

Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met October 12–14, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in conjunction with the annual joint meeting of all General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council (GSC), and February 9–10, 2018, in Atlanta, Georgia. It also met by video and conference call on February 22 to complete work in progress for inclusion in this report.

The COT is privileged to do this work for the church and grateful for the opportunity to serve in this way. The commission's primary task this year was assigned by General Synod 2017; however, the commission also continued discussion of several topics of theological significance to the church.

Referral Regarding a Theology of Office at Assemblies

From General Synod 2015, R-51 directed the General Synod Council to create a task force to bring a proposal to General Synod for changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* regarding the creation of diaconal assemblies at the classis level; and further, that the task force report on subsequent action that may be needed at the regional synod and General Synod levels (*MGS 2015*, p. 242).

During General Synod 2017, the report of the Diaconal Assemblies Task Force included two recommendations. The first was “to encourage classes and regional synods to form diaconal conferences in all the assemblies of the church, for the purposes of collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries; and further, to instruct the general secretary to help facilitate the creation of at least one such diaconal conference utilizing Transformed & Transforming funding” (*MGS 2017*, R 17-15, p. 89). The recommendation was adopted. The second recommendation was to include deacons in all assemblies of the church (classis, regional synod, and General Synod) through a local option that authorized consistories to choose whether to delegate an elder or a deacon—a change from permitting only elders to serve as delegates (*MGS 2017*, R 17-16, pp. 91–94). The second recommendation was referred to the Commission on Theology.

In response to General Synod 2017 (“To refer R 17-16 to the Commission on Theology for the review of the matter of office at assemblies and report back to General Synod 2018,” *MGS 2017*, p. 94), and in its desire to serve the church well, the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on History, reviewed the matter of a Reformed theology of office at assemblies and presents the following paper.

THE NATURE OF OFFICE AND ASSEMBLY

Overview

Current denominational discussions reveal questions about the role of ministers, elders, and deacons at classis, regional synod, and General Synod. The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is governance. The three offices of minister, elder, and deacon are equal in dignity, but they are neither the same nor interchangeable. Following the New Testament, the Reformed tradition affirms that, unlike deacons, elders bear the burden of governance. A change of the composition of classis, regional synod, and General Synod would entail a change of the very nature and purpose of those assemblies. The recommendation of this commission is to affirm the Reformed principles outlined in the paper, “The Nature of Office and Assembly,” that offices

are not interchangeable and that, as currently structured, the higher assemblies require the specific contributions of those gifted and called to the offices of elder and minister of Word and sacrament.

Introduction

A few elders and ministers representing three churches are seated around a table, coffee in hand, waiting for the General Synod meeting to begin. To everyone's relief, there are no contentious issues on the day's agenda. As the group settles in, one elder cautiously asks, "If everything is going well, do we really have to meet?"

A few others at the table look shocked, but most look curious, their eyes glancing toward one of the ministers. The unspoken question hangs in the air: WHY are we here? Why are WE here? What is the purpose of these people gathering in this group?

This table shares these questions with many in our denomination. Competing accounts differ on why we gather as classes, regional synods, and General Synod, as well as on who should be present at these assemblies and what qualifies them to be present. At every level of our polity, people are asking WHY are we here? And why are WE here?

This paper will argue that a Reformed theology of assembly grows out of a Reformed theology of office. After a brief overview of our current conversations around office and assembly, it will examine two different visions for the nature of ecclesiastical office, before answering why we have assemblies in the church.

Current Conversations on Office and Assembly

Our current discussions reveal questions about the role of ministers, elders, and deacons at classis, regional synod, and General Synod. For decades, we have debated whether deacons should be included in these higher assemblies. A consistory is made up of ministers, elders, and deacons. Why should classis only have elders and ministers? Should the deacons be included, especially when so much of the ministry discussed at the higher assemblies is seemingly *diaconal* in nature—namely, ministries of “mercy, service, and outreach”?¹ Is the work of the classis more akin to the board of elders, which would not require the presence of deacons? Much ink has been spilled, but the issue has not been settled. Beneath the presenting question of deacon inclusion are the deeper questions about who should go to our assemblies and why.

