

Greetings in the name of Jesus from a Consistory in the Reformed Church in America. We asked our pastoral staff to draft a document that would outline some of our concerns with the current condition of the RCA and why the path the RCA is walking troubles us. The issues contained in this document are not exhaustive, but they are of primary consideration. We pray God's blessing, clarity, and for the Spirit's wisdom as you reflect on this information.

## **(Part 1) Church Discipline & Polity Concerns about the RCA**

An alarming movement is happening within our denomination regarding church discipline. The opportunity for such movement is provided by an imperfect governance model.

*\*All scriptures quoted in this section are from the New International Version, 2011 published by Zondervan*

### **WHAT IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE?**

Very simply, church discipline is the process of correcting sin in the life of the church and its members. It's how God's people help each other walk well the path that God intends for His people. Paul directs the church toward discipline in 1 Corinthians 5, and the whole of Scripture speaks of it as a blessing to God's children.

#### **Hebrews 12:5-11**

*And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,*

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,  
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”*

*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

#### **Proverbs 12:1**

*Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,  
but whoever hates correction is stupid.*

#### **James 5:19-20**

*My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

**Galatians 6:1-2**

*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

Jesus even goes so far as to outline best practices in implementing church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17.

Lastly, in one of our Reformed confessions, the Belgic Confession, one of the articles in that document articulates that church discipline is an actual mark of the true church.

**Article 29 – The Marks of the True Church**

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully, by the Word of God, what is the true church—for all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of “the church.”

We are not speaking here of the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there. But we are speaking of distinguishing the body and fellowship of the true church from all sects that call themselves “the church.”

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults.

In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church— and no one ought to be separated from it.

As for the false church, it assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God; it does not want to subject itself to the yoke of Christ; it does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word; it rather adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases; it bases itself on humans, more than on Jesus Christ; it persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry.

These two churches are easy to recognize and thus to distinguish from each other.

**WHAT IS STOPPING CHURCH DISCIPLINE WITHIN THE RCA?**

The short answer to the problem is our organizational structure. There are governing bodies in our denomination that can act with impunity, regardless of the path they are choosing. And the rest of the churches in the RCA must simply live with the knowledge that, not only are our brothers and sisters rebelling against God’s Word, our polity structure does not allow us to

correct them, help them, stop them, nor can we keep them from actively recruiting others to join them on that path.

### DENOMINATIONAL STRUCTURE

To understand how the RCA is structured, let's use terms we all live with every day. There are 4 levels to our denomination as outlined in the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America, a book we call the BCO.

Level 1 – Local Congregation – imagine this as your personal household

Level 2 – Classis – imagine this as your local township or city

Level 3 – Regional Synod – imagine this as the state you live in

Level 4 – General Synod – imagine this as the country in which you live

Each level has certain powers and responsibilities. Each has limits to its power.

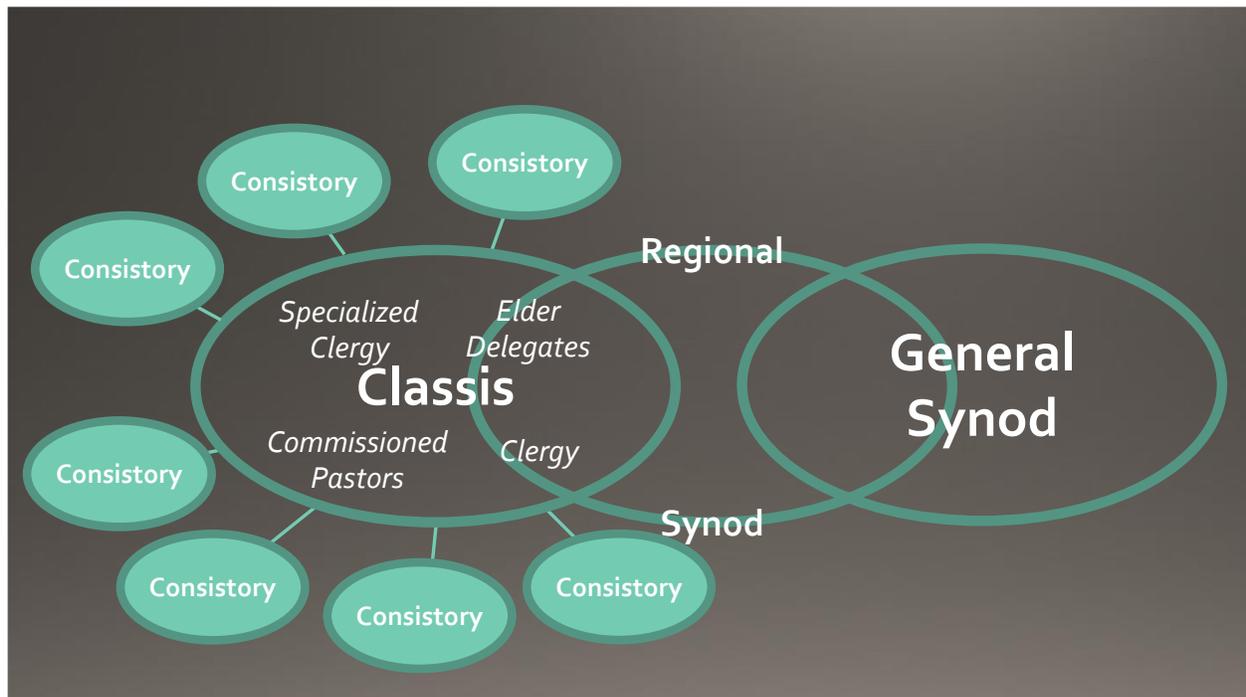
Level 1 – membership, congregational care, sacraments, service to the Kingdom, Gospel preaching, discipline

