Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met October 13–15, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois, in conjunction with the annual joint meeting of all General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council (GSC), and January 27–28, 2017, in Chicago.

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 the 2016 General Synod; however, the commission also continued discussion of several topics of theological significance to the church.

Referral Regarding Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies

The COT was directed by the 2016 General Synod to consult with the Commission on Church Order (CCO) and the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team to consider the capacity in which commissioned pastors would participate in regional synod and General Synod assemblies (MGS 2016, R 16-21, R 16-23, R 16-25, pp. 148-149). These referrals came out of the report from the Commissioned Pastor Summit (MGS 2016, pp. 142-152) and directed the COT to review the place of commissioned pastors in RCA polity. Specifically, should the Book of Church Order (BCO) recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder or as a servant of the church who functions as a minister? Recognizing an expressed desire throughout the church to remove the restrictions that currently prevent commissioned pastors from serving as delegates to the broader assemblies, would the commissioned pastor be sent as an elder delegate or as a minister delegate?

In October, the COT met with the CCO to discuss the history, current practice, and issues concerning commissioned pastors at the broader assemblies of the church. The COT also engaged in conversation with various members of the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team (CPAT) during both its October and January meetings. The following rationale supports the COT’s conclusion that “office” is the most significant identifying characteristic when forming assemblies in the RCA. The office that a commissioned pastor bears and to which the person is ordained is the office of elder. Therefore, if commissioned pastors are to attend the synods as delegates, they would attend as elders.

A THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR COMMISSIONED PASTORS AT THE BROADER ASSEMBLIES

Overview

The COT affirms the distinctive Reformed understanding that ecclesial “offices” are conferred by ordination as divinely appointed means for the representation, interpretation, and proclamation of the gospel and authoritative governing of church by the discipline of God’s grace. In response to the referrals from the 2016 General Synod (MGS 2016, R 16-21, R 16-23, R 16-25, pp. 148-149), the COT respectfully offers its rationale for permitting commissioned pastors to be delegated to regional and/or General Synod. Seeking to hold before the church a distinctively Reformed understanding of office, we joyfully confess that Christ continues to exercise his prophetic office. As such, no fundamental power has been transferred to the church or its offices. Instead, offices exist to bear witness to the prophetic ministry of Christ. We affirm the belief that General Synod is an assembly of offices and not simply a gathering of those called to ministry. Thus, we recommend that a commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.
Historical Background

The 2016 report from the Commissioned Pastor Summit states, “Commissioned pastors have been a vital part of the RCA's life and witness since the designation was established in the early 2000s” (MGS 2016, p. 142). While celebrating the “wonderful impact of commissioned pastors,” the 2016 report admits that, as a church, “we’ve struggled to know how to best include them fully in the life, mission, and structures of our denomination” (MGS 2016, p. 142). In response to the recommendation of the 2014 General Synod (MGS 2014, R-56, p. 267), the Commission on History began important work detailing the original purpose, subsequent history, and development of the understanding of the commissioned pastor in the RCA.

A revealing judgment about the nature and status of commissioned pastors can be found in the 2015 report of the Commission on History (MGS 2015, pp. 197-211). Its research indicates that the original designation of commissioned pastor was “intended to be for people who were already involved in and effective in ministry, providing more resourcing and commissioning to their ministry work,” adding:

Due to this, the commissioned pastor designation was not intended to be an entry point into ministry, but was intended to enhance and resource people who were already in ministry, with the goal of helping these people to eventually enter seminary and work toward the possibility of the ministry of Word and sacrament. The original intention was that commissioned pastors would serve alongside, and under supervision of, ministers of Word and sacrament, and they were never intended to replace or serve as a substitute for a minister (or serve on their own). (MGS 2015, pp. 201-202)

This lays bare the tightly defined function and status of the commissioned pastor. Likewise, two critical observations emerge from this history:

1. It was also never envisioned that commissioned pastors would be delegates to the General Synod.

2. Unlike ministers, whose training and education is overseen by the General Synod, the training for commissioned pastors was delegated to the classes, and therefore commissioned pastors could not move between classes, as ministers may (MGS 2015, p. 202).