More recently, the manner of how commissioned pastors should be included at higher assemblies has sharpened these questions. A commissioned pastor is an elder who has been commissioned to a particular ministry within the bounds of a classis. Commissioned pastors are members of that classis for the duration of their commission. How should they go to General Synod: 1) As one of the members of classis, all the rest of whom are ministers; or 2) as one of the elders, none of whom is a member of classis? A paper authored by the Commission on Theology in 2017, “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies,” argued that commissioned pastors ought to attend General Synod in the office to which they have been ordained: elder.²

These various discussions reveal a need for a more integrated understanding of the relationship between a Reformed understanding of church office and a Reformed understanding of the assemblies of the church.

Two Visions of Ecclesiastical Office

The challenge of a theology of ecclesiastical office centers on the offices' relationship to the common ministry of the church and the ongoing ministry of Christ. Every Christian receives a ministry. As our liturgy says, "By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work."³ On the one hand, there are those who argue that ministers, elders, and deacons are simply participating in this common ministry of the church. They have no special authority or representative function. These office-bearers simply exercise a particular set of gifts for ministry. Office is functional in nature. The ministers, elders, and deacons are just like every other member of the congregation but happen to do this particular service based upon the calling and equipping of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there are those who favor a more "sacramental" understanding of office, whereby the offices represent Christ in a strong sense and come with the authority of Christ himself. Thus, the work of the minister, elder, and deacon is different from the ordinary ministry of the non-ordained person and should be more closely identified with the ongoing ministry of Christ.

The Reformed Church has often undertaken the difficult task of navigating between these two poles. The offices cannot simply be identified with the ministry given to all believers. Instead, ministers, elders, and deacons are "set apart for a ministry."⁴ They "represent Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit." At the same time, ecclesiastical office is one of "servanthood and service."⁵ It is a calling through which the ordinary ministry of the church is built up. It is never merely naked authority or a title devoid of responsibilities. The Reformed Church has sought to avoid both of these extremes.

However, our recent discussion has often brought more confusion than clarity.

An initial study, "The Nature of the Ministry,"⁶ presented a functional view of ecclesiastical office: ministers, elders, and deacons were called not to an office, with its "rights and privileges," but to do the particular task of ministry, with its emphasis on service. The study lamented the current church structures that, it argued, drew sharp distinctions between clergy and laity, privileged authority over service, and were artifacts of the seventeenth century. The paper argued that a functional view of office is rooted in the New Testament. Christ is the head of his body, the church, and all believers are equal members of that body. "There is no hierarchy of members—'The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you.' The only distinctions are those of function or service."⁷ According to 1 Corinthians 12, all members are equally important in the body but have their specific gifts for service. Ministry is the responsibility of the whole church and can be structured in different ways to accomplish this goal. The various different lists of functions in the New Testament highlight this flexibility. The Holy Spirit calls and equips people for the common ministry of the church. "There is no one biblical form" of church government.⁸ The special forms of service that we call "offices" may change as the Spirit leads the church into new contexts.

"The Nature of the Ministry" argues for removing the language of ordination from the Reformed Church Constitution and practice and replacing it with the language of "commissioning." Ordination is not an "indelible mark" placed upon the one ordained. A functional view of ministry means that one only inhabits the office during the period in which one is serving in that function. Commissioning would end when the service in that position ends, and one would need to be recommissioned in each subsequent ministry. In this way, the paper sought to emphasize the common ministry of all Christians by virtue of their baptism. The various officeholders in the church exist to serve the church in its common ministry. The distinction between officeholders

and the rest of the congregation is a practical one that exists solely for equipping the church in its common ministry.