Level 2 – supervision of churches to ensure BCO compliance, ordination of clergy, supervision of clergy members, support of congregational ministry, judicatory of complaints from churches

Level 3 – organize classis boundaries, support classis/church ministries, appellate judicatory

Level 4 – supervise General Synod professors, denominational missions, organize Regional Synod boundaries, amend BCO, final appellate judicatory

If you like pictures, it looks something like this:



What does this have to do with discipline? Well, if a member of a congregation is living outside of the bounds of God's Word, church members or leaders address it with grace and truth. If a Classis member or a congregation is living outside of the bounds of God's Word, another Classis member addresses it. If an entire Classis decides to live outside of the bounds of God's Word, and no one within the Classis is willing to address it, there is no recourse. That Classis can act with impunity within our denomination. Because this is the polity in place, leaders in certain Classes have been using this loophole to influence changes they want to see happen.

Within our denomination, there are churches actively marrying same-sex couples. Within our denomination, some Classes are ordaining openly, practicing, gay clergy. Within our denomination, some churches are refusing to talk about sin, rejecting the idea of scripture's sufficiency, and are preaching a "new" gospel. Within our denomination, a certain Classis has openly adopted and recommended for adoption a theological stance and biblical interpretation that defies established, Reformed theological perspective, hermeneutic, and Biblical truth. That certain Classis asserts, as fact, things like (and these are quotes):

- *Imago Dei* means the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about God. Today we are learning that God is male and female, transgender, intersex, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, and queer. (Page 16, Paragraph 3, Affirmed + Celebrated)
- In the case of human sexuality, it is unjust for the RCA to compel some people to lives devoid of satisfying sexual intimacy and the possibility of lifelong sexual partnerships, if the RCA does not compel all people to live this way. (Page 25, Paragraph 3, Affirmed + Celebrated)
- Moral discernment is the process of seeking God's revelation and guidance as to what, given our shifting cultural context, is right and good for the life to which we have been called. (Page 12, Paragraph 3, Affirmed + Celebrated)
- We believe that we can discover all aspects of our personal identity—including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—through experience... (Page 14, Paragraph 5, Affirmed + Celebrated)
- The Classis of New Brunswick believes that the Bible alone is insufficient for providing the rules for a modern sexual ethic. (Page 17, Paragraph 3, Affirmed + Celebrated)
- **Does the God we trust, who said, "It is not good for a human being to be alone," (Gen. 2:18) expect gay and lesbian people to live alone forever?** No! Sexual desire encourages each person to find a suitable life partner. Marriage enables us to consecrate our bodies and our lives to serve one another, our community and God. The church sins by denying this gift to same-sex couples. (Page 18, Paragraph 6, Affirmed + Celebrated)
- As Saul sought to destroy the early church, the [traditional] RCA position encourages its proponents to discipline people in same-sex relationships and to discipline ministers, consistories and classes that enable the blessing of same-sex weddings, thereby destroying the unity of the RCA. The Classis of New Brunswick strongly disavows the RCA position as

abhorrent to the Gospel and holds the RCA responsible for all harm this position causes. Classis calls the RCA to disavow this position and repent the harm it has done. (Page 31, Paragraphs 2 and 3, Affirmed + Celebrated)

