A COLLEGIAL BISHOP?
Classis and Presbytery at Issue

Allan J. Janssen
Leon van den Broeke
Editors

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.
The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America

The series was inaugurated in 1968 by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America acting through the Commission on History to communicate the church’s heritage and collective memory and to reflect on our identity and mission, encouraging historical scholarship which informs both church and academy.

www.rca.org/series

General Editor
Rev. Donald J. Bruggink, Ph.D., D.D.
Western Theological Seminary
Van Raalte Institute, Hope College

Associate Editor
George Brown, Jr., Ph.D.
Western Theological Seminary

Copy Editor
Laurie Baron

Production Editor
Russell L. Gasero

Commission on History
Douglas Carlson, Ph.D., Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa
Mary L. Kansfield, M.A., East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania
Hartmut Kramer-Mills, M.Div., Dr.Theol., New Brunswick, New Jersey
Jeffery Tyler, Ph.D., Hope College, Holland, Michigan
Audrey Vermilyea, Bloomington, Minnesota
Lori Witt, Ph.D., Central College, Pella, Iowa
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributors</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan J. Janssen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The History of the Classis</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon van den Broeke</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Travail of the Presbytery</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph D. Small</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The Classis/Presbytery as an Expression of the Apostolicity of the Church</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan J. Janssen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Protestant Classis: Between Episcopè and Koinonia</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon van den Broeke</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 The Presbytery and Church Reunification in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches in South Africa: The Story of the United Presbytery of Stellenbosch</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Vosloo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig Van Gelder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of Authors Cited</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Index</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

Prototypes of the Classis Europe about 1560 Jona Willem te Water Adrianus ’s Gravezande The 1779 Regulations of the Classis of Walcheren 13 16 34 36 37
Preface

My earliest experience with a classis was when the Classis of South Grand Rapids took me “under care” when I was a senior in college, ready and eager to head off to seminary. Because the classis took its pastoral and discerning role seriously, I did as well. It was the classis that needed to discern whether the call I had heard was indeed from God, and whether the formation I was receiving in seminary was preparing me for faithful ministry. I suspect my experience with a classis thirty-five years ago was filled with many of the same dynamics that folks continue to feel about this “middle judicatory.” I felt some anxiety that there was a community of people, who didn’t always agree with each other, responsible to make a decision about what I perceived to be my vocational future. I felt grateful that there was a community of people, including both elders and ministers, who were deeply interested in my call to ministry. I felt irritation and sometimes anger with a community of people who didn’t seem to take my call and formation as seriously as I did, and who certainly didn’t understand all of the dynamics with which I was living. Who were these people and who gave them the right to make judgments?
One could easily change the focus of the paragraph above to describe the call of a controversial minister to a congregation that is seeking classis approval, or the discipline of a minister whose sins are not very public, or the movement of a pastor from his or her well entrenched, but ineffective, ministry from a local congregation that has mixed feelings about his or her departure. Some members of the congregation are grateful that there is a group outside their control that can help make such a difficult decision, and others remain irritated that the local congregation cannot function without “outside” interference. Classes or presbyteries can be “enemies” or “allies” or “wise old friends.” More often than not, they are all three, depending on your perspective and the circumstances.

Now add to these scenarios the relationship that every classis maintains not only to the congregations within its bounds, but the relationships it has with the regional synod where it is located and the General Synod to which it sends delegates, and the whole scene becomes even more complex. How does the classis function when it shows up to help make decisions for a region or the whole denomination? Does it connect with other classes with similar perspectives around controversial issues? Does it serve as a bridge or a roadblock between the other layers of the church?

For almost two decades I have heard the whispered questions about the judicatory we seem to love to hate and still can’t live without. Is it simply a relic left from an agricultural age when congregations gathered in groups a brief walk or buggy ride away? Is it any longer effective and efficient at what the church order expects it to do? Can it serve denominations that are slowly dying in a post-Christendom world? Does it have too much authority and too few resources to accomplish its work? Add to these questions those who observe that in a post-Watergate world where every authority is suspect, it is those structures closest to the ground that have the greatest chance of being trusted and thus followed. Such observations lead some of our colleagues to maintain that if middle judicatories were disbanded tomorrow, they quickly would be born again with new names but similar responsibilities.

