

# Looking Back—Seeing Forward: Examining 16<sup>th</sup> Century Foundations for Engaging a 21<sup>st</sup> Century World

By: Craig Van Gelder, Ph.D.

## Introduction

The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in North America is a 150 year old denomination that presently has about one-third of its membership in Canada and two-thirds in the U.S. What is important to note about this somewhat unique denomination is that its identity is deeply shaped by a number of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century developments that took place in Europe. This is very evident within the CRC in relation to its official polity which is contained in the *Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure*. This document, which reflects significant influences from Calvin's reform efforts in Geneva, is, in fact, a modified version of the church order developed at the Synod of Dordrecht in the Netherlands in 1618-19. The CRC *Church Order* provides for the structural design and organizational practices that guide the life and ministry of the CRC. A key feature of this structural design concerns the functioning of the classis as the regional ecclesiastical body that oversees the ministries of local congregations.

Classes have been a critical part of the organizational life of the CRC from the time this denomination came into existence in the 1850s. Classes were initially formed to oversee the ministries of the multiple congregations that were already present or emerging in the several colonies where Dutch immigrants associated with the, then, Holland Christian Reformed Church. As further immigration took place from the Netherlands in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and as migration out of the established colonies began to become more common during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, CRC congregations gradually spread across the U.S. This meant that new

<sup>1</sup> Christian Reformed Church, *Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure 2007* (Grand Rapids, MI: Denominational Office of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2007).

classes had to be organized to provide oversight for them. This pattern was duplicated in Canada after WWII when substantial immigration from the Netherlands entered that country and over 50,000 persons joined the Canadian part of the CRC by the 1950s. The CRC now consists, as of the 2008 yearbook report, of 268,052 members of 1049 congregations which are organized into 47 classes.<sup>2</sup>

### A Changing Church in a Changing Context

Substantial changes in church life in Northern America took place in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Mainline denominations quit growing in the 1960s and began a pattern of decline that continues to this day. Numerous Evangelical denominations showed growth during the 1970s and 80s, due in part to many members from the mainline groups transferring into them. Independent congregations by the 1990s became much more common and many have experienced substantial growth, especially through the mega church movement. More recently, emerging churches are now beginning to reshape church life for a new generation of believers.

Standing behind these changes in church life are substantial changes that were taking place in the broader society during that same time. The upheaval of the counter-culture in the 1960s led to what is now known as the 3<sup>rd</sup> disestablishment of the church—the privatization of the faith in the U.S.<sup>4</sup> and the nominalization of the faith in Canada.<sup>5</sup> What is currently being referred to today as the emerging postmodern condition has substantially eroded traditional understandings of truth as well as confidence in human rationality to solve the problems we are

<sup>2</sup> Christian Reformed Church, *Yearbook 2008* (Grand Rapids, MI: Denominational Office of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The term "Northern America" has recently come into use to refer to the United States, Canada, and Greenland. The older term "North America" also includes Mexico, which has a very different social and religious history from the other countries.

<sup>4</sup> Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987).

facing.<sup>6</sup> A multi-perspectival understanding of truth is now the accepted norm. This approach to shaping meaning has contributed to the continued legitimization of agenda-driven coalitions (e.g. the pro-life movement and the green movement), and trait-based affinities (e.g. feminism and the LGBT movement) as primary ways for organizing our social life.

In the midst of these larger societal changes, most denominations, including the CRC, encountered increasing difficulty in keeping their younger adult populations within their own faith communities.<sup>7</sup> Over the past 40 years, many in this age segment left the CRC for other denominations, and numerous others simply left the faith all-together. Local congregations in the midst of all these changes have greatly struggled in trying to maintain relevance while also seeking to steward the historic Reformed faith that so deeply stamps their identity.

