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# Coordinates of a Theology of Office: Footnotes for an Emerging Narrative

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Paul R. Fries

Someone recently described the paper I am about to deliver as the keynote address of this conference. That sounds rather grand, and I was flattered to think of it as such, but my purposes today are far more modest. I will not be giving the keynote address. I will be delivering instead what might best be called the *footnote* address.

I do not mean to be facetious. One of the few poems I enjoyed in the otherwise dreary collection, *The Best American Poetry 2002*, was Jean Bouilly's "The Body."<sup>1</sup> I found the poem's form intriguing. It is, in its entirety, twenty-one footnotes to a non-existent text. Bouilly makes this comment about her unusual poem: "I decided that whatever the story was, I would, as life so often seems to do, write the footnotes first and then construct the story later."<sup>2</sup> Of course the footnotes, once written, will guide the story. They become its coordinates. Whatever the literary virtue of such an approach, it seems to me that, when transposed, Bouilly's method holds promise for the work of this conference. The paper that follows will offer coordinates for a conversation on office in the Reformed Church in America. Thus my footnote address.

I will provide five notes. In the best tradition of Germanic scholarship, several will be long but I hope not ponderous. Each of my footnotes will involve an apparent polarity—I say apparent because in several cases what may initially be regarded as a polarity is in fact not. The five concerns are: the functional/constitutive understanding of office; the elective/experiential perspective on the church and ministry; the tradition/mission tension in theologies of office and ministry; the singular/plural character of office; the exclusive/inclusive vision of the church.

## Functional/Constitutive Understanding of Office

The first footnote, concerning the functional/constitutive understanding of office, locates our current discussion in the recent history of the denomination. The current debates in the Reformed Church reflect an earlier controversy that pitted functional views of ministry over against those that might be termed constitutive. Long before the recent initiatives of Wesley Granberg-Michelson, Carol Mutch, the Regional Synod of the Far West, and others, issues concerning the nature and function of office much like those before us today confronted the denomination.

The question of office and ministry in fact has been before the Reformed Church on various occasions for at least forty years. In the president's report to the 1962 General Synod, a recommendation was made asking the Commission on Theology "to study the Reformed doctrine of the ministry and to re-state its meaning in terms relevant to our times."<sup>3</sup> Classical overtures in the following years led the commission to produce a paper, "The Nature of Ministry," which was presented to the synod in 1968.<sup>4</sup> This paper advocated a strictly functional understanding of office. Here function *constitutes* office—today we might say *enacting mission* constitutes office. Although the terms have changed, the dynamics driving the quest for a new vision for office and ministry in the Reformed Church are much the same as the energies that propelled the 1968 study.

This report did not go unchallenged. Although it became the basis for a number of changes in the Reformed Church constitution, from the outset the report elicited criticism. Discontent finally grew to such proportions that the synod instructed the Commission on Theology once again to undertake a study of office and ministry. The commission produced a study entitled, "The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry," which was placed before the synod in 1980.<sup>5</sup> In that study, the Commission took sharp exception to the simple functionalism of the earlier paper. Indeed, ministerial function is integral to office but does not constitute it. The reverse is the case. Office *constitutes* function. To state this in the vocabulary of our day, *office constitutes mission*. And, as is the case with those advocating a functional notion of office, the defenders of a constitutive view continue to make their case in the church.

This, then, suggests the first coordinate for the journey we are on, the initial footnote for the narrative we are writing. Formulations concerning office and ministry should embrace the deepest evangelical motives undergirding both the functional and constitutive notions of office.

### **The Elective/Experiential Perspective on Church and Ministry**

Now, the second footnote. The controversies over office in the denomination's recent past were carried by deep running currents of a much older debate within the Reformed tradition concerning the church's understanding of itself, its offices, and its ministries. I am thinking here not so much of formal disputes over doctrine but rather of a pronounced division in ecclesial self-perception, of marked differences in the manner Reformed theology shapes the ethos of the congregation and of a polarity not logical or theological but attitudinal. One current may be traced back in our tradition's history to the sixteenth century and Calvin's understanding of election and the church, the second to the following century and the appearance of Dutch Reformed pietism.

