritual status. Besides, it would be wrong to conclude that not having this gift would leave room to live in a relationship of which God does not approve.

There are many situations imaginable in which one could be tempted to pursue a relationship that connects strongly to one's own desires. One could think of a widow or widower, a spouse in an extremely difficult marriage relationship, someone whose partner has an illness, and who meets another with whom things really click. Sometimes the struggle against the desire for a sexual relationship outside marriage can be a great burden. Lacking the – so-called – 'gift of abstinence' can be no reason

to yield to one's desires, no matter how strong they may be. The experience of not having this gift cannot give room for a relationship that God identifies in His Word as unlawful.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp 97-101.

5. Neurobiological aspects

Request for revision:

One request for revision specifically and directly inquired about neurobiological aspects of homosexuality. Other submissions referred to this indirectly. The essence of this objection is that (homo)sexuality is interwoven with our identity as human beings. It is impossible to change one's sexual orientation. And the demand to abstain from a sexual relationship is too much to ask. To live in abstinence may mean that someone will continually live in rebellion against oneself. Whatever takes place within one's brain is inseparable from patterns of behaviour associated with that. If homosexuality is a biological given, how could we possibly expect such a person to follow the way of abstinence? Ought we not to prevent situations where a person lives in a continuous conflict with oneself, is likely to develop depression, and perhaps ultimately commits suicide?

This objection lies close to that of point 4, which addresses the 'gift of abstinence'. Point 4, however, considers a Biblical argument, while point 5 deals more with a neurobiological one.

The Synod report:

In this context, a distinction is often made between two possible causes of homosexual orientation. In one case, the cause for this orientation is sought in *nature*: homosexuality is something that one is born with. The expression associated with this cause is one's *natural disposition*. Conversely, the other cause is sought in one's upbringing and in the environment that one grows up in (*nurture*). The 2013 Synod already pointed out that neurobiological, genetic and hormonal influences could play a role in the development of a homosexual orientation, and therefore expressed considerable caution about the possibility that such an orientation could be changed.

At this point, the Synod committee engaged the expertise of two clinicians with relevant qualifications and experience. They pointed out that clearly both *nature* and *nurture* may be influential, and that these two can be difficult to accurately distinguish. On the basis of current knowledge, it would be not be correct to choose for the one and against the other. It appears therefore, that Synod 2013 took the right approach by not making such a choice.

Evidence from the field of neurobiology indicates that people may sometimes have an (almost) uncontrollable urge to behave in certain ways. This is not to say, however, that such behaviours are acceptable. It is always important to pay attention to the

possible presence of feelings of depression arising from internal conflicts with a homosexual orientation. We may never speak lightly about a life of abstinence. It is important that the Christian community has an eye for the profound need that comes with unanswered longings. But it would go too far to suggest that the church would bear guilt in cases of depression and suicide when it, on the basis of God's word, rejects certain lifestyles.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp 102-112.

6. The exercise of discipline

Interpretation:

Synod 2013's decision speaks about admonition by the church: *"In its pastoral responsibility, the church is to follow the path of ecclesiastical admonition, in conformity with Scripture, Confession and Church Order"*. Where there is sin, there must always be admonition. If members do not break with sin, Scripture points us to the path of admonition and discipline by the church. In the end, this means: suspension from participation in the Holy Supper, and in the most extreme situations, if there is no repentance from sin: exclusion from the congregation.

The manner in which such pastoral admonition and censure finds expression is left to the local congregation. It is, however, a clear given in the Bible, our Confession and the Church Order that such admonition and censure *will* find expression. Christ's congregation is holy, and to belong to this congregation calls for a struggle against sin and a resurrection to a new life.

The requests for revision:

In relation to admonition and discipline by the church, the requests for revision articulated four objections:

1. If it is not unmistakably clear that Scripture characterizes a certain way of living as sinful, we may not place a member under discipline because of this way of living. After all, we declare that where there is no repentance, such a person has no part in the kingdom of Christ. We cannot state that brothers and sisters who live in a homosexual relationship are outside the kingdom of Christ.
2. It is not good that Synod 2013 identified church discipline as the only option in cases of a homosexual relationship.
3. Proceeding with church discipline forms a hindrance for pastoral discussion. After all, the outcome of such a discussion is already clear beforehand: a homosexual relationship is not permitted.
4. In its declaration, Synod states that in case of a homosexual relationship, discipline is to be applied. Discipline, however, is a matter for the local congregation, not something about which Synod is to decide.

The Synod report:

Again in this context, the question is raised whether we may state with certainty, on the basis of Scripture, that homosexual relationships are sinful. Indeed, it is true that admonition and censure by the church may only be applied to actions that Scripture says are sins. According to the requests for revision, it has not been demonstrated ‘beyond any doubt’ or ‘beyond refutation’ that homosexual relations are sin. Principally, it would then be wrong to institute church censure, even to the point of suspension from the participation in the Holy Supper, or ultimately excommunication from the congregation.

