Elder-Pastors and Deacon-Evangelists: The Plurality of Offices and the Marks of the Church

James Brownson

When I began preparing this lecture, I thought it would be an argument in favor of establishing an office of evangelist in the Reformed Church in America. In the course of my research, however, I changed my mind, and came to the conclusion that we should not create a new office of evangelist. I changed my mind for three reasons. First, I came to the conclusion that, if we added an office of evangelist, I didn’t know how or where to stop adding offices. Why not add every office or role that is listed in the New Testament: prophets, teachers, bishops, benefactors, etc.? That seemed a bit much, for some reasons that I’ll get into shortly. Second, I came to the conclusion that the Reformed Church’s present approach to the offices was sufficiently flexible to accommodate a variety of new roles and functions within its basic structure. We don’t need new offices to unleash new ministries. Our existing ones will work just fine to do that. Third, I have become even more convinced that our present structure of offices embodies a deeply biblical and theologically profound vision for the church.

In this lecture, I hope to narrate some of the learnings that brought me to those conclusions. In so doing, I hope to accomplish three things. First, I hope to provide a very brief survey of New Testament texts pertaining to church offices, in order to illustrate the range and diversity of the biblical material. Second, I want to develop a theology of church offices. To do that, I will first review how the reformers attempted to consolidate and organize this disparate range of New Testament material. In that review, I want to note both the strengths and limitations of the interpretative strategies used by the Reformers. Out of that review, I want to suggest a theological model for understanding the offices of the church in the Reformed tradition. Finally, I want to make some observations about how the current discussion of commissioned pastors might fit into such a theology of office.

Office in the New Testament

The treatment of offices in the New Testament is very difficult to squeeze into any coherent or consistent pattern. The vocabulary and structure varies considerably from one passage and one context to another. We see this, for example, in the various lists of offices or functions in the New Testament.

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The earliest list is found in 1 Cor. 12:28, where we find “first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.” Note that there is some sense of ranking of gifts or offices here. Perhaps this is connected with the Corinthians’ distorted attempt to rank the gifts. While they put the showy gifts first, Paul places preeminence on those gifts that bring the Word of God to the community (apostle, prophet, teacher—strictly speaking, these are the only gifts that are “ranked”). However, Paul quickly goes on in this chapter to make it very clear that no gift can claim greater importance than others. The force of Paul’s argument seems to be something like this: If you Corinthians are going to rank the gifts at all, you have the order of importance wrong, but the deeper problem is thinking of gifts primarily in terms of status and rank in the first place. Because Paul’s primary concern is regulating an excessive emphasis on speaking in tongues, one should also be cautious here about using this list in too systematic a way.

Turning to Rom. 12:6-8, we find the following roles: prophet, minister, teacher, exhorter, giver, leader, compassionate one. Note that “giver” in the list is closely related to the key role of benefactors in the ancient world in general, and also in the church. These are not just generous people, but people in leadership positions. “Compassionate one” perhaps refers to those entrusted with specific responsibility to care for needy people. It is also not clear whether “minister” in this list should be translated as “deacon.” The word is the same in either case (διακόνος). It’s likely that Paul isn’t trying to be exhaustive here, but rather illustrative of the way a variety of offices and functions should be exercised. The main thrust: whatever gift God has given you to exercise, do it with all your heart and all your energy. We should be careful about pressing this list for more definition than that.

In Eph. 4:11, we find apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. It’s interesting that there is no mention of elders, deacons, overseers, or numerous other offices mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. The focus in this text seems to be particularly on maintaining the unity of the body of Christ, and on assisting the community to recognize and appropriate the salvation that is already theirs in Christ. That appears to be why some gifts are mentioned and others are not. One also gets the sense that the focus here is not on the local church, but on the whole church of Christ, extended throughout history. For that reason, one need not necessarily assume that all these offices have a continuing role in the life of the church—for example, the office of apostle.