If desired, you can download “*Affirmed + Celebrated, A Reformed Theology of Inclusion*” at the following web address:

<https://www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Appendix-Affirmed-and-Celebrated-2019.pdf>

In case you missed it, these statements from a Classis in our denomination are overwhelmingly declaring that God’s Word is no longer sufficient for our understanding of life and faith. These statements declare that human experiences are more important than God’s declarations to know what it means to be human. And these statements declare that if you hold to a traditional, Reformed perspective on God’s Word, you are sinning and should repent. The Classis that believes these things has adopted these perspectives as official policy and is reaching out to the denomination exhorting the rest of the RCA to change to be more like them. And there is no avenue of church discipline to correct, rebuke, and pursue reconciliation with the members of that Classis. RCA governance restricts it. Emboldened by the lack of limitations or correction, some churches and Classes in the RCA are taking increasingly radical viewpoints and adopting them as “Biblical” ideology. This represents a broken system, and for our congregation to be included in the Christian fellowship with those churches and Classes is concerning.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Why does it matter if our congregation is doing our ministry and they do theirs? We live in different areas of the country and how does this actually affect our congregation?

#### **Romans 16:17**

*I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.*

In Corinthians Paul is clear that we’re meant to guard ourselves from false teachers within our midst...even as we do not separate ourselves from the world when the world is off-base. The world, by its fallenness, will always be off-base. Faithful disciples of Jesus have a responsibility to ensure that we are walking, within the church, in appropriate company.

As many of the conservative churches in the RCA realize and act on these concerns (many are leaving the RCA), the traditional Biblical voice in the RCA will diminish. As that traditional voice decreases, the strength and power of the alternative voice will increase. The implications of staying in the RCA long enough has the potential to mean that conservative churches may someday be brought up on charges by those in their Classis who take offense at the traditional, Biblical perspectives and how we live them out. For instance, in the Classis that wrote that paper with an alternative Biblical perspective we were quoting from earlier, it would currently be possible that a pastor in that Classis could be brought up on charges for not officiating a same-sex wedding. This is concerning.

## **(Part 2) Theological and Biblical Concerns with the Current State of the Reformed Church in America**

While many will attempt to frame the issues we are experiencing as a matter of human sexuality (LGBTQIA) in the church, that topic is actually just a symptom of a deeper disease. The discussion is often framed like this: “The church used to treat divorced people harshly, but we have changed our approach and we should do the same with LGBTQIA persons as well.” This sounds like a good argument on the surface; the church changed its behavior then, it should change its behavior now. The difference is that no one in the church is celebrating divorce or encouraging it, but that is exactly what we are being asked to do in this new area of culture.

As leaders in the church, it is important to keep the main thing the main thing and resist the temptation to be pulled into the “treatment of symptoms” and ignore the disease. Below you will find not a theological treatise but an attempt to communicate the underlying issues in a way that doesn’t require advanced academic theological training.

### **REVELATION**

(Not the book of Revelation but what God has revealed to us about Himself)

*\*All scriptures quoted in this section are from the New International Version, 1984 published by Zondervan*

General Revelation: Through creation, evidence of God can be seen in beauty, order, diversity of species, how the universe works, etc. General Revelation is something available to all.

#### **Romans 1:20**

*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

Special Revelation: How do we know the specifics of God’s character, will, plan, heart, and reign? Historically, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments – The Holy Bible – has been considered God’s special revelation. It is the collection of stories, people, and the redemptive pursuit of humanity as communicated to us by God. He inspired people to author the Bible to tell us who He is and who we are.

### **CHOICES EACH CHRISTIAN MUST MAKE REGARDING SPECIAL REVELATION**

- 1) Is the Bible the Inspired, Living, and Active Word of God Which Comes from Him?

#### **2 Timothy 3:16-17**

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

See also: *Hebrews 4:12-13, 2 Peter 1:20-21*

Or is the bible a man-made attempt to explain a religious world view, which means that the bible needs to be changed or parts of it ignored as the world changes?

2) Is the Bible True?