The observation that in situations of admonition or censure there may be no doubt about the Biblical basis for such steps, is quite understandable, but it is not to the point here: Scripture is sufficiently clear in this matter.

‘Absolute certainty’ regarding the exegesis or interpretation of Bible texts could hardly be a requirement here. Churches decide and act on the basis of knowledge available to them at the time. In this matter, that is what they *have* done, looking up to God in prayer, and searching together for a sound and sufficient Scriptural rationale, in order to come to a well-founded ecclesiastical declaration. Alternative exegeses brought forward in the requests for revision lack the grounds to come to a different declaration. Accordingly, they also lack the grounds to retract the declaration made by Synod 2013. There were and are good reasons to characterize homosexual relations as sin; therefore a church council, in the exercise of its pastoral calling, may not bypass this declaration.

The requests for revision state that proceeding with church discipline is a hindrance to fruitful pastoral discussion. Why could Synod not have made its declaration about homosexuality and homosexual relations and left it at that, without mentioning church admonition and censure? Over against that, it must be pointed out that this declaration about church discipline fits within the instructions already given by the 2007 General Synod. This is what Synod had specifically asked for. Of course, it seems obvious that one would not *commence* a pastoral discussion with such a step. In dealing with such a complex matter, church councils have ample room to work out their own pastoral responsibility. Pastoral admonition can find expression in a manner that does greatest justice to the local situation.

The 2013 Synod makes an urgent plea for intensive pastoral discussions, according to the mind of Christ, with an eye for the honour of God, the holiness of the congregation, and the salvation of the members concerned. The exercise of discipline is not the starting point here. However, an open discussion is not the same as an open-ended discussion, in the sense that every outcome is, in the light of Scripture, equally acceptable. That which the churches, arising from a genuine understanding of Scripture, describe as sin, must, in the exercise of congregational pastorate, also be treated as sin.

While the General Synod of 2013 made a clear declaration, the exercise of church discipline remains a matter for the local congregation. A concrete situation in one of our churches gave rise to a request for a declaration by Synod. In doing so, Synod did not intrude upon the authority of the local congregation; that will also be clear from the next point, below.

The 2013 Synod expressed a plea for a cautious, pastoral approach, while upholding the principle that living in sin requires a place for loving admonition, according to the mind of Christ. Here it is necessary that the churches engage in ongoing reflection about the way in which such admonition is to take place, since there is still a degree of unease and perplexity across the breadth of the churches in regard to this matter.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp 113-125.

7. The relationship between the church federation and local congregations

The requests for revision:

The declaration of Synod restricts the freedom of individual church councils. It is the church council that is called to exercise pastorate, admonition and church discipline. This responsibility lies with the local church council, not with the General Synod. Synod has therefore gone beyond its authority, and is compelling church councils to take a certain position, and to the exercise of discipline. This also places the unity of the churches at risk.

The Synod Report:

Our churches have a presbyterial-synodical form of church government. In this, the church council (*presbyterium*) takes a large place. The fact that we call ourselves ‘churches’, and not ‘church’, highlights the great degree of independence of the local congregation. At the same time, within Reformed church polity, the local congregation has yielded a certain degree of independence, and has voluntarily joined itself to a federation of churches, which have agreed to abide by the decisions and determinations made by a Synod.

The declaration made by the 2013 General Synod in relation to homosexuality and homosexual relations has no different weight from other declarations or decisions. The churches have agreed to accept these decisions as settled and binding, subject of course to the right of appeal. An appeal to the authority of the local churches cannot and may not diminish the acceptance of decisions made by the General Synod. Where a local church were to disregard the decisions or declarations made by the Synod, that raises questions concerning the nature of this voluntary association with the federation of churches.

A General Synod will make its decisions and declarations, in the awareness that these will be significant for the churches as a whole. That is also why the Church Order

provides that the General Synod may only deal with ecclesiastical matters that have been placed on its agenda in an ecclesiastical manner, by church assemblies.

By means of this ecclesiastical way, an instruction was placed on the table of Synod to make a declaration regarding homosexuality and homosexual relations. This wasn't the first time that a General Synod had made a declaration concerning an ethical matter. Earlier, declarations had been made, on Scriptural grounds, with regard to, for example, divorce and remarriage, and cohabitation outside of marriage.

One of the churches that was seeking a revision captured the real problem well: "We agree with your consideration that a declaration by Synod is to be binding for the churches. However, this is only true because and insofar as it faithfully repeats what Scripture says." The difficulty with the declaration of Synod proved to be chiefly in regard to its content. Most requests for revision articulated the view that it cannot be established, on the basis of Scripture, that homosexual relations as such are sin. From the perspective of this position, it is understandable that a church council could form the view that one particular exegesis or point of view has been forced upon it. It was the desire of Synod, however, to do justice to the Word of God. Alternative exegeses that gave room to homosexual relationships within the Christian congregation proved to be unable to stand.