What conclusions can we draw from these lists? First, it is clear that there is no standard list in the early church. Each of these lists differs from the others. Second, it’s worth noting that neither elders nor overseers (ἐπίσκοποι) nor deacons appear in any of these lists. This is particularly striking because elders/overseers appear more commonly than any other office in the New Testament outside the lists, with elder references in Acts, 1 Timothy, Titus,
James, 1 Peter, 2 John and 3 John, and overseer references in Acts, Philippians, 1 Timothy, Titus, and 1 Peter. Clearly the lists that lack these offices are not intended to be systematic or comprehensive.

Turning from the lists of gifts/offices, let’s look briefly at the New Testament discussion of deacons and elders. References to deacons are very hard to sift out. The appointment of the seven in Acts 6 is traditionally linked with the office of deacon, even though the word *diakonos* is not used of the people appointed in Acts 6 (nor anywhere in Acts). Paul is also quite fond of speaking of himself as a *diakonos tou evangeliou*, a “minister of the gospel.” In fact, most English translations render the majority of the usages of *diakonos* in the New Testament as “minister,” rather than “deacon.” So it’s not at all clear when the word *diakonos* in the New Testament is referring to what we might think of as the deacon’s office.

In any case, we have biblical references that are traditionally linked to the appointment of “deacons” in Acts 6, where officers are appointed to attend to the needs of the Greek-speaking members of the Jerusalem church. Both Stephen and Philip, ordained among these seven, are later portrayed in Acts as preachers and evangelists. We also find references to deacons as an office in Phil. 1:1 (coupled with bishops/overseers), Rom. 16:1 (referring to a woman—Phoebe), and 1 Tim. 3:8ff., where again deacons are paired with bishops /overseers. The link between deacons and evangelists is particularly striking: Philip, one of the “deacons” appointed in Acts 6, is also referred to as an evangelist in Acts 21:8, and in 2 Tim. 4:5, doing the “the work of an evangelist” is equated with “fulfilling your *diakonia*.”

Turning to the office of elder, we find many references to elders within the context of the Jewish people, where the “elders of the people” refer to a particular office and role within Judaism in general, and often within specific synagogues as well. But there are many explicitly Christian usages as well, usually occurring in early church contexts more heavily influenced by Judaism. On numerous occasions, elders are paired with apostles. Yet there are also many examples of the appointment and functioning of elders in local congregations. Of particular interest is 1 Tim. 5:17-18, where the salary of elders is discussed, particularly those elders who are devoted to preaching and teaching, and who exercise their office well. (So much for our easy distinction of elders=volunteers; ministers=salaried professionals!) This is part of the basis for the Presbyterian practice of referring to ministers as “teaching elders.”

Finally, a few words should be said about elders in relation to bishops or overseers. In the New Testament period, “bishop/overseer” seems to be a term used roughly synonymously with the leadership role of elders. In later periods, bishops acquired a different and more substantial role, functioning individually in a way that displaced the earlier and more collegial role of elder/overseers. A number of scholars have suggested that the use of the term “elder” may be more frequent in Jewish contexts, whereas “overseers” and “deacons” tend to show up more frequently in more hellenized congregations. The culture and prior
organizational models in each context influenced the way offices were implemented.

How are we to summarize all this data? The most clearly established role/office in the New Testament is that of elder/overseer, despite its absence from the “lists.” I have suggested that its absence springs from the contextual and rhetorical character of those lists. It may also be that some of the lists predate the time in the early church when offices are more formally developed. The office of deacon may be alluded to in Acts and is explicitly discussed in 1 Timothy, but it receives scarcer explicit mention elsewhere. It is not at all easy to discern when to translate diakonos as “deacon,” and when to translate the word as “minister.” Some blurring of these roles is also evident in the designation of the “deacons” of Acts twice in the New Testament as evangelists.