A subsequent study, “The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry,”⁹ presented both a response and a clarification to this purely functional view of ministry. Offices are the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church; they include specific functions but cannot be reduced to function alone. “Function is an important aspect of office, but it is not an adequate definition of office.”¹⁰ In the Old Testament as well as the New, the people of God were given particular offices to serve as a continuing authority in the church. The Holy Spirit came upon and anointed Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings. Jesus is the true fulfillment of these offices, and his Spirit has come upon the church. However, not all gifts of the Spirit are the same. Even in a church filled with the Spirit, there is need for particular gifts “for the purpose of quickening and directing all other gifts.”¹¹ The frequent mention of elders, deacons, and bishops/overseers in the New Testament attests to the reality of what we today call offices. While they include particular functions, offices are given by God to the church to “represent, interpret, and proclaim the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ through the generations, and in doing so, to govern the church authoritatively by his grace and according to his purposes.”¹² The offices of minister, elder, and deacon represent Christ and his authority to the church. They are the God-given means by which Christ exercises his lordship over the church in a continuous way.

“The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry” argues for retaining the language of ordination. Ordination is neither an “indelible mark” whereby the ordained is given special grace, nor merely a prayer of blessing for someone about to undertake the task of ministry. Instead, ordination is a setting apart of an individual for a particular duty. “By it the church sets apart for specific duties those in whom it sees the gifts and divine calling requisite for the ministry of the gospel of grace and the authority necessary to govern and serve God’s people.”¹³ Ordination is a consecration. The one who is ordained is presented before God as a holy, living sacrifice before the Holy Spirit to be filled and strengthened and before the church as one with the calling and gifts needed for the office. Ordination is also a legitimation. The one who is ordained is now authorized to perform the tasks of his or her office.

These two papers share many common commitments. Both claim that Christ is the prototype and source of Christian ministry. Both seek to emphasize ministry as service instead of privilege. Both seek to honor the common ministry given to the church by Christ. Both reject ordination as an “indelible mark” and the stark division between clergy and laity.

However, there are numerous tensions between the papers. Most significantly, they differ on whether the offices of minister, elder, and deacon should continue as offices and whether those who serve in those offices immediately renounce their office upon leaving their post. Whereas “The Nature of the Ministry” sees an antithesis between function and office, “The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry” sees them as compatible concepts. Additionally, there is disagreement on the nature of the church’s spiritual power. The initial study pushes strongly against any form of hierarchy within the body of Christ, so that no believer can truly stand in authority over another. However, the second study sees the proper exercise of authority by those ordained to office as part of the way Christ exercises authority over the church. While they agree on the source of ministry (Christ) and the goal of ministry (the building up of Christ’s church), a vast chasm separates them regarding how Christ accomplishes this work and the role ministers, elders, and deacons play.

Recommended changes to the *Book of Church Order* stemming from “The Nature of the Ministry” were passed by the 1973 General Synod and confirmed by the classes in 1974.¹⁴

Perhaps the most prominent of these, still in our current Preamble, is the claim that “the ecclesiastical offices which the Reformed Church deems necessary for its ordering are understood to be essentially functional in nature, and the term ‘office’ is everywhere viewed in terms of service.”¹⁵ Since then, various smaller changes have been made to other areas of the *BCO*, cumulatively pushing our polity in the direction outlined in “The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry.”

The way forward, it seems, is to remember that office and function should not be set in opposition. In every instance, officeholders within the church carry out their ministry *in service* to the body of Christ, which is to say that they *do not carry out ministry* as the exercise of power. Following the New Testament, the Reformed tradition affirms that, unlike deacons, elders bear the burden of governance. As the doctrinal standards, Liturgy, and the *Book of Church Order* teach, elders must be prepared to set forth the doctrine, worship, and government of the church. Accordingly, unlike deacons, elders and ministers are particularly responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church. This ministry (function) is itself the outworking of the calling, gifting of the Spirit, and election to the office of elder or minister. A Reformed understanding of office is one that maintains a vision of parity rather than hierarchy. When this critical insight is lost, a political rather than properly ecclesial understanding of authority and power threatens the proper exercise of office. All who are ordained to offices in the church carry out their ministry in service to Christ through the anointing and guidance of the Spirit. The church is one ministry—the ministry of Christ. The parity under consideration is manifest in exercise of ecclesiastical authority by “presbyters” or “elders.” Accordingly, ministers and elders share equally in the responsibility to govern the church. Indeed, this is the case at “higher” assemblies—classes, regional synods, and the General Synod—where minister and elder delegates exercise the ministry of governance.