In short, although the ministry of commissioned pastors is to be honored and received by the church for its wellbeing, the development of this new “ministry designation” (not ordination or installation) was for the purpose of carrying out a specific ministry under the supervision of a classis. As such, the commissioned pastor is not an ordained minister of Word and sacrament. As the 2015 report makes clear, the commissioned pastor is referred to as a ministry designation to which one is commissioned, and not as an office to which one is ordained or installed.

In 2006, the CCO offered an amendment to the BCO in response to a referral from the General Synod of 2005 (MGS 2005, R-84, p. 298) that would pave the way for consistories to recommend to the classis “a confessing member of a Reformed Church,” instead of an elder, as a candidate for commissioned pastor (MGS 2006, R-15, p. 69). Seeking to make clear that the basis of one’s candidacy for becoming a commissioned pastor was not the “internal sense of calling” or charism(s), the CCO tied the status of a commissioned pastor to the notion of office, arguing that “office is conferred by ordination, and ordination to the office of elder presumes election by a congregation” (MGS 2006, p. 69). The CCO cautioned that when individuals seek to become elders in order to become commissioned
pastors and carry out functions historically reserved for the office of minister of Word and sacrament, the very office of elder is made an *instrumental* means to an end, thereby losing the Reformed distinction of parity (*MGS* 2006, p. 69). This risks violating Reformed polity by effectively diminishing the office of elder by reducing it to a “second class” status—that is, not equal to that of minister of Word and sacrament.

Regarding the recommendation to the CCO that a commissioned pastor may serve as elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod, the COT cited *Volume* 4 of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*. Bavinck offers a crucial warning with respect to a “confusion of powers” that can arise when a distinctively Reformed polity and understanding of office is sidelined. 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. As Bavinck writes in *Volume* 4 (pp. 414 and 417):

> As impermissible as it is, therefore, on the one hand to assign ecclesiastical power to the civil government, so it is also sinful on the other hand to change ecclesiastical power into political power. Both Romanism and Anabaptism are guilty to the latter, because both think in terms of an antithesis between nature and grace. …

> Over against this [the ‘Romanist’] position the Reformers again viewed ecclesiastical power in the scriptural sense as a spiritual power. As a result the power to teach (*potestas docendi*), the administration of the Word and sacrament, naturally came to stand in the foreground.

By drawing a connection between the three offices of pastor, elder, and deacon, and the threefold office of Christ—prophetic, kingly, and priestly—Bavinck identifies three distinct kinds of power. These three distinct kinds of power follow from and represent, in their own distinct manner, the primary authority and rule of Christ: (1) the power to teach; (2) the power to govern (included here is the power to discipline); and (3) the power or ministry of mercy. While the power to teach has its origin in the prophetic office of Christ, it is crucial to see that this power has not been transferred to the church. Christ as Word continually exercises his prophetic office. The church, as such, must indeed herald the good news of the life-giving Word of God as the exercise of its divine calling. Put differently, one of the primary reasons a Reformed ecclesiology upholds the parity of office is because ecclesial power and authority are derivative—or, according to the *BCO*, representative.

According to the preamble to the *BCO*, all authority exercised in the church is “received from Christ” and authority “exercised by those holding office in the church is delegated authority” (*BCO*, Preamble; 2016 edition, p. 2). The *BCO* further explains the nature and consequence of this delegated authority in terms of the representative principle, whereby power is given to the church by Christ in the Holy Spirit. Seeking to steer clear of the “confusion of powers,” the *BCO* explicates the significance of the representative principle:

> Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, 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. (*BCO*, Preamble; 2016 edition, pp. 3-4)
Following the teaching of the New Testament, Reformed churches affirm the importance of the exercise of ecclesiastical authority on the part of “presbyters” or “elders.” Furthermore, the Reformed tradition understands ministers of Word and sacrament to be elders of a particular kind, namely “teaching elders.” Accordingly, ministers and elders share equally in the responsibility to govern the church. Of course, this insight bears directly upon the question of how, or in what capacity (that is, office), a commissioned pastor should serve as a delegate to General Synod. The answer to this question is illustrated in the liturgy for the “Order for Commissioning a Minister of Word and Sacrament into a Specialized Ministry” (*Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*, pp. 163-169).