There is also very little information about how people get put into various offices. Sometimes elders are appointed by the apostles (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5). First Timothy probably refers to an office that is granted through prophecy and the laying of hands by the council of elders or presbytery (1 Tim. 4:14). Acts 6:3 seems to presuppose that the people themselves choose those who were to be appointed to leadership positions in the Jerusalem church. The same is true of both overseers and deacons in the Didache (15:1). In all of this, one should be cautious about generalizing, since the New Testament churches were in a missionary situation, and long-term strategies had not been worked out.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it appears to be clear that the spiritual gifts given to the church and the ministry roles identified in the New Testament were more diverse than the formal offices that were created. Not all the “lists” describe formal offices, but rather functions or roles lived out in the life of local Christian communities. These roles may well have had a variety of levels of recognition and formality to them. There is some debate about Ephesians 4, for example, over whether pastor and teacher constitute one office or two separate offices. Calvin, followed by the Reformed Church in America, sees these as two offices (minister and doctor or professor), but many other churches of the Reformation do not. One has to reckon with considerable fluidity here. This principle, however, that gifts or roles are more diverse than offices, has great significance for the contemporary discussion of offices in the Reformed Church, and I want to return to it later.

A Theology of Church Offices

Given this New Testament background, how do we construct a coherent theological rationale for any approach to church offices and order? On the surface of it, it appears that one can use the New Testament to argue for just about anything. What we need, if we are going to make good use of the biblical materials, is a framework of values and principles, drawn from Scripture, which can help us to sort out all this material and apply it to the church today. I want to begin by asking three questions: (1) Why do we ordain? (2) Why do we ordain
some Christians, but not all? (3) Why do we ordain some roles in the church, but not others?

Ordination is, at the most basic level, the recognition of a call from God. It is God who ordains or appoints persons to fulfill the tasks or roles to which God assigns them. Our ordination process draws its essential meaning from the call of God on a person’s life. Thus for example, 1 Cor. 12:28 says that God has appointed in the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. It is because God has appointed these people that we ordain them.

But why do we ordain only some Christians, rather than all Christians? Surely God has called every Christian to a life of service. Why are not all ordained? All Christians are indeed called by God. The ordination we carry out in the church is not a higher calling than this general call, but simply one manifestation of that more general call—to the offices of minister, professor, elder, and deacon.

Why do we ordain ministers, elders, and deacons, and install professors of theology, but not evangelists, workers of mercy, healers, etc.? This is a central problem in the Reformation. The Reformers attempted to answer this question by distinguishing between temporary and permanent offices. For example, in his comments on Ephesians 4, Calvin thought that apostles, prophets, and evangelists were restricted to the apostolic age, and only pastors and teachers were continuing offices. Calvin also believed that a number of other gifts, such as healing, speaking in tongues, and the like, were restricted to the apostolic church, and then disappeared.

This distinction between permanent and temporary offices has come under considerable fire in more recent years. Charismatics have argued that it excludes certain works of the Spirit from the contemporary church in an unbiblical way. Others have noted that the distinction between permanent and temporary gifts is found nowhere in Scripture itself. I am inclined to think that the distinction between permanent and temporary offices is problematic and was used a bit too glibly by the Reformers. I would agree with them that the apostolic office is restricted to those whom Christ himself appointed and is now embodied in the canon of Scripture, the only rule of faith and practice for the church. Likewise, the function of the prophetic office must be understood as significantly reshaped by the completion of the canon of Scripture.9 But beyond that, I think the distinction between permanent and temporary offices raises far more problems than it solves. The most serious problem is that the distinction appears to be based on the assumption that the mission of the church is essentially complete—an assumption widely held in the sixteenth century, but oddly anachronistic now in our post-Christendom age. But if one rejects that approach, and the wholesale distinction between permanent and temporary offices, how does one decide which of the New Testament functions are ordainable?

