
The Future of Offices in the Future of God

Allan Janssen

I have been assigned the task of reflecting on the future of the offices in the life of the church. That's an attractive trap. It suggests that I might have some idea of what the future looks like. It's flattering to think someone might think that I have insight into what will be. But the Preacher offers sufficient caution: "Fools talk on and on. No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds?" I haven't got a clue what the future holds in terms of offices.

Nonetheless, my place in the topic affords a felicitous entrée for these reasons. First, we cannot think of office in isolation from a discussion on the nature of the church. The notion of something called "office" is predicated on a particular set of understandings of what makes a church to be church. We could think about ministry without invoking the notion of office, and in some understandings of the church that might work perfectly well. And yet we persist in using the term.

"Office" may be no more than a remainder from a Reformed continental tradition. But it does emerge from a way of understanding the nature of the church articulated most clearly in the Belgic Confession.¹ There are, however, within the Reformed Church in America at least two different understandings of the nature of the church that are active and available. Those came to collision in the General Synod's recent decision to accept commissioned pastors as a "ministry designation." At issue are different understandings of what the priesthood of believers entails, the character of the apostolic nature of the church, the place and function of the confessions, and where the church is located within the trinitarian economy, to name a few. That's why I had originally entitled this essay, "A Tale of Two Churches."

Hence my first comment: before we can discuss "office," and before we can begin to entertain initiatives for new offices, we need an ecclesiological discussion. Is the understanding of the nature of the church present in our confessions still available, and how so? How does God constitute the church? Where is the essence of the church to be located?

One may protest that conversation is a way of avoiding the demand of the hour. Why talk about the church when we are compelled by the gospel to *be* the church? On its face, that seems a plausible objection. But it misses the point. For we seem to be at loggerheads on what it means to be the church, or what it is that the church is to do, or how we are to be about it. Is something like "office" really necessary, or is it so much baggage? Not to have the discussion is to cease

to do theology, which is another way of saying that it is to cease to reflect as humans on God's living Word addressed to us poor creatures.

Second, we cannot discuss the nature of the church apart from the question of the purposes of God. Where is the church to be located in the economy of salvation? How one answers that question will determine whether something like office is necessary (and I use that word with all its force) and, if so, the shape or character it will take. If, for example, God grants that the church exist as a place to which the believer might come to express his or her praise and in which he or she may find support and assistance for the walk of faith, then office may not be necessary. But if God mediates God's self through the church in any way, then we are in the neighborhood of office. We may stop there, if God's purpose is to bring persons into faith, the church, and eternal relation with God. But if we go a step further and see God's purposes against the horizon of God's future, and the church within those purposes, then we begin to reflect on the church from the perspective of the future and thus we reflect on office from the future as well. I shall propose that we do just that in a moment. Moreover, we think not in the chronological sense of what will the offices look like in the Reformed Church twenty or thirty years hence, but within a resolutely *theological* future, that is to say, we see the church's future within God's continuing lived action.

Rather than to sketch how that conversation might go, to tease out guidelines for its conduct, or to posit the norms for the discussion and the like (all of which lands us in very deep theological waters indeed), I will essay a particular view, one that is rooted in a well-worn Reformed understanding of office, but which ventures beyond a repriming of a lost past.

So I will begin at a place where our discussions may lead; nonetheless, my starting point is not arbitrary. The most recent General Synod voted to send to the classes for approval a new paragraph in the preamble to the *Book of Church Order* on the "nature of the church on earth." It reads:

The church, which Scripture represents with many images, is a gathering of persons chosen in Christ through the Holy Spirit to profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in order to embody God's intentions for the world. Gathered by the Spirit around Word and sacrament, the church fulfills its call within the expectation of the reign of God as it participates in mission, in calling all persons to life in Christ, and in proclaiming God's promise and commands to the entire world.²

A particular direction has been taken. The church exists, it is claimed, on the one hand to "embody God's intentions for the world," and on the other hand, that it fulfills its call "within the expectation of the reign of God." What are the implications for the future of the offices?

First, the church is cast in the midst of the activity of the trinitarian God. That is, God is at work not only through the Son, Word and sacrament, but also through the Spirit, and not only through the Spirit, but through the Son or Word.³ Once the Spirit is involved, we are forced to think in terms of plurality or pluriformity. The Spirit works in a variety of ways; the "gifts are many." Furthermore, we realize that God leads the church through the community or communion of God's trinitarian reality.

Does God's way of calling, shaping, and forming the church find an image in the leadership or governance of the church? Does the church, in its leadership, reflect or anticipate the communion in which the church participates and embodies God's purposes? The upshot when we come to the offices is this: the offices themselves will be plural as the church "embodies" the purposes of God. Moreover, within this plurality, the offices will act in tensile relation to one another. It is of vital importance that this conference used "offices" in the plural in its title. Nor can one think of the offices apart from the assemblies in which they exist (and they can only exist with assemblies)—together.⁴

By viewing the offices from the plurality of God, I may appear to be moving away from a standard Reformed position that sees the offices as focused in the second Person. Our liturgy, for example, has the three offices of elder, deacon, and minister united in Christ, and sees the consistory as representative of the entire Christ. And so it is, so far as it goes. The confessions, however, articulate the church within trinitarian terms. This fuller way of understanding the offices within the church has found its way into the life of the Reformed Church in *Our Song of Hope*⁵ and more recently in the widely read paper, "Faithful Consistories."⁶ If we begin to think from within a new paradigm, we recover Reformation understanding.