These are some of the questions, feelings, and observations that led Drs. Allan Janssen and Leon Van den Broek to help mount a conference entitled, “Classis & Presbytery: Problem or Possibility?” New Brunswick Theological Seminary, through its Reformed Church Center, was eager to host the event. Presenters from three continents and five different denominations participated. The papers, collected
and edited within this volume, give some sense of the energy of the day and the theological seriousness that characterized their time together. There was no lack of opinions about what the questions are, and equal passion about where we ought to go next. Our deepest gratitude is expressed to Allan and Leon for their coordinating and leadership role in the conference, to all of the presenters who took their assignments seriously and shared remarkable insights for our consideration, to the Free University of Amsterdam and the Reformed Church in America who assisted New Brunswick in funding the conference, and to all who spent a day thinking about “middle judicatories”—which seem to be both the bane and the blessing of our ecclesiastical existence. I commend this volume to you, as I suspect you have opinions that may find their defense in these pages and you may have misgivings that may be elevated or diminished by these papers.

Finally a word of thanks to the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America which has agreed to publish these papers so that many can enter the continuing conversation.

Gregg A. Mast  
President,  
New Brunswick Theological Seminary
Contributors

Leon van den Broeke is a pastor in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands and assistant professor of religion, law, and society at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. He is the author of Een geschiedenis van de classis (A History of the Classis) and Classis in crisis: Om de classicale toekomst (The Present and Future Classis).

Allan Janssen is pastor of the Community Church of Glen Rock, New Jersey (Reformed Church in America), and assistant professor of theological studies at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. He is the author of Gathered at Albany; Constitutional Theology; and Kingdom, Office, and Church.

Joseph Small is director of the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He is the author of Conversations with the Confessions; Preservation of the Truth; Fire and Wind: The Holy Spirit in the Church Today; and God and Ourselves: A Brief Exercise in Reformed Theology.

Craig Van Gelder is a minister of the Christian Reformed Church who has taught at Calvin Theological Seminary. He is professor of congregational mission at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. His publications include The Essence of the Church and The Ministry of the Missional Church.

Robert Vosloo is head of the discipline group of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. He has published essays on themes such as the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the doctrine of the Trinity, and South African church historiography. One of his books, Die ligtheid van die lig (coauthored with Nico Koopman), received the Andrew Murray Prize for theological literature in 2003.
Dutch theologian A.A. van Ruler compares church order to the rafters of a church building.\(^1\) Church order sustains the space within which the church is met by God, where it engages in its play with God (liturgy), and where it is used by God in its mission in and to God’s world. Presbyterian church order intends to be faithful to its root in God’s Word, as it is shaped around the office of elder and governed through a series of councils of the church. These ecclesiastical assemblies move outward geographically from the consistory or session or church council at the level of the local congregation to the classis or presbytery and then to larger regional and national synods.

These bodies are roughly representative in character. I use the term “roughly” not to indicate that members of the greater assemblies sometimes emerge from lesser assemblies and sometimes not, but to denote that in a presbyterial-synodical church order members of greater assemblies do not represent the interests of the lesser

\(^1\) A.A. van Ruler, “Is er een ambt van de gelovigen?” in *Theologisch Werk II* (Nijkerk:Callenbach, 1971), 142. Actually he says in the same article that the church is a “cathedral of love” (139), so that one gets the evocative image of church order as constructing the rafters of the cathedral of love!
assemblies. That they appear to do so is because church order is often viewed from the perspective of civil polity; presbyterian order seems to follow a republican model of government. It is true that members of a consistory, for example, do in some sense “represent” the congregation. After all, they come from the world of the congregation and will bring concerns and hopes shared in the congregation. Nonetheless, office-bearers represent Christ, and the authority they exercise comes not from “below” but from the One who calls them to the office.

As a result, Reformed churches employ what in recent ecumenical documents is called “communal oversight.” That is, God leads the church in Christ through the Spirit through gathered assemblies. This stands in contradistinction from personal oversight—as in an Episcopal church order—on the one hand, and a more democratic—congregational—church order on the other. The responsibility for leading the church falls always to councils of the church authorized by the church order. That this creates difficulties will become clear in the set of essays in this volume and is the occasion for these reflections.

The classis or presbytery occupies a critical place within this system of church order. It is the next level out from the local consistory or session. It consists of elders from neighboring churches along with the ministers active within the geographic area determined by the churches within classis boundaries. The classis has immediate jurisdiction over both churches and ministers and hence bears considerable authority. This includes such things as ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament, supervision of ministers, including original discipline, and approval of calls from local consistories on ministers. The classis is charged both with starting new churches and closing dying congregations. It even holds considerable authority over a congregation’s disposal of its property.