If so, then it is true in all matters. If it's not true, then it should not be trusted on all matters.

3) Is the Bible Authoritative?

**James 1:22-25**

*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.*

4) Is the Bible Clear?

Can a reasonable person discern the meaning of God's directives while prayerfully reading the scriptures? Is the meaning clear?

5) Does God Change?

If yes, then our mission is to prayerfully discern what God means today in His revelation. If no, then His revelation means what it meant. If the Bible is from God, true, authoritative, and clear then we must believe that God does not change

**Malachi 3:6**

*For I the Lord do not change*

**Hebrews 13:8**

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

6) Does the Bible Mean Today What It Meant Historically?

**DANGEROUS TRENDS**

In addition to the presenting symptoms, the ones that seem to be the impetus for churches leaving the RCA, there are a growing number of clergy in our denomination who no longer talk about sin, they question the virgin birth of Jesus, doubt the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and some even question Christ's divinity.

There are a growing number of clergy who attest to the inspiration of scripture but are redefining what inspiration means.

- 1) Some argue that scripture is not inspired in its authorship but only in its reading. Therefore, the meaning is dependent on the cultural or personal context of the reader. There is an element of truth to this: how the scriptures change a people in sub-Saharan Africa may be very different than how it changes people in suburban Grand Rapids, MI. For example: in sub-Saharan Africa, the Holy Spirit may convict people to take care of their older members instead of tossing them aside to fend for themselves...in suburban Grand Rapids, the same Spirit may convict folks to be less dependent on things and be generous with their wealth. So, the scriptures do inspire change and those changes may be different given different contexts. But to say the scripture is inspired ONLY in its reading and the context of reader is a mistake that can lead to completely different meanings of scripture, not just different convictions from it.
- 2) Others define “inspired” as inspired much like a good song, a moving sermon or a good book but not as the very Word of God, living and active.

**Your Elders, Deacons, and Pastors affirm that the Bible is the revealed word of God. The Bible is true, authoritative, clear, and it means what it has always meant because God Himself does not change. We also believe God is a God of transformation, that He can and does change the very heart of a person. He can make a greedy person generous, a mean person kind, a broken person whole and a sinful person righteous. But we do not believe that God is transforming (changing) into someone new, nor do we believe He is changing what He has revealed to us through the Bible.**

### CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

Behind the symptoms in our denomination are much more crucial questions. Whatever is decided about the current controversy will boil down to choices on the following questions.

#### Who Defines Holiness?

Is it God, the church, the culture, or some combination thereof?

As you read earlier in this document through quotes from a theological paper submitted to General Synod, the choice made by another Classis has been clear. For them, God is defined by human experience rather than people defined by God’s image (Imago Dei – made in the image of God). Their erroneous argument goes something like this...if humans are “X” then we know that God is “X.” If this were true, then because humans are born sinful, God is sinful; because humans are born mortal, God is mortal; because people are born fickle, then God is fickle. As I’m sure you can see, this is what is known as “anthropomorphizing God,” defining God by our experience – or – making God in our image.

And, quoting their paper again...“Moral discernment is the process of seeking God’s revelation and guidance as to what, *given our shifting cultural context, is right and good...*” (Page 12, Paragraph 3, Affirmed + Celebrated, italics added for emphasis)

The “progressive” (*their label for themselves, no disrespect intended*) side of the RCA has decided that holiness is defined by the culture and the church, not by God. We believe this to be another error. We believe God is Holy, and holiness is defined by who God is, not by what His creatures decide they want to do. Does our cultural context challenge us to look more closely at scripture to discern if we are being faithful or sinful? Yes. Does the cultural context often show us our own error? Yes and no. It might accuse us of error, but it is the revelation of God (Bible) that we return to in order to recognize that error, not the culture.

**Your Elders, Deacons, and Pastors have believed and continue to affirm that God is the One who defines holiness and that, as flawed as we are, He is the source of correction, not “shifting cultural context.”**

### **1 Samuel 2:2-3**

*“There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.*

#### What/Who Defines Us?

From where do we get our identity?

Does our identity (who I am and who we are) come from within or from without? This has been an ongoing core question people within our culture have been trying to answer for decades. We’ve heard about identity crises, people seeking to “find themselves” and now “I identify as...” This is completely understandable, and we do not belittle anyone looking within to know themselves. Self-examination is a good and even righteous thing.