In 2010, General Synod adopted R-34 from the Commissioned Pastor Task Force, directing the Commission on Christian Worship “to create a liturgy for the commissioning of commissioned pastors to be developed in consultation with the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team” (*MGS 2010*, p. 145). While the commission based this new commissioning liturgy on the “Order for Commissioning a Minister of Word and Sacrament into a Specialized Ministry,” it did so with two crucial qualifications:

1. This liturgy is intended for the commissioning of an elder, not a minister of Word and sacrament; and

2. The commissioned pastor’s commission is valid for the period of assigned service, is under contract, and is subject to annual review by the classis (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Sections 1, 5, and 10; 2016 edition, pp. 58-59).

The 2011 General Synod approved the Order for Commissioning a Commissioned Pastor and commended it for use in the church. This liturgy states that it is an elder who is commissioned, and not a minister of Word and sacrament.

**Conclusion**

The 2011 General Synod approval of the Order for Commissioning a Commissioned Pastor demonstrates a critical insight reflected in the 2015 report of the Commission on History. Namely, “commissioned pastors are an exception in the order, and not the rule.” The COT agrees with the need to recognize “limitations on functions” (that is, the ecclesial and juridical limits of those who function as ministers of Word and sacrament but who are not ordained to such office) in order to maintain a distinctively Reformed understanding of ministry and office. Such distinctions should not threaten the full affirmation of both the representative function of ecclesial authority and the parity of offices. 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.

The COT honors and celebrates the gifts present in the ministry of commissioned pastors, upholding the fundamental equality and dignity of their office as elders, and honoring the distinctively Reformed understanding of the representative nature of ecclesial power under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the Commission on Theology encourages General Synod 2017 to approve the *BCO* changes that are suggested by the Commission on Church Order in R 17-41, which will permit classes to assign commissioned pastors to serve as elder delegates to a regional and/or General Synod.

For more on the shared work of the COT and the CCO regarding commissioned pastors and the specific changes being proposed to the *BCO*, see the report of the Commission on Church Order on pp. 249-272.
Consultation Regarding the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

At the October meeting, the Commission on Christian Unity asked the COT to reply to a request from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) regarding the RCA's response to the WCRC statement on the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ). The COT considered the WCRC statement regarding the JDDJ carefully. While the COT found much to commend in the document, the COT issued some cautions and concerns regarding the statement. The statement itself can be found at wcrc.ch/theology/joint-declaration-on-the-doctrine-of-justification.

RCA COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY: A BRIEF RESPONSE TO WCRC

Ecumenical consensus on fundamental doctrines is a praiseworthy fulfillment of Jesus’ high priestly prayer (cf. John 17:21). Indeed, Christ teaches that the efficacy of our witness rests, in part, upon our union with Christ. Accordingly, the World Communion of Reformed Churches’ (WCRC) revised draft of the “Association of the World Communion of Reformed Churches with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (“Association”) represents a positive move toward ecumenical agreement.

Sympathetic to the salutary efforts of the WCRC to respond to the invitation of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation to associate with the Joint Declaration and grateful for the invitation to provide general feedback on the revised “Association,” the Reformed Church in America Commission on Theology respectfully submits the following brief response.

We welcome the WCRC’s efforts to make more visible the Reformed contribution to the common understanding of justification by highlighting the intrinsic connection between justification and justice. Indeed, according to Reformed understanding, “justification and sanctification, which cannot be separated, both flow from union with Christ” (cf. 4). Also, we concur that “the message of justification directs us in a special way to the heart of the biblical witness.” Furthermore, we wholly endorse the necessity and significance of conveying the dramatic significance of the relationship between justification and justice. Indeed, highlighting this connection is an important Reformed contribution to the growing ecumenical consensus on the doctrine of justification.