For Calvin, the salvation of the elect depends on incorporation in the body of Christ. The primary referent here is the actual, ascended body of Jesus—an incorporation called the *unio mystica cum Christi* ("mystical union with Christ")

in Reformed theology. The secondary and necessary referent is the church, also referred to in Scripture as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5, 1 Cor. 12:12f., Eph. 1:22-23). The salvation of the elect, grounded in union with the ascended Christ, will be realized only through incorporation into the visible church.<sup>6</sup> Let me underscore this point concerning the visibility of the church.<sup>7</sup> Calvin's well-known distinction between the visible and invisible church was not formulated to provide a way to circumvent the empirical church. True, not all in the visible church will be saved, but none will be saved apart from it. The invisible church exists *only* within the visible church and depends on it. Calvin relishes the ancient dictum of Cyprian, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "Outside the church there is no salvation." Lyrically, Calvin compares the church with human mothers—as they give us life and nurture us so does the church give birth and nurture to the faithful through the regenerating work of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Salvation is "actualized" through the means of grace, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, in other words through the offices. Calvin writes in his commentary on Ephesians 4:13, using once again the image of the mother, "The Church is the common mother of all the godly, which bears, nourishes and brings up children to God, kings and peasants alike; and this is done by ministry."<sup>9</sup> *This is done by ministry.* By ministry Calvin intends the ministry of the offices, especially of the office of minister of Word and sacrament. His testimony to the indispensability of such ministry is sometimes startling in its boldness. He writes:

Now we must speak of the order by which the Lord willed his church to be governed. He alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his word alone. Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in visible presence (Matt. 26:11), we have said that he uses the ministry of men [*sic*] to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own word—just as a workman uses tools to do his task.<sup>10</sup>

Here we arrive at the core of Calvin's understanding of office—an understanding guiding the order of Dort and the Reformed Church in America's Explanatory Articles of 1792, and one that is closely reflected in the preamble of our current *Book of Church Order*.<sup>11</sup> Christ is the only true minister of the church; the offices represent (in the sense of re-present) him in the church even as the church re-presents him in the world. Better said: Christ presents himself to the church through the offices and to the world through the church.

Thus for Calvin the church is the incubator of faith, the crucible of regeneration. There may be rejoicing over the convert, and Calvin's theology would be put to use in a robust missionary movement, but in Calvin's view it is

God's good pleasure ordinarily to accomplish the works of grace throughout the lifetime of the elect, from birth to death. This is why in Calvinist perspective, the baptism of infants is more than acceptable; it is normative.

Calvin's theology took on new and vivid coloration in the century after his death when Reformed pietism came to be a dominant factor in many Dutch Reformed churches. Calvin, for all his doctrinal virtuosity, recognized and taught the importance of the heart for the Christian. But certain influential pastors and theologians of the seventeenth century believed his teachings on this point had never been fully credited. They taught that a *nadere reformatie*, a further reformation, was necessary. Concerned with the transformation of the inner life and the sanctification of behavior, they made a strong appeal for an experiential Christianity. Unlike many pietist groups in the coming centuries, these reformers did not seek to replace doctrinal orthodoxy with piety, but saw religious experience as an essential concomitant to it.

Historians link the *Nadere Reformatie* to the Puritan writers, and this connection cannot be denied. Willem Teelinck, regarded as the father of the second reformation, lived among the Puritans for an extended period of time and married a Puritan woman; Jacob Cats, who produced a small library of devotional literature, found his inspiration in the Puritan writings on the Christian family; the Englishman, William Ames, author of the celebrated *The Marrow of Divinity*, lived and taught in the Netherlands, where he was highly esteemed, for twenty-three years. Yet it would be wrong to suppose that the deepest roots of Dutch pietism are to be found in English Puritanism. They are rather to be located in the only homegrown of the three classical Dutch Reformed confessions, the Canons of the Synod of Dort. Indeed, another of the leaders of the *Nadere Reformatie*, Godefridus Udemans, was vice president of the synod of Dort, and one of the framers of "the five points of Calvinism" that structure the Canons.

