

Has the Reformed Church in America Changed Its Beliefs?

A Pastoral Reflection on RCA Governance, Recent Tensions, and the Coming Restructuring

Many people in our churches are asking an honest and heartfelt question:

Has the Reformed Church in America (RCA) changed its fundamental beliefs regarding human sexuality and marriage?

This question has become especially pressing as some congregations have chosen to leave the denomination in recent years because they thought this was the case. The short and truthful answer to that question is no—the RCA has not changed its historic theological position on human sexuality and marriage. But the way our denomination is structured has created real tension, and that tension has led to confusion, frustration, and grief for many faithful believers.

Our hope is that this explanation brings clarity, comfort, and a renewed trust in Christ, who continues to build His church even in seasons of strain.

Understanding How the RCA Makes Decisions

The RCA has always believed that Christ is the true head of the church. Those who serve as ministers, elders, and deacons do so as servants of Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit.

For many decades, the RCA has been organized into four governing assemblies:

- 1. Consistory – leadership of the local church**
- 2. Classis – a regional gathering of churches**
- 3. Regional Synod – a larger grouping of classes**
- 4. General Synod – the denomination’s highest assembly**

This is a presbyterian form of government, which means authority is shared among assemblies of ordained leaders. But unlike a political democracy, these leaders do not represent the will of the people—they seek to represent the will of Christ.

Where the Tension Comes From

One key feature of RCA governance is this:

Discipline cannot occur above the classis level.

That means:

- ✓ A classis oversees ministers and ordains clergy.
- ✓ A classis receives new congregations.

- ✓ A classis supervises students preparing for ministry.
- ✓ Consistories oversee elders and deacons.

The General Synod may speak clearly, but it cannot enforce discipline on a congregation or minister outside its jurisdiction. This is where much of today's struggle arises.

Why Some Churches Have Chosen to Leave

For many years, the General Synod has reaffirmed the biblical teaching that marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman and that this is God's intended context for sexual intimacy. This remains the official position of the RCA.

However, some congregations and the classes of which they are a part have chosen to affirm same sex marriage and the ordination of those practicing the LGBTQ lifestyle. Because the General Synod cannot discipline a classis, these practices have continued in some regions.

This has caused deep pain for churches who hold to the traditional view and feel that the denomination cannot maintain unity in practice. As a result, some congregations have discerned that God is leading them to join other denominations or ministry networks.

This is not because the RCA changed its beliefs, but because the RCA's structure has made it difficult to apply those beliefs consistently.

Grace, Discipline, and the Heart of the Church

As Christians, we believe in the transforming grace of God. We believe that God shows mercy to sinners like us, and we are called to show mercy to one another. This commitment to grace often makes churches slow to discipline—and that is not always a bad thing.

But when discipline cannot happen, even when many believe it should, it creates a real and painful dilemma.

For example, if a classis on the East Coast allows a same sex marriage without discipline, the General Synod has no authority to intervene. This is not a theological failure—it is a structural limitation.

And it has left many faithful believers feeling discouraged.

Living in the Tension

The topic of human sexuality has divided many denominations. The RCA has chosen not to “change the rules” of discipline but to “live in the tension”—holding fast to core beliefs while allowing classes to differ in practice.

For some churches, this tension is manageable. For others, it is not. The RCA has sought to offer a grace-filled separation for congregations who cannot remain.

A Helpful Analogy: How States Govern Marijuana Laws

The RCA’s governance dilemma is similar to how marijuana laws work in the United States.

- Marijuana remains federally illegal.
- Yet many states have legalized it for medical or recreational use.
- Each state sets its own laws, and the federal government allows this freedom.

Kansas and Minnesota, for example, have very different laws. But no one suggests that either state should leave the union.

In the same way, the RCA allows each classis (and soon each Middle Assembly) to govern its own ministry practices within the broader covenant of the denomination.

Looking Ahead: The 2027 Restructuring

During 2026, the RCA is completing a major restructuring. Two assemblies—the Classis and Regional Synod—will be combined into a new body called the Middle Assembly.

What Will This Look Like?

- Each Regional Synod will form one or more Middle Assemblies.
- Middle Assemblies may differ in size, structure, and even theological emphasis.
- Congregations may join whichever Middle Assembly best fits their identity and mission.
- Among other things these Middle Assemblies will now take on the responsibility of discipline.

This restructuring is not a change in doctrine. The RCA remains rooted in Scripture and the historic Reformed confessions, including its traditional understanding of marriage.

The Regional Synod of the Heartland

The Regional Synod of the Heartland is the Regional Synod to which Bethel and our Classis currently belong. The Regional Synod's Administrative Team has voted to continue as an entity under a new name:

The Reformed Global Assembly

Please Note: The Reformed Global Assembly is committed to upholding the RCA's traditional positions on marriage and ordination.

Bethel's Consistory has chosen to become a part of this Middle Assembly.

How the Reformed Global Assembly Will Function

Two components will guide our life together:

1. Administrative Hub
 - Handles governance, oversight, administration and disciplinary responsibilities
2. Missional Networks
 - Provide support, encouragement, and direction for ministry
 - Foster relationships and shared mission between congregations and ministry leaders

A Middle Assembly Chair will help maintain unity across the networks.

A Word of Encouragement

We must remember that we are all flawed people in flawed churches within flawed denominations. And yet, Jesus Christ has promised:

"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

He has not abandoned His church. He is still at work—refining, correcting, strengthening, and guiding us.

Final Thoughts

The RCA has not changed its fundamental beliefs.

The tension we feel comes from governance, not doctrine.

As we move into a new structure in 2027, we pray that:

- Christ remains at the center
 - Churches find a home where they can flourish
 - And the Gospel continues to go forward with clarity and grace
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A Brief History of the RCA's Position on Human Sexuality

1978–1994

The RCA first addressed homosexuality in 1978, clearly rejecting homosexual behavior while affirming the dignity of all people. This position was reaffirmed in 1979, 1990, and 1994.

1990

The RCA formally stated that “*the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to Scripture,*” while urging love and sensitivity toward all persons.

2005

General Synod deposed Norman Kansfield for presiding at his daughter's same sex wedding. This event led to the formation of Room for All, an advocacy group for LGBTQ inclusion. This group is not an official entity of the RCA.

2012

General Synod reaffirmed that homosexual behavior is sinful and that performing or advocating same sex marriage is a disciplinable offense.

2016

General Synod adopted the *Order for Christian Marriage* as constitutional, defining marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman.