First, it is clear that the offices that appear most commonly in Scripture—minister, elder, deacon, overseer—are positions of authority within the church. This relationship between authority and office is key. Reformed theology sees
several grounds for ordaining some roles in the church, but not all. The ordained offices are those functions in which Christ is authoritatively present to the church, in contrast to the many ways in which Christ is present in the church to the world. Christ delegates his authority over the church to office holders. Hence office and governance are always linked with each other. Only where governance is at stake does ordination emerge. Ordination is thus closely wrapped up in the acknowledgement of authority. When we ordain someone, we recognize that Christ’s authority is present in that one to the church. The church acknowledges Christ’s authority in the ordained person and promises to recognize and submit to that authority. The public election and recognition of office holders is critical to their effective exercise of their roles. This is not true in the same way in other gifts and ministries that do not require public recognition in order for them to be effective.

The ordained offices are also closely linked to what the Reformers called “the marks of the church.” That is, the ordained offices are closely linked with those aspects of the church that are most critical for its very identity. Reformed ecclesiology has always recognized two central marks of the church: the right preaching of the Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments (which includes the practice of church discipline). The health and well being of the whole church is critically at stake in these two areas, because everything else in the church flows from these.

The offices of minister and elder are centrally linked with these marks of the church. Here, in the proclamation of the Word, in oversight of the sacraments, and in the exercise of church discipline, says Reformed theology, the authority of Christ must be centrally acknowledged and recognized. Therefore, these offices require ordination and particular recognition in the church as a whole. This is why we ordain ministers and elders.

But why do we ordain deacons? It is noteworthy that Calvin’s treatment of the office of deacon in the Institutes is rather cursory. He basically appeals to apostolic precedent in Acts 6 but offers little if any theological rationale for the office of deacons. He locates the function of the office entirely in the care of the poor.

Nevertheless, one could push the theological argument a little harder than Calvin did. One could argue that, if the proclamation of the Word is one of the central marks of the church, one must understand that proclamation as taking place both in word and in deed. The traditional concern for the poor, which centrally concerns the deacon’s office, is precisely part of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, not only in word, but also in deed. Perhaps this is why the office of deacon is linked several times in Scripture with the role of evangelist.

To summarize: We ordain some, but not all, for the following reasons: We ordain those offices where Christ is distinctly and authoritatively present to the church, and not those offices or roles in which Christ is present to the world through the church. This is because the ordained offices are centrally concerned with the task of governing the church and keeping it faithful to its mission.
ordain those offices which have the unique responsibility to assure that the church is faithful to its calling in the most basic way. That is why there is a crucial link between the ordained offices and the marks of the church (proclamation of the Word and right administration of the sacraments/discipline). We ordain those offices where the church’s acknowledgment of the office’s authority is crucial to the exercise of the office. The authority of elders, deacons, ministers, and professors must be acknowledged within the church in order for these offices to be fulfilled. The same does not apply, for example, to the gift of healing, where the exercise of the gift carries its own authentication within it. Because it is only together that the offices assure all the marks of the church, there is a complementarity of offices. None of the offices can function without the others. That is the rationale for the consistory as the overall governing unit of the congregation, and also for the collaboration of ministers and elders in the assemblies and judicatories of the church.

Offices in the Reformed Church in America

With this basic theological understanding of ordination, let’s turn to the recent proposals faced by this denomination. How do we develop leadership within the context of local congregations? Can or should the ministry of the Word be expanded to include those who have not fulfilled all the denominational standards for the office? Can or should we add new offices?

In order to answer these questions, we first need to look again at the offices of minister, elder, and deacon. Let’s return to the basic marks of the church: the proclamation of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments and discipline. I would argue that the office of minister shares with both elders and deacons a concern with one of these marks. With elders, ministers share a basic concern for the teaching and pastoral care of the flock. *All* elders are pastors, not just those who are commissioned as such. (See graphic: “The pastoral and teaching office.”)