Regrettably, shortcomings in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification remain unaddressed in the “Association.” As such, we maintain that it is not wise to affirm “fundamental doctrinal agreement with the teaching expressed in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed at Augsburg on 31 October 1999.”

While a full treatment of the impediments to a fundamental agreement would require a more comprehensive document than is provided in this “brief response,” a number of critical points can be expressed concisely. To affirm the central importance of Calvin’s account of double grace is not to diminish the central role that doctrine plays as a hermeneutical category for the whole of Christian theology. In short, the doctrine of justification focuses the drama of salvation upon the finished, complete, and unrepeatable saving work of Jesus Christ. The Joint Declaration and the revised statement of association occlude a number of critical Reformation commitments.

For instance, divine righteousness is rightly identified with God’s declarative work that frees us from slavery to sin. The primacy of God’s saving work and its character as “event” rather than “process” is a significant Reformation understanding that must be retained—hence the crucial importance of solus Christus. The Joint Declaration and “Association” does not clarify the metaphysics of grace found in Roman Catholic theology.
Finally, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and revised “Association” does not uphold the force of *sola fide*. Failing to do so risks misunderstanding the ontology of human personhood. The Reformers rightly understood “righteousness” as that which is imputed to the sinner—an alien gift that sets the person in an entirely new relation to God by virtue of that which is *nos extra nos* (outside of ourselves).

In the end, the ecumenical witness of the church is very important and wherever possible, *rapprochement* between Roman Catholic and Protestant communions must be sought. We honor the efforts of those involved in the Joint Declaration and the proposed “Association” even though we maintain that insufficient attention has been paid to crucial features of a Lutheran and Reformed understanding of *solus Christus*, *sola fide*, and the forensic nature of justification. Finally, neither the Joint Declaration nor the “Association” demonstrate a sufficiently clear grasp of the ontology of human persons alongside the fundamentally alien nature of righteousness.

**Makeup of the Commission on Theology**

The current membership on the COT as dictated by the *BCO* consists of ten members (three RCA seminary faculty members, two RCA college faculty members, three pastors, and two laypersons) plus two ecumenical observers. Because many of the topics and issues considered by the COT overlap with issues and topics brought before the professorate (those serving as General Synod professors), the COT requested that the CCO suggest a revision to the *BCO* to insure that a member of the professorate is always serving on the COT. In order not to increase the number of members on the COT, the member of the professorate would replace one of the RCA seminary faculty slots. The CCO provided suggested wording for the following proposed amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod.

**R 17-57**

To approve the following amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod in the *Book of Church Order* for submission to the 2018 General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

**Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 9**

a. The commission shall have ten members. The membership shall include two persons from among the Reformed Church seminary faculties, one General Synod professor, two persons from among the faculties of the Reformed Church colleges, three pastors, and two laypersons. There shall also be two ecumenical observers named by the Commission on Theology, subject to the approval of the General Synod: one from other reformed bodies and one from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The term of office for ecumenical appointees shall be three years. They shall be subject to re-election for one additional term. Competence in theology is required of all members. (ADOPTED)

*The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-57.*
Ongoing work

The COT continued discussion of items assigned to the commission as well as items the commission considers to have theological significance for the church. During its October and January meetings, the commission discussed (among other topics): the work of the task force on diaconal assemblies, a curriculum for becoming a multiracial, multiethnic denomination, understanding the current apostolic movement based on Ephesians 4:11 and its impact on the RCA, and the accessibility and quality of theological education for those who are called to leadership in the church.

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 Dawn Boelkins, faculty member at Western Theological Seminary; John Paarlberg, pastor in Albany, New York; and Roger Willer, director for theological ethics for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 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