#### Recent Efforts of Classical Renewal

Several agencies of the CRC took the lead a little over 15 years ago to work with the classes of the denomination in an effort to address the continued changes that were taking place. Their focus was on assisting classes to help their congregations better deal with the multiple challenges they were facing, while also seeking ways to make the larger ministry of the classes more strategic and effective. This work became organized as the Classical Renewal Ministry Team (CRMT) which had representatives from Christian Reformed Home Missions and Christian Reformed World Relief Committee along with various classical leaders. The primary focus of the efforts of the CRMT was on modeling, exploring best practices, and engaging in

<sup>6</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

story-telling. A regular newsletter was instituted and major conferences were convened from time to time to help facilitate this conversation.<sup>8</sup>

The leadership of the CRMT recognized early on that there was more at stake in working with classes that just helping them engage in activities such as forming ministry task forces and doing strategic planning. Deeply implicated in these renewal efforts designed to re-envision classical ministry were some fundamental issues that dealt with the ecclesiology and polity of the CRC. Not surprisingly, early efforts to raise these issues to the level of discussion and consideration met with substantial resistance from key faculty and administration at Calvin Theological Seminary.

The work of the CRMT has continued over the past 15 years with some significant success in helping a number of classes better understand their role in working with congregations and promoting shared ministry. In addition, many classes have reworked their classical meetings to make them more fellowship oriented, helping those in attendance to become more supportive of one another. But across the whole of this work, as significant as it has been, a critical and informed discussion of the underlying issue of the very identity and logic of the classis as an organizational entity of the CRC failed to come to fruition. The ecclesiology and polity undergirding both the rationale for and the ministry of classes have remained largely unexamined.

Such a critical reflection is the focus of this essay. It seeks to engage CRC polity, in general, and the classis, in particular, historically, theologically, and contextually as these developed in Europe and as they were transported by Dutch immigrants into Northern America. It is important to note that in pursuing this task that the author is fully committed to the necessity

<sup>8</sup> This summary information about the CRMT was gleaned from a handout under the title of, "Classical Renewal: Mobilizing Classes for Ministry," and is available from the CRC Denominational Office.

<sup>9</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dirk Hart, "The Church Needs to Understand Its Missionary Nature: A Response to John Bolt and Richard Muller," *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2, November 1996, pp. 504-519.

of churches and/or denominations developing a common polity—structures and practices to guide their shared ministries. But what is also important to note is where polity fits within a theological understanding of the church. The approach taken here assumes the following framework as a way of conceiving both an ecclesiology and a polity for the church:<sup>10</sup>

*The Church is*—It is a creation of the Spirit of God that is both human and holy. *The Church does what it is*—Its Spirit-led ministry flows out of its very nature. *The Church organizes what it does*—Structures and practices come into existence to support ministry, and are, therefore, always contextual and somewhat provisional.

This understanding means that shared structures and organizational practices (a polity) need to support the ministry of the church, which, in turn, flows out of the very nature of the church. Since structures and practices are contextually shaped to some extent, this means that they need to also be understood as being somewhat malleable. We should expect them to change as new conditions emerge (e.g. the rise of discontinuous change has now overturned assumptions about being able to expect stability and continuity), or as geographic realities change (e.g. the physical distance between CRC congregations in many classes has increased to the point that this now challenges the logic of the cohesive geographical classis). Interestingly, this instinct was present in the polity developed in 1618-19 at Dordrecht where article 86 said that, "if the profit of the church demand otherwise [these articles] *may and ought* to be altered, augmented, or diminished . . ." (emphasis added). We will come back to this point later in this essay.

The contextual nature of shared structures and organizational practices as being a part of the life of the church is evident in the life and ministry of the congregations that came into existence in the first century. It is clear in the N.T. documents that there were a number of different ways in which the church began to organize its shared life. Unfortunately, these patterns of difference became the seedbed for the formulation of what became, during the Protestant

<sup>10</sup> This is the argument proposed in Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

Reformation, claims of different polities being the only true biblical polity. Three predominate models were proposed—Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Every particular denomination in Northern America follows one of these organizational designs, usually under the assumption that it is a reasonably faithful representation of the biblical intent. The CRC falls into the Presbyterian model with its representative pastors and elders serving on consistories, at classical meetings, and at the annual synod. While the viability of making biblical claims for a normative approach has been largely deconstructed,<sup>11</sup> the CRC like most denominations continues to function as if such claims were still defensible. But the focus has now largely shifted from one of trying to make normative biblical claims to one of arguing for the necessity of maintaining the core traditions of the church.