The Nature of Ecclesiastical Assembly

Church governance is a matter of wisdom rather than divine law. There were no “classes” or “synods,” as we know them, in the New Testament. They were not needed, because the church still had the apostles, who visited, instructed, and guided the churches. In addition to the whole church, each individual church can rightly be called the “temple of God” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16), the “bride of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2), and the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). There is no hierarchy between churches but a fundamental parity between them. Each church is equally a part of the larger church and believers constitute the united body of Christ through union with an individual church. These various churches, while independent, were in relationship to one another through mutual prayer, mutual support, and the teaching of the apostles. These churches gathered among themselves to settle disputes but also, on occasion, sent delegates to other churches to settle disputes. The gatherings of Acts 1, 6, 15, and 21 demonstrate that “synod” gatherings are permitted by Scripture even if they are not mandated.¹⁶ The synodical structure of the church is not necessary for the essence of church but is permitted and necessary for the well-being of the church.¹⁷

The desire to uphold the clear commands of Scripture across the broad communions of the church led to the development of classes and synods. The church is to “[make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). The one body of Christ must not be torn asunder, nor should it be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). The church is to maintain the truth of the gospel in the face of false teaching (2 Timothy 4:3-4; Acts 20:28-30; 2 Peter 3:14-18; 1 John 4:1-6; Matthew 7:15-20), correct faults for the purpose of living faithfully (1 Timothy 5:1-2; Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2

Timothy 3:16, 4:2), continue to reach out in mission (Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8; Acts 13:47; Romans 10:13-14), and care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan (Matthew 25:35; Luke 4:18, 14:14; 1 John 3:16-17; James 1:27–2:6; Acts 24:17). In doing these things, “we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15, NIV). On a local level, Christ has given the church the offices of minister, elder, and deacon to bear witness to Christ’s ongoing ministry and guide the common ministry of the church into flourishing and faithfulness. As Herman Bavinck says, “The office does not suppress the gifts [of the church] but, rather, only guides them.”¹⁸ The ministers teach and admonish so that the garden of the Lord might be watered and produce much fruit. The elders exercise governance so that the sheep might be protected from wolves and faithfully follow the voice of the good shepherd. The deacons take leadership in mercy and compassion to free the oppressed and preach good news to the poor. Each office fulfills its calling so that the body grows up into maturity. Again, in the words of Bavinck:

The church is a field that needs to be constantly weeded, a tree that must be pruned at the proper time, a flock that must be led and pastured, a house that requires constant renovation, a bride who must be prepared to be presented as a pure virgin to her husband. There are the sick, the dying, the tested, the grieving; those who are under attack, conflicted, in doubt, fallen, imprisoned, and so forth, who need teaching and instruction, admonition and consolation. And even apart from these things, the church must increase in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁹

In order that this might be so, Christ gave his church apostles, prophets, and evangelists and continues to give the church ministers, elders, and deacons (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3; 1 Peter 5). On a local level, the three offices of deacon, minister, and elder aid the congregation in carrying out the mission of its head, Jesus Christ. “Together they enable the whole mission of the church. Everything in the church will be done decently and in order when faithful persons are called to office, and responsibly fulfill their charge.”²⁰