In what ways did the Canons prompt and sustain experiential Christianity in the Netherlands? The synod was called, at least ostensibly, to respond to the theology of Arminius, who challenged the high-Calvinistic interpretation of predestination. The Arminians alleged that this understanding rendered God a cosmic puppeteer. God pulls the strings, these critics alleged, and the elect dance—human will and experience has no place. The synod's delegates responded to these allegations by developing a kind of "theo-psychology" demonstrating that regeneration is no *Deus ex machina* by mapping the psychic transformations worked by regeneration. The Canons are so attentive to these inward spiritual transformations of the soul that the Dutch theologian A. A. van Ruler could speak of this confessional statement as the first treatise on psychoanalysis. Among the human emotions Dort addresses is the believer's anxiety concerning his or her salvation. Can we know that we are among the elect? How can we know?

The Canons answer by inviting the believer to recognize signs of election—not only in good works, but also to look inwardly to discern the Spirit's work. Listen to the clarity of Canons on this point:

Assurance of their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to those in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, *but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God's Word—fruits such as true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on.*<sup>12</sup>

In such teachings of the Canons regarding the internal signs of election, we have what may be regarded as the confessional charter of Dutch Reformed pietism.<sup>13</sup> Experience for Dort is no longer an accessory to the Christian life; it has become its ground. Here also is the theological foundation for the nineteenth century, the *Réveil* (Revival) that moved through Protestant circles in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. Energies from both fueled the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834, an event of great importance in the mid-nineteenth century Dutch immigration to America.

How was ministry viewed in early Dutch pietism? An album of seventeenth-century Dutch church life would offer many examples. Let me give a snapshot drawn from an excellent work by a Reformed Church minister, Carl Schroeder. His book, *In Quest of Pentecost: Jodocus van Lodenstein and the Dutch Second Reformation*,<sup>14</sup> presents the life, work, and thought of one of the most accomplished and interesting figures of the period. Minister at the prestigious *Domkerk* in Utrecht, van Lodenstein became a celebrated preacher, poet, and composer of hymns. His style of living verged on asceticism, including a vegetarian diet, sleep deprivation and celibacy. He preached the denial of bodily pleasures, mental discipline, frequent prayer, and disciplined Bible reading. But the great and, for the time, remarkable thrust of his preaching was repentance. Accepting the theology of the Reformation, he at the same time believed that the sixteenth-century reformers had stopped short of complete reformation, and he called not only individuals but also the churches of the Netherlands to repentance and holy living. Repentance, regeneration, and sanctification were not merely doctrines to be believed but spiritual realities to be experienced.<sup>15</sup> Church for van Lodenstein became more than a body for the nurturing of faith; it was for him the arena in which the matters of faith were profoundly *felt*.

The claims of pietism on the Reformed Church cannot, of course, be traced from any single source. Randall Balmer argues rightly that there is a clear connection linking the "second reformation" in the Netherlands to the Dutch Reformed churches in the middle colonies,<sup>16</sup> and that these churches in turn

nurtured the development of American evangelicalism. A second infusion of Dutch Reformed pietism came to America through the immigration of the mid-nineteenth century, following the *Afscheiding* mentioned above. Any thorough account of experiential Christianity in the R.C.A. would also need to factor in myriad "American" influences from the second Great Awakening to twentieth-century neo-pentecostalism (and should not omit modern pragmatism). But it is clearly the case that an understanding of office and ministry oriented by experience has a venerable history in our own church and figures as prominently in our denominational DNA as does the theology of Calvin.

Thus the second coordinate for the journey we are on, the second footnote for the narrative we are writing. Any formulations we propose should embrace a theology of office and ministry that reflects both the ecclesiological perspectives of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, as well as those of the "second reformation" in the seventeenth.

### Tradition/Mission Tension in Theologies of Office and Ministry

The third footnote concerns the alleged polarity of tradition and mission. I say "alleged" because, as I will demonstrate, the two can never stand in opposition.

Our English word "tradition" comes from the Latin *tradere*, meaning "to hand over, pass on." Tradition thus understood reminds us of a relay race, where one runner passes the baton on to the next. There simply is no Christianity apart from tradition. It can rightly be argued that belief is more than tradition, but it is never less. In matters of faith we are absolutely dependent on those things handed over to us. None of us can claim to be contemporaries of Christ or to stand in an assembly addressed by Peter or Paul. We turn to Scripture for such knowledge. The Bible, that ancient collection of books, has been passed on, generation by generation, along with translations, interpretations, and applications. Can the transmission of God's Word be any less a work of the Holy Spirit than the inspiration of that Word? The *sola scriptura* of the Reformation provided a necessary corrective to the misuse of tradition in the church of its day, but it is a bit misleading. After all, even this dictum, as strongly rooted in Scripture as it is, has been passed down through the centuries since the Reformation—*sola scriptura* is tradition.