Unfortunately, a substantive biblical and theological discussion about these matters is difficult to have in most denominations. This is certainly true within the CRC where specific historical developments, primarily from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, have been coalesced with biblical arguments to make normative claims for the *Church Order*. This makes it difficult to reconsider and renegotiate its contextual and, therefore, somewhat provisional nature. It is now time to turn to specifics of the CRC story and to engage the issue of whether 16<sup>th</sup> century foundations for its polity are, in fact, sufficient for the CRC to engage the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

### **Historical Development of Reformed Polity—Calvin's Geneva**

It is important to consider in some detail the developments that took place in Geneva in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in order to understand both the ethos and the logic that is embedded within

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Paul E. Engle, ed., *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004); and Chad Owen Brand and R. Staton Norman, eds., *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004).

Reformed polity, in general, and CRC polity, in particular.<sup>12</sup> The City of Geneva in the early 1500s had a population of approximately 10,000 persons. Geneva was the cathedral city in the Roman Catholic diocesan system, having become such in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It was a very large diocese by the 16<sup>th</sup> century with over 400 parishes under its oversight. Developments in the 13<sup>th</sup> century had led to the formation of a Council of 200 that provided general magisterial oversight of the city. Within this Council of 200, there was a Smaller Council of 25 which had emerged and which gave primary leadership to matters of governance. This approach to the governance of the city was somewhat representative in its organization, which principle would become a part of Calvin's polity both in relation to pastors and elders. However, the social structure of Geneva was still very hierarchal in make-up and the selection of representatives and their replacements was tightly controlled by those in power.

The Bishop who provided ecclesiastical oversight of the Diocese of Geneva also happened to be a Prince by birth who belonged to the House of Savoy. This important House governed the territories just to the south of Geneva in what is now northern Italy, which territory was known as Savoy. For over a hundred years leading up to the time of Calvin's entrance into Geneva, the House of Savoy had controlled the selection of the Prince-Bishop, the person who had oversight of the Diocese and who also had political influence by reason of birth with the magistrates—the Council of 200. Interestingly, during the first decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century leading up to the time of Calvin's involvement, the Prince-Bishop was an absentee from the City of Geneva, choosing instead to reside in Savoy.

<sup>12</sup> A primary source used for the details in this section related to Geneva and Calvin's work in that city was E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1967). A further source was Arthur David Ainsworth, *The Relations Between Church and State in the City and Canton of Geneva* (Atlanta, GA: The Stein Printing Company, 1965).

Located to the north/northeast of Geneva was a canton in Switzerland that is known as Bern. This territory came early under the influence of both the Zwinglians and the Lutherans, and had become Protestant in its faith by the 1530s. War between Bern and the House of Savoy broke out in the 1530s, which eventually resulted in the defeat of Savoy. The political freedom won by the military action of Bern at that time provided the Council of 200 in Geneva with the freedom to consider alternatives to being Roman Catholic in the Christian faith. William Farel, a French evangelist who had helped establish the Reformed Church in Bern, came to Geneva in 1532 and found conditions ripe, he thought, for the Reformed faith to be introduced into the city as the Protestant alternative. He invited his friend, the young John Calvin, to join him in Geneva, which Calvin did by 1536. By that time, the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes* had already been penned and sent to the King of France as an apology for the Reformed version of the Protestant faith. Largely because of Farel's rigorous positions, he and Calvin did not fare well in Geneva at that time and by 1538 both were expelled, with Calvin returning to French territories.

The climate in Geneva, however, improved by the early 1540s in favor of the Reformed faith as the Protestant faith of choice among the Council of 200. With this shift, Calvin was invited to work with a committee of six from the Council to develop a proposal for how the City of Geneva might proceed in making the Reformed faith the religion of all its people. This led to the formulation of what we have come to know as the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. It was proposed by Calvin on behalf of the committee that had worked with him, and it was officially adopted by the Council of 200 as the plan for making the church in Geneva Reformed in faith and practice. This adoption of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* by the magistrates of Geneva resulted in what is known as a magisterial reform—reform of the church imposed on a populace



by the governing authorities. The articles of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* included the following:

- Four Orders of the Church
  - o Pastors
  - o Elders
  - o Teachers (Doctors)
  - o Deacons
- Sacraments
  - o Baptism
  - o The Supper
- Marriage
- Introduction of Hymns
- Concerning Burial
- The Visitation of the Sick
- The Visitation of Prisoners
  