But this is where my argument may become more controversial. I would argue that ministers and deacons share a basic concern for the heralding of the gospel in word and deed. We know, for example from Acts 21:8, that Philip, one of the seven “deacons,” was explicitly called an evangelist. (See graphic: “The office of heralding the good news.”) Part of the reason why the office of deacon is underdeveloped in the churches of the Reformation is that the Reformers thought the church’s mission was already completed. Therefore, the only form of witness in deed that they could imagine was caring for the poor.
The office of heralding the good news (Proclamation)

But I see no reason why we should not understand the role of evangelist, from a theological perspective, under the general heading of the office of deacon.

This suggests that all the local functions of leadership, from youth group sponsors to small group leaders to church planters to counselors to those who run soup kitchens—all these functions are easily encompassed within the three basic offices of the local church. The reason they are so encompassed is that these three offices together are built on the fundamental Reformational understanding of what it means to be the church at all: (a) the true church is founded upon and continually reformed by the Word of God; (b) the true church is known by the proper exercise of pastoral care, both in discipline and in the administration of the sacraments; and (c) the true church is known by its heralding of good news in word and deed.

There is absolutely no theological or ecclesiological reason why churches should not have full-time paid elders and deacons on their staffs, no reason why the office of elder and deacon should be restricted to volunteers from the congregation who take on minimal responsibilities with no pay. Such an attitude severely diminishes the full biblical weight of these offices. I believe that we should have not only commissioned pastors (who, I believe, are elders), but also deacons who serve as commissioned evangelists in new church development. Elders should be able to function as full-time youth pastors, and full-time church business administrators should be deacons. The titles and functions that elders and deacons can fill in the church in accordance with Scripture are limited only by our imaginations.

One sad aspect of the current discussion in the Reformed Church about offices is its implicit disparagement of the offices of elder and deacon. Despite the rhetoric about “the empowerment of the laity,” recent discussion about commissioned pastors has not really focused on the laity at all—it has focused on the expansion of the clerical class, broadening the office of minister of Word and sacrament. The Reformed Church needs to turn from its refusal to embrace the biblical vision of the offices of elder and deacon. We will never empower
"the ministry of the laity" until we give the offices of elder and deacon the honor and respect they deserve and ordain full-time church workers to these offices when appropriate.

If we needed to create new offices, such a move could only arise with integrity either from a conviction that our understanding of the marks of the church needed to be changed, or from a conviction that our present offices do not adequately reflect and assure those marks. I do not believe we are in that situation; rather we need to embrace more fully our own Reformational ecclesiology—already quite flexible—and take steps to assure that our approach to the offices embodies the full richness and wisdom of Scripture.

But there is a further question that is pressing very hard within the Reformed Church at the present time. It concerns the scope of the offices. To put it briefly, different offices have different "homes." Presently, elders and deacons are ordained and installed within the context of local congregations. Ministers of Word and sacrament are ordained and installed by classes. The General Synod installs professors of theology. Why is there this difference? Why don't local congregations simply ordain and install their own pastors as well? Why are professors of theology installed by the General Synod, rather than by classes? These are particularly pressing questions because of the emergence of the role of commissioned pastor.

The role of commissioned pastor poses several different questions to our polity and ecclesiology. First, there is the question of whether this role represents a new office or an extension of existing offices. I have tried to argue that the commissioned pastor role should not represent a new office (since our understanding of the marks of the church has not changed, nor has anyone brought forth arguments that our present offices fail to ensure the true marks of the church). I have instead argued that we should expand and revitalize our understanding of the offices of elder and deacon to accommodate the role of commissioned pastor.

But there is yet another question. Why should we envision the role of commissioned pastor under the offices of elder and deacon, rather than under the office of minister of Word and sacrament? I have argued that the office of minister of Word and sacrament shares with elders the pastoral and teaching office, and that ministers share with deacons the office of heralding the good news. Indeed, one might observe that there is very little, if anything, in the office of minister of Word and sacrament that is not included in the offices of elder and deacon. Ministers pastor the flock, teach the Word, take part in the practice of discipline and the celebration of the sacraments, and proclaim the gospel in word and deed. All these things elders and deacons also do.