Tradition provides the genetic code for a community of faith extended in time and space. There is no such thing as a Christian in general any more than there is a human being in general. We all exist in the specificity of family, community, and culture. There are customs, traits, and qualities discernible in the Jones clan distinguishing it from the Smith family, although both share a common humanity. So does in certain ways the Reformed clan differ from say a Baptist or a Pentecostal clan—while we are Christians all. Tradition guides us as Reformed Christians in the way we read Scripture, understand the practice of our faith, and relate to one another and the world as believers. At the same time, our

tradition has a built-in principle of self-criticism and change—if you will pardon my extending the metaphor, a provision for genetic engineering. I refer, of course, to the celebrated *ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda est* (“the church reformed because it must be continuously reforming”).<sup>17</sup> We receive what is handed over, weigh it against the Word of God and the mission of the church, abandon some things, change others, add to the treasury, retain those with continuing integrity, and then, in turn, hand over to those who follow that which has structured our faith and practice. But what is that hypothetical point at which the genes are so modified that the Jones clan is no longer the Jones clan? A church, like a family or individual, may be called to die for Christ. But a church, like a family or individual, needs also to be cautioned not to sell its birthright for a mess of pottage.

The appropriate question, then, is not whether we should abandon tradition for something else—we may as well ask if we should eliminate the air we breathe for something else. The question is, rather, which traditions do we honor and live out of and why? Again, I emphasize: traditions are not sacrosanct and need always to be critiqued and modified, or perhaps even abandoned, as our best understanding of God’s Word demands. But a tradition ought not be changed or abandoned because it has been misunderstood or misused. Nor should those who seek change fail to recognize that every meaningful innovation will itself become something of a tradition. There is an intoxication with the “new and the next big thing” in American culture, an intoxication which seems to have inebriated the church as well. The new may serve us better, but it may also be an excuse for our failure of understanding, energy, and imagination.

There are those in the Reformed Church today, and I am among them, who believe in regard to the question of office, ordination, and ministry, that which has been passed on to us has amazing potential for the renewal of the church and the engagement of its mission. We distinguish tradition from traditionalism and believe there is a spiritual dynamic in the Reformed tradition of a *ministerium* comprised of three offices that carries greater potential to serve Christ and his mission than the alternatives advocated enthusiastically today. As I have tried to show in my paper, “Faithful Consistories,”<sup>18</sup> taking such a position does not suggest maintaining the *status quo* but re-visioning the offices in a way that is both faithful to their genius and responsive to the biblical call to mission.

Having made this claim, I would be the first to admit that those who question the role of the offices in the congregations of the Reformed Church in America have good reason to do so. More often than not the essential missional nature of office has not been recognized. In place of a living and effective theology of ministry, tired habits and routines of proprietary interests have dominated congregational life. I argued above that tradition and mission are not in fact polarities, but I would readily admit that often *traditionalism* has stood in opposition to mission in the faith and practice of the church. When offices are not missional, neither are they traditional.

Conversely, when offices engage their own tradition they will be missional, for, as indicated in the above discussion of Calvin, the offices have had no other purpose than to represent Christ, and that means to represent the Christ's mission to the church and through the church to the world. These are points also elaborated in "Faithful Consistories." Because they are apropos for our discussion today, I will recall some of them here, and, since I cannot state my understanding of mission and office better than I did in that paper, I will borrow some of its language for the ensuing discussion.

The root meaning of "mission" is "to send with purpose." There is consequently the one who sends, the sent one, and the act of sending. The church's mission—its sending—is not self-derivative: it depends on two prior divine "sendings" recorded in the New Testament, the sending of the Messiah and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Messiah is sent by the Father<sup>19</sup> through the agency of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-34); then, upon the completion of Jesus' earthly ministry, the Father sends the Holy Spirit to the church as the bearer of Messianic salvation (Acts 1:4-5, 2:33). Through the Holy Spirit, the church becomes the embodiment of Jesus' mission (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

What is this mission? One of its defining events occurred at the beginning of his ministry when at Sabbath worship in the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus stood to read the prophecy written in the book of Isaiah (61:1-2a):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

After reading this lection, he proclaimed: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Here we have what may rightly be regarded as Jesus' mission statement (4:21). He had been anointed by the Spirit (at his baptism) to be the servant of God who offers good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and God's favor to humankind. What is at stake here is the kingdom of God itself. The passage may be read as a commentary on the words Jesus used to announce his ministry in the gospel of Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Jesus' mission *is* the kingdom. In him the new creation has appeared, transforming the old, fallen, creation which waits to be "set free from its bondage to decay" so that it will "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21).

