A Response to “Coordinates of a Theology of Office”

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It is a privilege to respond to Paul Fries’s paper, especially since he has given the subject much attention and is well qualified to address it. In the introduction, he says that he will offer some footnotes to a paper yet to be written. I saw in what he gave us much more.

The paper is faithful to the Reformed tradition of office, ordination, and ministry. It is also faithful to John Calvin’s heavy emphasis on order, particularly order in the church. I once reread Calvin seeking his contribution to the faith of the church. After a whole year, I concluded that it is order and the Holy Spirit. Calvin’s temperament, schooling under the Neo-stoic teachers, association with Martin Bucer, Scripture, and the times in which he lived made order one of his major emphases. The Holy Spirit gave order to creation at its inception; civil government was ordained so that sin may be curbed and that there may be order in the state; salvation is the restoration of order; and, since the church is the body of Christ and the creation of the Holy Spirit, it is unthinkable that disorder be allowed in it. Calvin writes, “There is nothing in which order should be more diligently observed than in establishing church government; for nowhere is there greater peril if anything is done irregularly” (Inst. IV.iii.10). He believed that Scripture gives us instructions about church government. Dr. Fries shares Calvin’s thinking.

I like the definition of office as both constitutive and functional because I see office as Dr. Fries does, as a divinely ordered regularized function marked by a call to service, the imposition of hands, and prayer. Persons thus set aside for Christ’s work represent Christ in leading God’s people in his mission in the world, and they do so in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Fries is correct in giving priority to office rather than to the persons who hold it. I also agree that the number of offices is somewhat arbitrary and that his caveat is apropos: be careful about adding offices. If we do so, by what authority and reason do we add them?

I like the claim that the mission of the church is Christ’s mission in the world, and I was reminded of that teaching by A. A. van Ruler, under whom both Dr. Fries and I studied years ago. It is indeed Christ who governs his church, and he gives it leaders (Ephesians 4:11 reads: “... and he himself gave” [kai autos edoken]).

I also like the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Professor Fries here is faithful to his mentors, John Calvin and A. A. van Ruler, as well as to Scripture. The emphases on tradition and mission, singularity and plurality, the church as
understood as inclusive and exclusive also pleased me, as did the treatment on
the polarity of election and experience. I was especially pleased by his reference
to the *Nadere Reformatie* (Second Reformation) in the Netherlands, for I have
been immersed in some of its literature for the past year, and by his reminder of
that great section on experience in the Canons of Dort. I also agree that all
baptized Christians should be involved in mission.

The only place where I raise a question is the statement that in Calvin’s
thinking, “the invisible church exists only within the visible church and depends
on it.” Calvin indeed lays heavy emphasis on the visible church and its ministry,
and it is dangerous to separate it in the discussion from the elect known to God
alone. I believe that it is for that reason that Dr. Fries makes the statement. It is
also well to recall Calvin’s approval of Augustine’s statement that “many sheep
are outside, and many wolves inside” the visible church (*Inst. IV.i.8*).

The admonition to caution near the end of the paper is well taken, and the
questions posed there are apropos. In fine, I consider the discussion excellent
and hope that the positions taken in Professor Fries’s paper are given careful
attention within our church family.

Pondering this subject reminded me of a comment of an esteemed minister
in a prestigious church long ago. I heard him lament, “If we only had elders! If
we only had elders!” His consistory had men elected to the office of elder; there
were lawyers, doctors, sharp businessmen, and a justice of the state supreme
court. However, they may not have been functioning as elders should function
in Christ’s church. Perhaps our problem is similar to that church’s problem. Do
we have capable persons filling our offices, and do they function as they
promised?