The ordinary ministry of ministers, elders, and deacons takes place within churches and communities. But how does the church maintain unity of doctrine, discipline, and worship across its breadth, while also responding faithfully and as one to the particular challenges of this historical moment? This unity is found in Christ and secured by Christ. He is the sole head of the church and has united his church into one body. Yet, the way Christ exercises this headship has been conceived in different ways. The Roman Catholic Church maintains unity of doctrine, life, and witness through hierarchy. The unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of any given church is maintained by its communion with and submission to its bishop and, particularly, through the bishop of Rome. One congregation maintains its relationship with the head of the church, Christ, by maintaining its relationship with Christ’s vicar, the Pope. The Reformation rejected this formulation for at least two reasons and has recognized that this governance is exercised through the offices of minister and elder. First, the Reformation denied that the apostolic office continued in the person of the Pope. The office of apostle was an extraordinary office that ceased upon the death of the first apostles. The apostolic character of the church is maintained by its faithfulness to the witness of the apostles (Old and New Testaments), not by submitting to their successors (papacy). Second, the Reformation denied the hierarchy of various churches. One church does not have inherent authority over another. Whether a church was large, was home to a prominent minister, or was placed in a prominent location did not give it authority over any other church. Even parent churches were not of higher authority than the churches they planted. The churches were bound together, not by unity under the bishop of Rome and the churches under his authority, but under the authority of the apostolic teaching, the Word of God.

The stewardship of this apostolic teaching and the governance of the body of Christ were exercised through the ministry of ministers and elders. The three offices of minister, elder, and deacon are equal in dignity, yet remain distinct. All three are offices of “servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit.”²¹ All three serve, all three represent Christ, and all three are empowered by the action of the Holy Spirit. Yet, these three offices are neither the same nor interchangeable. “The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way.”²² Elders are “to study God’s Word, to oversee the household of faith, to encourage spiritual growth, to maintain loving discipline, and to provide for the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments.”²³ Deacons “are set apart for a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach.”²⁴ Both elders and ministers are charged with three main tasks: Word, sacrament, and discipline. They both proclaim the Word and guard the proclamation of the Word from error and abuse. They both provide for the administration of the sacraments and guard the sacraments from being profaned. They exercise discipline. The ministry of mercy, service, and outreach performed by the deacon is vital for the health of the church. It is a calling from God and of immense value for the life and witness of the church in the world. Yet, these three offices are different and fulfill different callings within the body of Christ.

Yet how could this unity of doctrine, life, and witness be maintained beyond the local level to the larger church? In other words, how could Protestants, who maintain the Scriptures as the only rule for faith and life, hold to both the apostolicity and catholicity of the church? The sixteenth-century church developed synods in response to this problem.

Synodical church government first developed in France. Meetings of pastors had taken place in Zurich, Geneva, and the Lutheran church from early in the Reformation. However, it was the Huguenots who first gathered for a synod in Paris on May 26, 1559. The church in France was expanding quickly, and the synod gathered to adopt a common confession and church order. Both historically and ontologically, the General Synod was prior to the other higher assemblies. The General Synod created provincial synods and, in 1572, created the first classes.²⁵ National synods were gathered to maintain unity of doctrine, worship, and discipline so that the local churches could be united in mission.

The Dutch Reformed churches were one of many Reformed bodies—including those in Poland, Hungary, Germany, Scotland, and England—later to adopt synodical church government. However, almost upon its inception, there were objections to the structure of synods. It was believed to reintroduce hierarchy into the church and promote the tyranny of the synod over the individual church.

The assemblies of the church actually serve to subvert hierarchy. The Preamble to the *BCO* states that there are three kinds of authority exercised by the church: ministerial, declarative, and spiritual. In particular, the spiritual authority of the church “is the right to govern the life and activity of the church and to administer its affairs.”²⁶ This authority is given to office-bearers and is exercised within the assemblies of the church. Spiritual authority is exercised by the gathered assembly, not the individual or even a handful of members. Furthermore, “Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.”²⁷ The synod structure seeks to ward off abuse by circumscribing the spiritual authority of the church so that it is exercised in its proper place. Not every person will be called to office, and “some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of

others. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.”²⁸ The placement of assemblies serves to protect one person or one group from exercising undue authority over others without saying that there is never a place for authority to be exercised. By placing boundaries around the exercise of spiritual authority, assemblies can subvert the natural hierarchies found in our culture based on wealth, prestige, gender, race, and power.