If the church's mission is the mission of Christ, then ours is the mission of his kingdom spiritually given to us. The sending of Christ is the coming of the kingdom. But equally so the sending of the Spirit. Where the Spirit of Christ dwells, there the kingdom of Christ is present. The church is called to be sign

and agent of the kingdom. Note the breadth and depth of this kingdom. Clearly, the call of individuals to faith and repentance, their regeneration and incorporation into the community of faith, must be seen as constitutive for the mission of Christ, but personal salvation is only one aspect of it. In God's kingdom there will be no hunger, no warfare, no disease, no oppression, no injustice, no poverty. In short, the scope of the kingdom is as large as creation itself, and the biblical promises concerning peace, justice, reconciliation, and liberation take their place alongside those associated with faith, repentance, regeneration, and sanctification. The mission of the church, to be faithful to its Lord, must embrace the fullness of the kingdom, personal, corporate, and cosmic. Missional ministry and missional office must orient itself according to the presence and promise of the kingdom.

In summary of footnote three, then: our narration on office and ministry must take into account both tradition and mission and do so in a way that does not see these as antithetical but complementary. The coordinate established here can be placed as a question: Does that which has been passed on to us (tradition), when imaginatively re-visioned, offer a faithful and effective means of accomplishing the purposes for which God has sent us (mission)?

### The Singular/Plural Character of Office

My fourth and penultimate footnote considers office in terms of the one and the many. The one, of course, is the single office of Jesus Christ. The many are the several offices of the church, including those now in existence, those that have disappeared (such as, in Calvin's view, the apostolic office), and those which in the future may be created. The many derive from and are dependent on the one. As the preamble of the *Book of Church Order* aptly states, ". . . the entire ministerial or pastoral office is summed up in Jesus Christ himself in such a way that he is, in a sense, the only one holding the office."<sup>20</sup>

It is well to remember that Jesus was not a self-appointed Messiah. Nor was his vocation based on the recognition of gifts. Whatever his inner sense of call may have been, whatever natural abilities may have been his, his ministry began when he was called to office and anointed for it. His is an office of the kingdom, established by his heavenly Father who elected him to occupy it. His authority was not self-derivative, but that of the Father.<sup>21</sup> Question and Answer 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism makes clear the dynamic relation of Jesus' messianic office to the Father and the Spirit. To the question, "Why is he called Christ, that is, the anointed one?" the answer is given, "Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet and teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be our eternal King, governing us by his

word and Spirit and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.”

Office, mission, and tradition, as we have seen, are intimately related. God the Father calls the Son to a specific mission, that of the kingdom, and the messianic office structures and directs this mission. Christ’s entire ministry may be seen as an exercise of his office, a ministry the Lord continues in and through the church by the working of the Holy Spirit. Christ’s mission is “handed over” spiritually to the church, and then, again by the action of the Spirit, continued in time and space until the Lord’s return (tradition). The authority given to Christ by the Father is now mediated by the Spirit to the offices of the church; the divine purposes invested in Christ now are effected by him through the *ministerium*. Unlike Roman Catholic ecclesiology, which sees the church as the extension of the Incarnation, Reformed thought locates continuity with the historic Jesus in the continuation of office.

Office, including Jesus’ office, is prior to the one who holds it. The person called pledges to conform to the office; the office is not molded to the person. We speak of holding an office, but it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the office holds us—and molds us. In this way we might speak correctly of the indelibility of ordination—offices can and should mark those who hold them. One who holds an office should come to view himself or herself in a new way (it is precisely at this point we have often degraded the offices of elder and deacon by regarding them as voluntarism). In highlighting the priority of office, I am not suggesting that the person is unimportant. In the case of Jesus, there is perfect congruity of the office and the one who holds it. Those ordained to one of the offices of the church should seek such congruence. This is what we mean when we speak of “fitness for ministry.”