What distinguishes the office of minister of Word and sacrament from the offices of elder and deacon is both the focus and the scope of the office. By focus, I mean that ministers have a particular responsibility for preaching and teaching the Word of God. We see this already in Acts 6, where the apostles refuse to allow their responsibilities to be broadened beyond this critical
responsibility. Likewise Paul identifies this as the center of his calling: “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). Because the Word of God and the sacraments are so tightly interwoven, ministers likewise have a special responsibility for the administration of the sacraments. Thus from an ecclesi­ological perspective, a minister is really a specialized elder with a more tightly focused range of responsibilities. The Presbyterians capture this by calling the minister a “teaching elder.”

This tighter focus of the office of minister of Word and sacrament is also accompanied by a broader scope to the office. In our polity, ministers are ordained by the classis, rather than by the congregation, as is the case with elders and deacons. The standards for ordination are established not even by the classis, but by the General Synod, and are overseen by the seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency functioning as agents of the synod. There are no analogous standards for elders and deacons that are governed by the General Synod.

Why is this? Why does General Synod spell out more clearly and supervise more carefully the standards for the office of minister of Word and sacrament than those for the offices of elder and deacon? If one looks at Scripture, it becomes evident that there is a great deal of concern over who is authorized to proclaim the Word with authority. In the New Testament, this authority to proclaim the Word is closely linked to apostolic authority. Acts 2:42 portrays the earliest Christian community devoting itself to the teaching of the apostles. In Rom. 1:5, Paul equates his authorization to preach with apostleship. In Scripture, the proclamation of the Word is always closely linked with apostleship. We see this focus on apostolicity emerging also in the four Nicene marks of the church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

I believe that this linkage between the proclamation of the Word and apostolicity is rooted in the church’s basic desire to be faithful to Christ. Above all else, the proclamation of the Word must be faithful to Christ, and to the teaching he entrusted to his closest followers. So one of the crucial questions for the office of minister of Word and sacrament is this: how does the church ensure that the proclamation of the Word is truly apostolic, faithful to the teaching of Christ that is handed down and preserved in the church? The Reformers rejected the contention that apostolicity is passed down from person to person through an unbroken chain of bishops, and assured by the primacy of the Roman See and the hierarchy of bishops. Rather, they insisted that it was the work of the Holy Spirit to preserve the apostolicity of the church, and that the Spirit works through those called to the governance of the church, particularly when they are gathered together and act in assembly. We see this already in Acts 15, where the decision about proclaiming the gospel to the gentiles is made not by an individual, but by the Jerusalem Council. Critical issues of faithfulness to Christ and the gospel are decided corporately, and not merely by individuals.

This is crucial for understanding the office of minister of Word and sacrament. The Reformers were centrally concerned with reforming the church
in accordance with the Word of God. They were also centrally concerned that the use of Scripture in the church be *apostolic* in character—in keeping with the teaching of the apostles as interpreted by the whole church, guided by the Spirit. This is why the ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament takes place in the classis, rather than in the local congregation. The need for discernment is higher when the Word of God is at stake, and so this responsibility is vested in the gathering of elders and ministers in a particular geographic region—a practical and workable way to embody the apostolicity of the office.

But the Reformed Church has taken one further step to ensure the faithfulness and apostolicity of the preaching of the Word: it has established denominational standards, and put in place a certification process to interpret and apply those standards for the whole church. Thus, there is a "two-track" system in place, designed to ensure the apostolicity of the preaching of the Word in the Reformed Church. Ordination takes place in the classis, with the oversight and consent of an agent of the General Synod, either one of the seminaries or the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency.

This system not only provides additional assurance regarding the apostolicity of the ministerial office, but it also goes a long way to ensure another of the Nicene marks of the church, its *catholicity*. The catholicity of the church is essentially its consistency and connectedness. When we confess in the Apostles' Creed that we believe in the "holy catholic church," we confess that the Holy Spirit continues to preserve throughout history a body of Christians joined to Christ, who engage in shared beliefs and practices that are held everywhere and by all. To affirm the catholicity of the church is to affirm that life in Christ has certain distinguishing marks that are always present, both in belief and in practice, despite remarkable cultural variation from place to place and from time to time. The use of the Apostles' Creed itself is an example of this catholicity—a practice carried out everywhere by all Christians.