The classis, then, exercises considerable power in relation to local congregations. In fact, one can often hear church members or consistory members mumble unhappily about “the classis” as it refused to vote favorably on a candidate for ministry, for example, or acted in a disciplinary matter contrary to the person’s hope. Still, the “classis” is not a person, nor is it an institution that exists somewhere else. It

---

2 Some Reformed/Presbyterian churches include deacons as members of the classis/presbytery. This was the case with the former Netherlands Reformed Church, now the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

3 One could define the classis as the collection of the churches within a geographic area—neighboring churches. However, strict definitions in church orders often define the classis as the office-bearers who constitute it.
is made up of elders and ministers in churches that are very much alike. In fact, because it is made up of the elders and ministers who in the nature of the case are employed in work other than the classis, the classis is difficult to pin down. It often doesn’t have an address (other than the address of its clerk or scriba) to which concerns can be placed, and because action must be taken in concert, it often takes considerable time to get things done. If efficiency means acting with dispatch, the classis/presbytery is a very inefficient institution. The apposition of power and the ambiguous nature of the institution provide a recipe for frustration with the classis as an institution.

That frustration was built into the classis in its earliest instantiations. In earlier Reformed and Presbyterian church orders, the classis (like the synods) existed only when it was in session. At all other times there was no “there” there. This state of affairs changed when church orders began to state that the classis existed “between sessions” in its committees. This is scarcely an improvement, however, as the committees must meet, often take their time in coming to decision, and then often obtain the approval of the classis before an action can take effect.

And it is the classes and presbyteries that constitute the milieu of both ministers and local congregations. If one is, like this writer, a Reformed minister or a member of a Presbyterian congregation, this is the air we breathe. Like family is for many people, the classis is just there. Because one of its primary tasks is that of governance, it is enjoyed by some, tolerated by many more. It takes precious time that could be spent elsewhere, whether in ministry, tending to family, or taking time for one’s self. There is no other way to exist as church or minister, but one pays little attention to it except as a bit of a bother.

This attitude of frustration is exacerbated when another expectation is placed on the classis that often remains unfulfilled. The classis is the ecclesiastical “home” for ministers of Word and sacrament. They are subject in discipline to the classis alone. And the classis is often charged, either formally or informally, with the pastoral care of its ministers. Ministers will look for collegial relations within their classes. Sometimes this emerges, whether through design or circumstance. More often it does not, leaving ministers slightly resentful of a body that takes more than it gives.

4 Efficiency can mean that an action requires many perspectives to be taken into account and all concerned parties to be involved in the action taken. In that case a slower, more cumbersome, process might in fact be considered more efficient.
The classis/presbytery may seem to be an institution that has outlived its time. Perhaps there are better ways of being church at a “middle judicatory” level.5 That question is being bruited in a number of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The question can be put by asking about the nature and purpose of the church first and subsequently asking what order best expresses that purpose. Craig Van Gelder’s contribution to this volume asks precisely that question when he claims that the church’s purpose is missional and then asks how the classis can best express the nature of the church.

The humble nature of the classis, its alleged ineffectiveness, and its present existence as nonexpressive of the nature of the church combine to place the continuing existence of this cumbersome and often fragile institution under considerable pressure. Because Reformed and Presbyterian churches value order so highly, they give considerable time and energy to thinking through their institutions. How, they ask, might we better structure ourselves for mission?6

Not as much thought has been given to the classis/presbytery from a more strictly theological perspective. In 2007, Leon van den Broeke was invited to be the Albert A. Smith Scholar at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Van den Broeke wrote his doctoral dissertation on the classis, Een geschiedenis van de classis [“A History of the Classis”] and was doing historical research in records of the Classis of Amsterdam present in the library and archives at the seminary. Since I, too, have considerable interest in Reformed church order and have written on the classis, we engaged in lively and delightful conversation. One might suppose that this would be to the enjoyment of a couple cognoscenti and of little interest to anyone else. Nonetheless, our conversation raised similar questions about the classis despite the fact that we come from Reformed bodies that are related historically, but which have diverged over two centuries and more. We wondered: how does this institution fare in a variety of cultures? Van den Broeke proposed a project entitled,

---

5 The term “middle judicatory” is itself contested. What constitutes a judicatory? In some communions, a judicatory is an assembly that is acting in a formal judicial capacity. In others, judicatory means simply those who take “judicious” decisions. Nonetheless, we must have some vocabulary to denote the church’s governing bodies beyond the congregational level and somewhat short of the national level.

6 See, for example, the Reformed Church in America’s report on “missional structures” from the 2007 meeting of its General Synod: Reformed Church in America, Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, 2007, 88-104.
“Classis Cross-cultural,” in which scholars from different Reformed ecclesiastical cultures would be brought together to discuss the classis.