However, as Christians, submitting to God and how He identifies or defines us is at the core of what it means to be Christian. If our identity comes from within, then our experiences become Truth with a capital “T.” You can have your Truth and I can have my Truth. And each of us can say, “This is who I am.” But each time we define ourselves (who I am) we are subjugating ourselves to our own desires, whims and wants. Thus, we define ourselves by something small...me, what I want and/or what arouses me. If, however, our identity comes from without (not within) then we are defined by something greater than our wants, whims and desires...we are defined by God.

Isn’t it actually true that we are creatures, created in the image of God? He made us and therefore He knows who we truly are, and His desires for us are greater than our desires for ourselves. And we trust Him even when He shows us we have it wrong. If I think I am unlovable and God tells me He loves me, I am in error (John 3:16). If I think I am oppressed and God tells me I’ve been set free, I am in error (Galatians 5:1). If I think I am defined by my past and God says “you are a new creation,” I am in error (2 Corinthian 5:17). As Christians we believe that God tells us who we are; we are His children. And His children will look like Him, not the other way around.

**Your Elders, Deacons, and Pastors affirm that God is the One who defines who we are, not us. Our lived experiences, though helpful, are unreliable when they contradict God’s revelation of Himself and us.**

**Ephesians 2:10**

*“For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

**SUMMARY THOUGHTS**

We hope we’ve been able to make the case that the most visible topics currently facing the RCA are not the actual core issues, but rather symptoms. As far as it depends on us, we will not be pulled into the cultural debate and finger pointing surrounding the symptoms because we do not believe this is God’s will for His church.

What may sound like a debate about marriage is not, it’s a deeper issue. The progressive Christians believe that marriage is a cultural construct and therefore should be defined as culture would have it defined. Since, for them, culture is the primary definer of holiness and (quoting them again) “...the Bible alone is insufficient for providing the rules for a modern sexual ethic” (Page 17, Paragraph 3, Affirmed + Celebrated) then marriage can be whatever we decide it is.

If, however, marriage was instituted by God (Matthew 19:6, Mark 10:9) then God defines what it is and who it is between. And that brings us back to the deeper issues for discussion, “Who is the One who does the defining?”

**The symptomatic divide is clear, but the theological divide is core.** The question isn’t who can be married, the question is who defines marriage. The question isn’t about the truth of one’s lived experience, but what the Creator of life reveals to be True. The question isn’t whether we are judging them or they are judging us, but what the Judge’s verdict says. The question isn’t about an interpretation of scripture but whether scripture is actually Scripture.

It seems our progressive brothers and sisters believe we are in sin because we point out what scripture calls sin. This we deeply grieve. It has become clear that we view scripture, holiness, and faithfulness so differently that the leaders of our church have begun to question if we can covenant together any longer within the RCA – not because we don’t love one another – but because groups in the RCA have completely different understandings of what it means to “spur one another on to love and good deeds.” Because the branches of our denomination have grown so far apart, it seems their weight is splitting the tree itself.

Charles Spurgeon, in the late 1800’s during the great downgrade controversy, came to a similar conclusion. He said it like this: “To pursue union at the expense of truth is treason to the Lord Jesus. If we are prepared to enter into solemn league and covenant for the defense of the crown-rights of King Jesus, we cannot give up the crown-jewels of his gospel for the sake of a larger charity. He is our Master and Lord, and we will keep his words: to tamper with his doctrine would be to be traitors to himself.” ([https://archive.spurgeon.org/s\\_and\\_t/dg06.php](https://archive.spurgeon.org/s_and_t/dg06.php))

This is not an accusation of “them” rather a confession of “us.”

## **CONCLUSION**

No one in the church's leadership "signed up" for this...but we did. Let me explain.

None of us want to be dealing with this. None of us hoped we would be in leadership when all of these denominational and theological issues came to the place they are today. Over many years, the Consistory of this church have been watching, listening, reading, and praying for our denomination surrounding these matters. In cooperation with other denominational leaders, sharing their concerns, echoing their hopes, and in prayer together with them, we waited for God to do a mighty work at General Synod 2021. Unfortunately, that mighty work did not come to be.

While none of us signed up for this specifically, we each responded to God's call in our lives to serve for this particular time with these particular issues. As we pray for you, we ask that you pray for us. And together, to spur one another on to love and good deeds.