It is this role of the General Synod and its agents in ensuring the apostolicity and catholicity of the church that is most in question when the issue of commissioned pastors comes into view, since the commissioned pastor proposal makes this a function of the classis, with no denominational agent involved at all. Here is where the church must be very clear in its thinking about offices. The classis has responsibility for overseeing the integrity and faithfulness of local congregations. In this capacity, I believe that the classis has a role in commissioning various ministries that may take place in local congregations, particularly where the preaching and teaching of the Word is significantly in view. Therefore, even though commissioned pastors function ecclesiologically as elders, they should be examined and commissioned by classes, so that the apostolicity of the preaching and teaching of the Word in local congregations is ensured. The same is true, I would argue, for deacons who are commissioned evangelists, or elders who are commissioned youth ministers, etc. Wherever churches are putting people into leadership roles who carry a primary responsibility for the preaching and teaching of the Word in local congregations, the
classis should be involved in authorizing and supervising their ministries, to ensure that the preaching and teaching of the Word apostolic—faithful to Christ.

But what about the classis itself? How does the church ensure that classes make judgments that are faithful to Christ, that reflect fully the apostolicity and catholicity of the church as a whole? This is where the offices of minister of Word and sacrament and professor of theology come into view. The General Synod has established an agent (the professors of theology). It asks that agent to grant a certificate of fitness for ministry. The certificate of fitness is granted to ensure that ministers of Word and sacrament—those involved in the preaching and teaching office—are capable of conducting their ministry (including their mutual oversight in classes) in a way that fully reflects the apostolicity and catholicity of the church of Jesus Christ.

In other words, by creating the office of professor of theology, the General Synod tries to ensure that the standards it lays out are reflected consistently in the ministries of those ordained to the preaching and teaching office. The certificate of fitness granted by the professorate is the Reformed Church’s way of embodying and affirming the catholicity of the church—the consistency of its beliefs and practices in the midst of considerable cultural and social diversity. The classis brings together those with a broader level of exposure to and authorization by the whole church (ministers of Word and sacrament) with elders, who are more carefully attuned to the local situation and its needs. This balancing of the broad church and the local context, of catholicity and contextuality, is the necessary condition for a healthy church life. Ministers have as their primary responsibility a faithfulness to the Word, the responsibility to ensure that their preaching of the Word is a faithful expression of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that we all confess. Elders have as their primary responsibility the discernment of the preaching and teaching of the Word, to ensure both that it is faithful to Scripture and that it is meaningful and appropriate to their particular context.

In this balancing of catholicity and contextuality, I believe that we need to be clear that commissioned pastors, or any other more fully developed expressions of the offices of elder and deacon, retain this local orientation and role. The difference between commissioned pastors and ministers of Word and sacrament is not a matter of function. I have already argued that ministers share almost all their functions with elders and deacons. The difference between ministers of word and sacrament and commissioned pastors is not even necessarily a matter of focus. I believe that the classis may authorize commissioned pastors for fulltime preaching and teaching ministries. Rather, the fundamental difference between commissioned pastors and ministers of Word and sacrament has to do with the scope of their authorization. Commissioned pastors are, from an ecclesiological perspective, still elders and deacons, whose authorization is local. Ministers of Word and sacrament, by contrast, have a denomination wide authorization through the certificate of fitness process, and therefore have a unique responsibility to oversee the apostolicity and catholicity of the church.