Our ecclesiological conversation, then, cannot focus on one thing that the church is to do or to be. It cannot be, as the denominational "Mission and Vision Statement" has it, that our "shared task" is about "a thousand congregations in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission." There is no "one thing." The Spirit will have us doing a myriad of things. Following Christ into mission, yes. But bringing the ministrations of Christ to the dying; sharing in Christ's presence around the Table; teaching the children of the faithful the meaning of their baptism—to name a few. Are not those who offer such ministrations following Christ into works in-breathed by the Spirit? If what God purposes is to be understood theologically, and thus trinitarianly, then the very structure of the church that embodies these purposes will reflect that fundamental plurality. And it does so in the plurality of offices (this said without foreclosing the discussion of the nature and number of those offices).

Second, it is important that the offices remain plural, that they do not fold one into the other. Otherwise, we are in danger of losing the horizon of the reign of God. This is true when our offices of elder and deacon lose their peculiar places to that of minister of Word and sacrament. For while it is true that Word and sacrament are foundational and essential, they do not represent God's aim or

goal. They are means that God uses along the way. It might appear that the Reformed church is slipping into the anomalous position whereby those with "gifts" are being encouraged to engage in the ministry of Word and sacrament when what the church needs is elders and deacons.⁷

There are, however, countervailing trends that indicate that the real issue might appear somewhere else. There has been for some years a recovery of the office of deacon. This was signaled by the adoption of a new definition of that office in 1989. It has been encouraged programmatically by national and local deacons' conferences, and it will advance further if the classes adopt the proposed change to the *Book of Church Order* and classical diaconal conferences become a reality. More recently, the office of elder has also been given a new definition and is receiving renewed attention. Moreover, strong indications are available from a number of areas in the church of a renewed interest by elders and deacons themselves in the offices as evidenced by high attendance at consistorial workshops in a number of synods and classes.

Nonetheless, we need not think our theological work finished in terms of those two offices. The office of elder need not be thought of only in terms of governance. It can also be understood as an office that has a role in the lives of members in their vocational tasks, thus having a ministry that extends beyond the bounds of the church. The deacon may have as his or her function a servanthood that functions societally, in advocating for public policy that reflects God's justice and righteousness.⁸

Here I pause not over the offices of elder and deacon, but over that office which we usually understand as self-evident, and that we have traditionally spent most of our time, energy, and theological capital on—the minister of Word and sacrament. What is peculiar to this office? Hasn't it been more often the case that we have viewed them less as servants of Word and sacrament and more as servants, albeit servant-leaders, of congregations? Don't we often view them more as leaders of religious organizations than as preachers and pastors and teachers?

The continuing drumbeat for pastors to be leaders of congregations, versed in entrepreneurial methods to gather and grow a church, tells against a view of the minister as servant of the Word and as pastor and teacher. The 1956 proposal from H. Richard Niebuhr has gotten deep into the American ecclesiastical culture with his understanding of the minister as a "pastoral director."⁹ That view needs badly to be revisited if the Reformed Church intends to maintain the office of minister with its peculiar attributes.

Thus one must insist that plurality entails that each office find its own center, discover what makes it peculiar in God's economy. What is it that the minister is about that an elder is not, and vice versa? And that answer is not to be arrived at by looking at job descriptions, but by inquiring into the ways of God. The Reformed Church has offered answers to that question: the minister is to be about proclamation of the Word, the elder about governance of the

congregation, and the deacon about servanthood and service. Do they still obtain?

It must be said that this plurality discloses a foundational strength within the Reformed notion of office. There exists a suppleness, a variability that no one office need bear the entire weight of God's work; nor, for that matter, does any one person.

Third, we have it backward as we encourage the notion that the Christian is closer to the goal when he or she enters an office. Despite protests to the contrary, I hear office often discussed as a prize. Office supposedly confers a status on the office-bearers such that they might have greater power, or be more highly esteemed in the church. But the office exists not for its own sake, but for the sake of the believer. How is it possible to live as parent, stockbroker, etc.? Only as one is fed by Word and sacrament, that is by Christ, and only as one is supported by the Spirit, that is, as the elder encourages and as the deacon wraps healing arms around the broken. Set against a wider horizon, how is it possible for a society to survive? It will survive only as the Word unmaskes demonic powers and calls governments to just action, only as the Spirit admonishes evildoers (discipline), and only as justice is done (diaconal work).¹⁰

Fourth, this is possible only within the work of the trinitarian God. We are engaged fully as humans, but we cannot prevail on our own. We are not Lord of history, and we are not the Spirit who winds its dizzying way through the vagaries of the centuries. That means that God stands ahead of us and over us and against us. And the offices, individually and together, express that reality. The minister, elder, deacon, and the professor stand in a critical relation to the believer and to the world. The notion that all God's people are gifted is true enough, and is to be honored. But it cannot bear the full reality. The offices will continue within the reality of God's salvific and sustaining reality.