This brings us to the question of a new office. The one and the many, but how many? I believe that our polity calls for an irreducible core of minister of Word and sacrament, elder and deacon—the *ministerium*—but there is no necessary limit to the number of offices serving the church. Calvin himself, while embracing the four offices that form our polity, acknowledged the possibility of extraordinary offices being divinely created at critical periods in the history of the church. Few scholars today would claim that there is a single, irreversible church order established in the New Testament. The question then is not one of the permissibility of a new office, but of its warrant. All of the following coordinates would be necessary to justify the creation of a new office.

1. A new office could be warranted if it *uniquely* re-presents (in the sense described above) the mission of Christ in and through the church. I say uniquely, because if one of the existing offices adequately represents Christ and his ministry, or if adequate representation may be achieved apart from an office, there is no warrant for a new office;
2. A new office could be warranted if it carries original authority. An office carries with it not only responsibilities and functions but also powers which reside in it alone (e.g.,

- elders admit persons to the sacrament of baptism).<sup>22</sup> What authority would be vested in a new office?
3. A new office could be warranted if it honors the ecumenical commitments of the Reformed Church in America. Ministry has become one of the most controversial aspects of ecumenical engagement, the mutual recognition of ministry being one of the most sensitive points in the conversations leading to the *Formula of Agreement*. Would the addition of a new office represent a departure from the understanding of ministry evaluated and approved by our *Formula* partners?<sup>23</sup>
  4. A new office would *not* be warranted were it to compromise the ministerial vocation of every baptized Christian. An office by definition separates the office holder from other Christians in terms of authority and responsibilities. A theology of ministry emphasizing the universality of ministry might well prefer fewer, rather than more, offices.

### The Exclusive/Inclusive Vision of the Church

The final footnote turns on the polarity of an inclusive understanding of the church in tension with one, which is exclusive. I will explain what I mean by these terms through the use of a historical illustration and a commentary on our own denominational history.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, pietistic and orthodox interests in the Netherlands combined in opposition to the allegedly liberal national Reformed church, an alliance ultimately leading to the *Afscheiding* (Separating), which saw a significant number of congregations withdraw from the parent church. Later in the century, under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper, another secession occurred, one in which even more congregations withdrew. This second secession, called the *Doleantie*, occurred in 1886, and in 1892 most of the congregations of the *Doleantie* united with congregations of the *Afscheiding* to form a new denomination, the *Gereformeerde Kerken*, which has had historical affinity with the Christian Reformed Church in our country. These events are familiar to most of us. What may not be known is that at the time of the *Doleantie*, there was a strong minority in the parent church with an equal or even superior commitment to orthodoxy and piety, but which nonetheless determined to remain part of the "mother" church. This group believed in the indivisibility of the church and found separatism unconscionable; rather than seceding, they formed a party within their church to bear witness to their convictions. Over the years this voice has become increasingly powerful.

This history illustrates nicely what I intend when I contrast the inclusive and the exclusive church. The inclusive understanding of the church accepts that

although there may be sharp differences concerning faith and practice within a denomination, the church is God's creation, to be reformed and purified when necessary but not abandoned. In the freedom of the Spirit, we can live with our divergence of convictions, even with those that might be thought heretical. Of course there are boundaries—when the body becomes apostate it is no longer the church and one must disassociate from it. But true apostasy, the proponents of the inclusive church would argue, is a rare and challenging phenomenon. Those embracing an exclusive view, such as the participants in the *Doleantie*, on the other hand, argue that purity of doctrine, even in the smallest matters, defines the true church. Even if the phrase is not used, such Christians exhibit what might be called a *status confessionis* mentality—they are ever vigilant against what they take to be threats to the gospel.