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This distinction between ministers and commissioned pastors suggests two important issues in terms of church polity. First, commissioned pastors can only be delegates to classis as elders and are not ongoing members of classis as are ministers of Word and sacrament. What is at stake here is not so much whether commissioned pastors, as elder delegates, should rotate in and out of classis. (I think they should, but that can be debated.) But the deeper issue is the role and function of commissioned pastors within the classis. Classis as a whole bears the responsibility of oversight for the churches within its bounds, to ensure that the faith proclaimed and lived out is expressive of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. In this discernment process, ministers and elders work together. Ministers tend to take the lead in ensuring that churches are conducting themselves in accordance with Scripture and the faith of the whole church; elders are uniquely positioned to take the lead in ensuring that churches are conducting themselves in ways that are authentic, vital, and appropriate to their context. This balancing of catholicity and contextuality is crucial to the capacity of the classis to fulfill its oversight responsibility. In this balance, commissioned pastors function as elders, and not as ministers, due to the scope of their training and their authorization.

The second polity issue has to do with the “portability” of the function of commissioned pastors. Because commissioned pastors are not certified by any body beyond the classis, their commissioning must of necessity be restricted to the classis. This means that if and when they switch classes, they should go through the examination and commissioning process of the new classis under whose oversight they work. (I do not believe that regional synods should provide certification for commissioned pastors in their region, since they lack any authorization in our church order to do so and lack the structures actively to supervise the ministry of Word and sacrament within their bounds. For regional synods to take on this role confuses their role with the role of the classis in our polity.)

To sum up, then, it seems clear that there are many more functions and roles described in Scripture than there are offices. The key question, then, in our understanding of office is not the titles or the number of roles, but rather whether the structure of offices, taken as a whole, is both consistent with Scripture and effective in assuring that the church remains faithful to its core identity as one, holy catholic and apostolic church, marked by the faithful preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments and discipline. Within such a structure of offices, we can and should accommodate a variety of roles as needed—a strategy that the newly emerging commissioned pastor role exemplifies.

At the same time, we need to continue to be mindful of the interplay between catholicity and contextuality in the way we think about the offices, recognizing a critical role for both. The denominational certification of ministers of Word and sacrament provides a very helpful way of ensuring the connectionalism and catholicity of the whole church and ought not to be
obscured as the role of commissioned pastor develops. Let's be clear: Elders can be pastors, and deacons can be evangelists, but both are local offices, and in that sense are to be distinguished from the office of minister of Word and sacrament, an office which bears unique responsibility for ensuring the apostolicity and catholicity of the church in each of its local expressions.

ENDNOTES

1 There is some debate about whether pastors and teachers constitute one "office" in Ephesians, or two.
2 Ephesians 2:20 appears to assume that the offices of both apostle and prophet are "foundational," and may not continue after the first generation. Likewise in Acts, though Judas is initially replaced to make sure that the church begins with twelve apostles, these original twelve apostles are not later replaced, even though Acts 12 speaks explicitly about the death of James, one of the apostles. (I am indebted to a conversation with my colleague Robert Van Voorst for the insight into Eph. 2:20.)
3 E.g., 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6, 6:4, 11:23; Col. 1:23, 25. The Latin "minister" is a direct translation of the Greek diakonos.
4 E.g., Acts 15:2,4,6,23, 16:4; 1 Peter 5:1 (where Peter identifies himself as an elder), and in the opening to 2 and 3 John, where the writer, who claims apostolic authority, identifies himself as an elder.
5 E.g., Acts 14:23, 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:5.
6 Acts 20:28 seems to equate elders and bishops/overseers. In Titus 1:5 & 7, elder and bishop seem to be equated as well. In 1 Tim. 5:17, the reference to "elders" may well refer back to the discussion of bishops in chapter 3.
7 We see the authority of individual bishops emerging as early as the turn of the second century, reflected, for example, in the letters of Ignatius, who repeatedly calls for submission to the bishop, understood as a single authoritative figure in a specific region.
8 The pattern of the Greek text (repetition of tous de) suggests that pastor-teacher is envisioned as a single office in Eph. 4:11.
9 See above, note 2.