The plans included two foci. The first was to hold an academic conference in which a number of speakers were to be invited. The second was to publish the results of that conference thereby engaging more people in a broader conversation. The conference was held April 1, 2008, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The conference was entitled, “Classis & Presbytery: Problem or Possibility?” Present were representatives from five Reformed and Presbyterian bodies: Craig Van Gelder and Thea Leunk represented the Christian Reformed Church of North America; Robert Vosloo of Stellenbosh University came from the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa; Joseph Small represented the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Leon van den Broeke comes from the Protestant Church in the Netherlands; and I, Allan Janssen, represented the Reformed Church in America. The conference was sponsored by the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the Center for Church and Law of the Free University of Amsterdam, and the Office of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.

Presenters were asked to reflect on the classis/presbytery by analyzing its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and to do so from the context and culture of their particular communions. Each would bring a story peculiar to his or her own context.

To the pleasant surprise of its organizers, the conference drew a relatively large audience. It turns out that the classis as an institution does in fact remain at the center of many people’s thoughts. And as the essays included below give evidence, the issues facing classes and presbyteries transcend cultures. The stories shared common threads, even as each took on the color of its own context.

This little book, then, offers the results of that conference to expand the conversation. At the end of the day, a short panel discussion disclosed that the conversation among communions had just begun. Each presentation opened new perspectives, some to be challenged, all to be considered.

In the first chapter, however, Leon van den Broeke offers a history of the classis as an institution. This reflection of his scholarly work opens a perspective on the “whence” of the classis. We see it as an enduring institution, more so in fact than the other greater assemblies, the synods. We see it as an institution that has retained some of its essential tasks even as it has evolved through time and across geography. Van den Broeke’s history is important for American readers; this is the first time the history of the classis has been published in English.
The subsequent chapters contain the lectures presented at the conference. Joseph D. Small follows Van den Broeke first by placing the presbytery in the context of Calvin’s understanding of the church and a Reformed understanding of church order. He then relates recent developments that have put presbyteries under strain or “travail.” He looks beyond travail as anguish to an opportunity to obtain new possibilities.

I follow with a chapter that emerges from the experience of the Reformed Church in America. I ask the theological question: if the classis expresses an episcopal function in Reformed church order, how does it instantiate the apostolic task of the church? By putting the question that way, I hope to turn the question from that of how a church best organizes itself to be about mission to its theological placement. Does the classis have an essential task? I dare respond to Van den Broeke’s later chapter by suggesting that the classis may be of the esse of the church.

Leon van den Broeke writes from the perspective of the newly formed Protestant Church of the Netherlands, a reunification of the Netherlands Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands along with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Reformed churches had a long experience with classes. Van den Broeke contends that the classis has two fundamental tasks, that of episcopè and that of koinonia, and that the former has been emphasized at the cost of the latter. He asks serious questions about how the classis can be about its appropriate task in the church’s future.

The Dutch Reformed Church, with the family of Reformed churches, in South Africa is finding its way through the wrenching reality that was apartheid. Robert Vosloo, a theologian at the University of Stellenbosch, relates the story of the formation of the Presbytery of Stellenbosch within that context.

Craig Van Gelder represents a third view from the North American family of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. He too rehearses the story of the development of a Reformed church order but filters it through the experience of the mid-nineteenth-century Dutch immigrants who formed the Christian Reformed Church. He challenges the tradition to reconsider its order from the perspective of the missional church in the context of newer theological reflections on the nature of the divine Trinity.

The contributors share the observation that the classis/presbytery is under considerable stress. All reflect on the classis from
within different cultural perspectives and discuss how that way of
governance can or cannot respond to those perspectives. Furthermore,
the contributors share an understanding that the matter at hand is not
simply organizational, but in differing ways fundamentally theological.
At issue is the nature of the church. This conversation confirmed the
hunch that the issues raised are not unique to one communion but are
shared across the denominations. The very identity of the Presbyterian/
Reformed way of being church is in the balance. Of itself that may not
be so serious; the unity and catholicity of the church extends beyond
any one family of churches. But that simply shifts the question, for
the Reformed and Presbyterian churches claim to be faithful to their
Lord. Can they be so as they are now constituted, or must they be
reconstituted from the very heart of their existence?

It is hoped that this modest convocation and the essays offered
here may be the beginning of a conversation. This conversation needs
to extend beyond denominational boundaries, and it needs to include
not only ecclesiastical personnel but academics as well. If the order of
the church constructs the building, then the shape of the building is
important. As architects tells us and we experience every day, how a
building is shaped determines how we live. Indeed, otherwise, in the
church, we become gnostic.