There is profound wisdom in having regular assemblies of the church. While having no biblical mandate, it represents a wise way of maintaining the catholic and apostolic character of the church. The church is called at all times to faithful witness to Jesus Christ, and that faithful witness is encouraged by the work of the offices as they assemble to promote the unity of the church’s worship, discipline, and doctrine.

Who Should Gather in These Assemblies?

The Reformed Church has maintained that the church is governed best by those called by God to serve in the ordinary offices of the church. Having been called, they are equipped for this work of service for the good of the church and therefore for the good of the world. The various assemblies are gatherings of those who have been called by God to help maintain the unity, faithfulness, and witness of the church. As the Preamble to the *BCO* states:

While governance of the Reformed church is executed through the offices gathered in assemblies, the church expresses its full ministry through all its members in a variety of tasks. Each assembly is charged with determining the nature and extent of its ministry in faithful obedience to Scripture and in responsible concern for the church’s mission in the world. Every member receives a ministry in baptism and is called with the whole church to embody Christ’s intentions for the world.²⁹

The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is to maintain the unity of the church’s doctrine, life, and witness in the world. In short, guidance and governance. This perspective about the purpose of the assemblies is reflected in the *BCO*, which states that “the purpose of church government is to aid the church in the development of its own life, in order that it may carry out the mission of its Head—to announce the good news of his Saviorhood and extend his Lordship throughout the world.”³⁰ The assemblies are said to have judicial and legislative powers, with the board of elders, classis, regional synod, and General Synod having both powers. The deacons only have legislative power in the consistory and never judicial power.³¹ This is a result of the specific nature of the callings of the different offices and the work required by the various assemblies. Therefore, since the task of the greater assemblies is guidance (legislative) and governance (judicial), the offices that should be gathered at those assemblies should be those tasked with guiding and governing the church. It is for this reason that the Reformed Church has filled its greater assemblies with elders and ministers. According to the Preamble to the *BCO*, in the New Testament:

The churches then were ruled by “presbyters” or “elders,” just as the synagogues from which the first Christian converts came were ruled by elders. The Reformed churches consider the minister to be an elder of a special kind, called in some churches of the Reformed order, the “teaching elder.” Ministers and elders therefore govern the church

together. They also assist in the governing of the larger church by becoming from time to time members of the higher legislative assemblies or courts of the church.³²

The Reformed churches followed the New Testament—where rule was exercised by elders and ministers—because the particular calling of their office entails the particular functions required for the larger assemblies. A change of the composition of classis, regional synod, and General Synod would entail a change of the very nature and purpose of those assemblies. If the primary purpose of the greater assemblies is guarding the unity of the doctrine, life, and witness of the church, then these assemblies should be filled with elders and ministers.

As the recent paper “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” concludes, “Careful distinctions, alongside a fundamental commitment to the parity (rather than hierarchy) of the offices, are necessary to the good order and wellbeing of the church and its witness to the gospel.”³³ Behind this affirmation lay the presiding issue of how commissioned pastors could be delegates at the higher assemblies of regional and/or General Synod. The Commission on Theology affirmed the teaching of the church set out in the Preamble to the *BCO*, that “since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.”³⁴ Recognizing the need to honor and celebrate the unique *ministry* of commissioned pastors (ordained elders whose ministry often shares a functional semblance to that carried out by ministers of Word and sacrament), and, at the same time, signaling the importance of their ordination as elders, “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” argued that commissioned pastors ought to be permitted to serve as elder delegates on the basis of their office *as elder*.