Is the Reformed Church in America an inclusive or exclusive denomination? Although there are clearly exclusivist elements in its history, I would argue that it is fundamentally inclusive. Before the Articles of Incorporation, discussed above, the church participated in a movement with a wide embrace, the First Great Awakening. Its commitment from the beginning, according to John Henry Livingston, was to be an American church. The schism of 1822 witnessed to the denomination's rejection of narrow doctrinal exclusivity. Those immigrants who joined the existing Reformed Church in the mid-nineteenth century linked themselves to this American denomination. Others maintained an exclusivist theology and established the Christian Reformed Church in 1857. The Reformed Church today continues to demonstrate a commitment to inclusiveness through its participation in such ecumenical instruments as the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Our recent debates over subscribing to the Formula of Agreement, passionate as they were, did not result in a twentieth century *Afscheiding*, as many feared.

While our inclusive posture as a denomination may not in every case be based on an articulated ecclesiology, it seems clear that the inclusiveness of the Reformed Church expresses a theological commitment of the church. But there are other instances of inclusiveness which may not be so much the result of theological judgment as of pragmatic concerns. At least in part, these are the issues before us today. Ordaining men and women not to offices but to ministries, bypassing graduate theological training for the sake of utility, transposing the office of elder to that of minister of Word and sacrament—all of these may rightly be viewed as instances of the denomination's inclusiveness. But do they push us beyond the boundaries of acceptable inclusiveness? Admittedly, such boundaries are hypothetical and exist to large degree in the eye of the beholder. Nonetheless, a community, an institution, a denomination, needs to ask not only how it can become more inclusive, but also what it cannot risk excluding. Can we as a denomination formulate a theology of office and ministry that both embraces the diverse interests and strategies brought to this table today and is at the same time one of ecclesiastical congruity and integrity?

Such an ecclesiology, would, then, to sum up my footnotes, take into account: the constitutive and functional understandings of office; the claims of a theology laying emphasis on election as well as one concerned with experience; the importance of both tradition and mission; the relationship of the one office of Christ to the offices of the church; and the adjudication of the inclusive and exclusive.

These are some important footnotes for a text yet unwritten. The narrative remains to be unfolded. This is our task for the day and days to come.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Best American Poetry: 2002*, Robert Creeley, ed. (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002), 16-24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>3</sup> *The Church Speaks*, James I. Cook, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-37.

<sup>6</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.xxiv.1-6.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of visibility in Calvin's ecclesiology, see my essay, "The Theological Roots of the RCA's Ecumenical Disposition," in *Concord Makes Strength: Essays in Reformed Ecumenism*, John W. Coakley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 38-42.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.4.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, no date), 282.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.1.

<sup>11</sup> The text of the Explanatory Articles is available in Daniel J. Meeter, *Meeting Each Other: In Doctrine, Liturgy and Government* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Canons, I.12. Italics added.

<sup>13</sup> I have discussed this more fully and in relationship to ecumenism in "The Theological Roots of the RCA's Ecumenical Disposition," *Concord Makes Strength*, 43-46.

<sup>14</sup> Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Schroeder, *In Quest of Pentecost*, 75-76.

<sup>16</sup> Randall Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent brief discussion of this principle, see M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 32-35.

<sup>18</sup> Paul R. Fries, *Faithful Consistories: Office, Ministry, and Mission in the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> While I am committed to using inclusive language in reference to the deity, I have discovered no way of speaking of the trinity apart from the traditional language of the church. Thus, as I tell my students, language speaking of God is not gendered, while language concerning the Trinity is inescapably so.

<sup>20</sup> *Book of Church Order* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>21</sup> A number of texts could be cited supporting this assertion. The Great Commission provides a nice summary: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18b).

<sup>22</sup> The office of professor of theology was compromised in this regard when the power to grant a professorial certificate (now called a certificate of fitness for ministry) was removed from it.

<sup>23</sup> Debate over ministry has occupied ecumenical theology at least since the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982). The longest and most controversial section of this report concerned ministry (20-32). The Reformed Church in its official response gave general approval to the report, including its section on ministry, but with a minimum of comment. See Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM, v. II* (Geneva: World Council of Churches), 141-51. The second Lutheran-Reformed bilateral also concerned itself with questions of ministry, its report including a joint statement on ministry and also essays pertaining to Lutheran and Reformed views. See James Andrews and Joseph Burgess, eds., *An Invitation to Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue, Series III* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 24-36, 90-107. The theological precursor to the *Formula, A Common Calling*, built on the work of earlier panels, accepting the conclusion concerning ministry stated in *An Invitation to Action*. See Keith F. Nickle and Timothy Lull, *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 9-21.