Our discussion shall have to focus on two places in this matter. First, to what extent and how do the particular offices reflect God's vis-à-vis the congregation? How does the deacon, for example, manifest not what humans, but what *God* is about with and toward the human? Does not the deacon express the limitless mystery of God's compassion? And that neither the church, nor the human, nor the society, nor the created order can find its way to God's purposeful end without that compassion?

Second, how do the offices, so conceived, assist and encourage an entire panoply of ministries both within the church and without? Or to put it in slightly a different way, how do the offices of the church assist the "office" of the "laity" within the church?¹¹ The barber, the mother, the lawyer may all have as their task to bring God's salvific vis-à-vis to the world. The recent proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order* in fact begin to ask that question in their conceptual distinction between "office" and "ministry" (understanding that office itself includes ministry).

I have thus far argued that we find our way best to the future of the offices by examining the nature of the church and that such includes looking at the

church within the context of the purposes of God. I further sketched a way such a discussion might go, having started from a particular set of convictions. I now add one further piece, not unrelated, and indeed within the same context, but more speculative.

A Reformed understanding of the church is resolutely local; the marks of the church are to be discovered in a geographically discrete area, one that comes under the purview of ministers, elders, and deacons. The paradigm is the village, with the church at center. The offices, likewise, find their place within that locality, specifically in the local consistory. That "local" may, historically, have been well beyond the village. The first consistory was, after all, that of the church of the city of Geneva. But ministers, elders, and deacons are bound to the local; they are so in terms of election, ordination, and discipline.

But what if we re-examine our notion of "local"? Is it fundamental to our order that the local be only the worshipping congregation? Our notion of collegiate church, generally fallen away with one large exception, begins to give flesh to this notion. But need we stop there? This question has been suggested to me by a number of recent conversations, including conversations about how a *classis* might be about a ministry that is greater than the local congregation. After all, we no longer live in villages, not all of us. And the notion of space has changed radically. The local may extend far beyond village lines, at least in my corner of the world. Might we find a place for elders, deacons, and ministers that is not necessarily, or not for all, connected to a local consistory?

This would require much thought, and the experiment might well fail. We shall need to ask how the offices continue to cohere around the Word and the Table. Who ordains and to what? How are the offices held together? And if the local as traditionally understood cannot be given up (as I don't think it can), what is the relation of that sort of local to a local of broader geographic scope?

I may have ventured further into the future than is wise, and thus become fodder for the Preacher's quip. The offices are by nature, after all, tied to the past. They exist in the context of apostolicity, and thus to the reality of a history that once was. But as we confess that that history arches through the present into the future, and that God is Lord of history, then the offices will be molded from the future. How we get there is a matter for the Spirit. But because it is the Spirit, it is we who enter that future and are made full participants in the shaping of that future. And indeed, while the theological work of the church is not the only thing the Spirit is about, it is one of the things the Spirit is about.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Articles 27-36.

² *Minutes of the General Synod*, 2002, 231.

³ See the Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54, where it is the "Son of God through his *Spirit and Word*" . . . who "gathers, protects and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life . . ." (emphasis added). Cf. Belgic Confession, Article 27,

where the church is described as a “holy congregation of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.”

⁴ The claim made in the preceding paragraphs finds a correlation in a document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A State on the Way to a Common Statement” (Faith and Order Paper #151, November, 1998). The paper includes claims that the church is “. . . that part of the human community which already participates in the love and communion of God . . .” (par. 45), and that “Communion is the gift of God whereby God draws humanity into the orbit of the generous, divine, self giving love which flows between the persons of the Holy Trinity.” The church is a sign and instrument of God’s design. The paper is available at <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/nature1.html>.

⁵ See especially para. 15-19.

⁶ *Minutes of the General Synod*, 2000, 280 ff. See especially 285.

⁷ See on this Answer 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism, where all members of the church share in Christ’s treasures and gifts and are encouraged to offer them readily and cheerfully. The catechism claims a plurality of what is offered to and through the church, not to be conflated either into one office, or, for that matter, into the offices at all.

⁸ See, e.g., A.A. van Ruler, “Is er een ambt van de gelovigen?,” in *Theologisch Werk*, dl. II (Nijkerk: Callenbach), 1971, 147.

⁹ *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row), 1956.

¹⁰ On this see A. A. van Ruler, *Reformatrische Opmerkingen in de Ontmoeting met Rome* (Hilversum: Paul Brand, 1965), 90 ff. It is a *Roman Catholic* understanding of office that uses the scheme of natural/supernatural by which the office represents the goal of the human, and thus instantiates a “higher” way of being. This in contradistinction to a Reformed, covenantal understanding of office whereby the office stands in service to the human as the human is redeemed to become fully human in the kingdom, in communion with God.

¹¹ See van Ruler, *op. cit.*