Conclusion

The coffee break midway through the General Synod meeting is about to be interrupted so commission reports can continue, and one elder is brave enough to ask: “So WHY are we here?” Every eye turns toward the ministers, and the silence hangs around the table. It is a question that has been asked before and left unanswered.

Only this time, one quiet elder softly says, “God has called us here. He placed us here to help the church be faithful, to help the church proclaim the Word of God, baptize, and celebrate the Lord’s Supper, to reach out to the lost, and to praise Jesus. I’m sure God could do all that without us, but he doesn’t choose to.” There are a few nods as everyone takes a deep breath and gets back to work.

The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is to maintain the unity of the church’s doctrine, life, and witness in the world. If a Reformed theology of assembly grows out of a Reformed theology of office, the perspective of this commission is that the offices of elder and minister best serve the greater assemblies.

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To affirm the Reformed principles outlined in the paper “The Nature of Office and Assembly,” that offices are not interchangeable and that the higher assemblies require the specific contributions of those gifted and called to the offices of elder and minister of Word and sacrament.

Ongoing Work

The COT continued discussion of items assigned to it as well as items the commission considers to have theological significance for the church. During its October and February meetings, the commission continued examining the roles and training available for commissioned pastors. The COT hopes to serve as a support and resource for those involved in training commissioned pastors and other leaders in the church. The COT also consulted with the Commission on Church Order regarding the tensions around the term “commissioned pastor.” It also agreed to offer support to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education as it begins a project to produce resources to teach children about a Reformed understanding of faith, covenant, and identity using historical exemplars of the faith. Finally, responding to a request from the RCA director of communication, the COT began the process of reviewing the “Questions of Faith” pages on the RCA website.

The commission always welcomes appropriate inquiries of theological significance from members of the RCA, and it continues to trust that its work serves the RCA and specifically the General Synod and brings glory to the triune God.

Acknowledgments

In closing, the commission offers thanks to Jill Caratini, a specialized minister from Atlanta, Georgia, and John Young, an elder from LaGrangeville, New York, for their faithful service. Their membership on the Commission on Theology is ending, and the COT is deeply grateful for their gifts, perspectives, and contributions to the ministry of the RCA. The commission also offers thanks to Terry DeYoung, staff to the commission, for his constant and effective guidance of its work.

Respectfully submitted,
Laird Edman, moderator

¹ *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10 (2017 edition, 13); Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 6, Section 1 (2017 edition, 22).

² *MGS 2017*, 314–317.

³ *Worship the Lord*, Order for the Profession of Faith, 42.

⁴ *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 1, Sections 8; 10 (2017 edition, 13).

⁵ *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 1, Sections 8; 10 (2017 edition, 12–13).

⁶ *MGS 1968*, 185–189.

⁷ *The Church Speaks, Volume 1*, 118.

⁸ *The Church Speaks, Volume 1*, 119.

⁹ *MGS 1980*, 98–108.

¹⁰ *The Church Speaks, Volume 1*, 125.

¹¹ *The Church Speaks, Volume 1*, 126.

¹² *The Church Speaks, Volume 1*, 128.

¹³ *The Church Speaks, Volume 1*, 134.

¹⁴ *MSG 1974*, 119.

¹⁵ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 2).

¹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Four: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, edited by John Bolt, translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 430–433.

¹⁷ Bavinck, 433.

¹⁸ Bavinck, 418.

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- ¹⁹ Bavinck, 422.
- ²⁰ Liturgy for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons (2000).
- ²¹ *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 4; 8; 10 (2017 edition, 12–13).
- ²² *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 4 (2017 edition, 12).
- ²³ *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 8 (2017 edition, 13).
- ²⁴ *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10 (2017 edition, 13).
- ²⁵ Bavinck, 432.
- ²⁶ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 2).
- ²⁷ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 3).
- ²⁸ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 3–4).
- ²⁹ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 4).
- ³⁰ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 1).
- ³¹ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 1).
- ³² *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 4).
- ³³ *MGS 2017*, 317.
- ³⁴ *BCO*, Preamble (2017 edition, 3–4).