Some church councils were of the opinion that reflection on homosexuality and homosexual relationships was a matter for church councils, and that synods could not offer any added value to this reflection. The manner in which this subject came to be on the table of Synod, however, demonstrates otherwise. A church council, even with the assistance of its classis, proved to be unable to find a resolution. It was agreed that it was good to bring this matter before the General Synod, especially also because this was a matter that touches the church as a whole.

It is not the *fact* that the 2013 Synod made a declaration concerning this sensitive matter, that is the cause for tension in the churches. If Synod had decided not to make a declaration, the unity of the churches would have been no more served than is the case at present. The churches have been waiting for a declaration regarding this matter.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp 113-126-140.

8. A doctrinal statement

The requests for revision:

Our churches have always been exceedingly hesitant to make doctrinal statements. We have six confessional documents, and these are sufficient. A declaration regarding homosexuality and homosexual relations is a doctrinal statement. Such a

statement ought not to have been made, since it places great pressure on the unity of our churches, and binds consciences.

The Synod report:

It is indeed true that our churches have always been hesitant to express their ‘own doctrine’ by means of doctrinal declarations. That was also the case in 2013. Then, too, there was no attempt to articulate ‘our own doctrine’. It is true that a declaration was made. And that was necessary, because that is what the churches asked for.

It is understandable that church councils will experience difficulty in applying ecclesiastical admonition when they are not convinced that such admonition is correct. However, there is also another side to the matter: in a federation of churches we have been given to each other, and we are called to mirror our personal consciences by (and even to conform them to) what we as churches together understand to be the way the Lord points us, certainly when that way has been tested repeatedly against Scripture.

For other arguments presented, either in the requests for revision themselves, or in the responses of Synod (or its committee) we refer to the Report itself, pp 113-126-140

TO CONTINUE: WHERE DO WE AS CHURCHES GO FROM HERE?

The 2016 General Synod has overruled the requests for revision. Instead, our churches have upheld the declaration of 2013. Everyone will sense that this decision does not mean that the concerns within our churches are now a thing of the past. Nor has the discussion about homosexuality and homosexual relations now been brought to an end. Rather, it is a conversation that in many places still has to make a start. Synod wanted to lend its support to that.

Our starting point must be: to win each others’ hearts, so that churches and church councils will conform to the declaration of 2013. For, in overruling the requests for revision, Synod has made a decision that in the words of the Church Order are ‘settled and binding’. Discussions will be held with church councils concerning the question whether they, in the consideration of their requests for revision, received a proper hearing, also as regards the difficult pastoral situations they must deal with.

In this connection, these discussions may well take account of the fact that while the General Synod of 2013 pointed the way of pastoral admonition, it left the responsibility for such admonition with the local congregation. It has imposed no model for such admonition. Room has been provided for appropriate ways to carry out this responsibility. Church councils who did not submit a request for revision will also be served by such a conversation.

In addition, Synod wishes to provide support to the Classes, to assist them in conducting further discussions regarding homosexuality and homosexual relations among the churches in each Classis. Further, it seemed good to the 2016 General Synod to engage in discussion with other churches about the 2013 Vision Document that formed the basis for the Synod declaration, and the Pastoral Guide (also released in 2013), since in other churches also, conversations about homosexuality and homosexual relations are underway.

The purpose of this discussion is, in the first place, to win hearts for the decisions that have been taken. What could be the objection, considering that it took six years to come to such a decision, to also devote ample time to find more unity of spirit in accepting it?

Truly, this is nothing else than a desire, in deep and lasting dependence on the Spirit of God, and ‘together with all the saints’, to discern the will of God, and to know the love of Christ, also in our care for homosexual brothers and sisters among us.

For more detail see the Report to Synod: pp 148-151.

THE TASK GROUP

The General Synod decided to appoint a task group, with instructions as follows:

1. To prepare for publication a booklet in which a summary is provided of the main points of the requests for revision, and the response to them contained in the Committee report; this report is to be written in accessible language, to present it as a supplement to the Study Report of 2013, and to see to it that this booklet is distributed within the churches; (*this is the booklet you are presently reading*).
2. To engage in discussions with the church councils that submitted requests for revision, and where possible with other church councils also, for the purpose of providing further explanation of the Synod report, and of listening to expressions of difficulty, concern and conflict of conscience, to the end that we may arrive at a common conviction in supporting and carrying out the churches’ Declaration of 2013;
3. To initiate discussions, at Classical level, by producing a discussion paper dealing with the 2013 and 2016 reports, and as required to support the Classes in conducting such discussions;
4. To seek, in collaboration with the Deputies for Church Unity, opportunities for discussion with related churches, with the aim of receiving substantive responses to the various reports and the 2013 Declaration, and to find greater common ground in our reflection on homosexuality;
5. To report to the General Synod of 2019 in relation to these discussions;

6. To see to it that the aforementioned booklet is translated into the English language, to be included as an addendum to the 2013 Study Report, and to make it available to sister churches abroad.