- Discipline in the Church

These articles clearly reflect the condition of the church in Geneva and its organizational needs in 1541. What was required to reform the former Roman Catholic Church in Geneva and to conform it to the Reformed faith were qualified ministers who could preach the Word purely and properly administer the sacraments. This is likely why the *Ordinances* start with church office as the first article, and then proceed to sacraments as the second article. The mission of God in the world and the church's participation in that mission were assumed within a Constantinian Christendom worldview of Calvin's day. The church already existed and was legitimized under magisterial oversight. What was needed was its reform. In order to accomplish that, qualified leaders needed to be put into place—e.g. pastors and elders; and certain abuses associated with Roman Catholic teachings and practices had to be corrected—e.g. instruction on marriage, allowing people to sing hymns, de-mystifying death, etc.

It would have been interesting to see how Reformed polity might have been shaped had Calvin been working in a context into which the Christian faith was just being introduced. One wonders, for example, if there would have been more attention given to the world as the larger

horizon of the gospel, rather than the church being the assumed telos; and whether the vocations of all believers would have taken on a higher priority in understanding the inter-relationship between pastoral leadership and the ministry of the priesthood of all believers. This, however, was not the case and there are several major developments that took place in light of these *Ordinances* that are worth examining because they continue to exercise significant influence within Reformed polity, in general, and CRC polity, in particular.

First of all, authority and power were accepted as being primarily vertical in character and were carefully distributed in practice among those already in authority. The reform of the church would follow the logic of the reform of the city—it would be from the top down and would be imposed by magisterial authority working in concert with those holding ecclesiastical authority. The Council of 200 provided magisterial oversight of the reform taking place, and what became known as the Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva provided ecclesiastical oversight of that reform. While there were at times disagreements between these leadership groups, they largely worked together to effect the desired reform. This understanding of authority led Calvin to focus on the official offices of the church—pastors, elders, doctors, and deacons—as the key leverage point in relation to the reform that was required. The reform of the church was to take place through qualified ordained office-bearers, among who were to be pastors who could engage in the pure preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments.

Second of all, a system of discipline was imposed in order to bring about citizen compliance with the reform that was being imposed. The Catholic Church had a long tradition of using discipline to effect compliance. Calvin, through utilizing the authority of the magisterial leadership of the Council working in collaboration with the Company of Pastors, modified and

brought forward the practice of church discipline in the polity that was proposed and implemented. The magistrates were assigned responsibility to insure that persons living within their assigned areas of the city conformed to the expected standards.

The role of discipline is important to understand in this phase of the development of the Reformed faith in Geneva. Exercising discipline meant that persons were brought under overt persuasion to bring their practices into conformity with expected behaviors. An example of the actual practice of discipline in seeking compliance can be seen in the following law which was passed by the magistrates, the Council of 200, in seeking to support the work of the Company of Pastors both in Geneva and among the former parishes of the previous Diocese of Geneva as these also began to come under Reformed influence and leadership.

*Concerning Sermons—All the members of each household shall attend church on Sundays, unless it is necessary to leave someone behind to look after children or livestock, under penalty of 3 sous . . . everyone is to be present at the service when worship commences, under penalty as above . . . No one shall leave the church until the prayer has been offered at the end of the sermon under penalty as above.<sup>13</sup>*

One might note in the midst of today's spiritual and cultural sensitivities that this approach seems less than being fully grace-based. However, in Calvin's day, the use of such an approach was consistent with a world view that supported the church having direct authority over every aspect of life.

Third of all, the precursor of what has become known as the "consistory" also came into existence in the church in Geneva with the church leadership (Calvin and his ordained colleagues) being joined by elder representatives. These elder representatives, however, were carefully selected from among the membership of the Council of 200. There was little opportunity for the members of the church to shape these choices. One of the primary roles of

The Register of the Company of Pastors, *Ordinances for Country Parishes*, 1547.

these elders was to help insure that the reform of the church was proceeding on course among the persons living in each of their jurisdictions. This expected oversight by elders was later incorporated into the Dutch Reformed tradition through the practice of yearly family visitation, where elders checked on the spiritual welfare of each member of the church. Embedded in these practices was the assumption of expected compliance to required faith practices.

Fourth of all, the foundations for the eventual development of a judicatory (classis) was put in place through a system of visitation from the Geneva church to former diocesan parishes now being led by Geneva-trained, Reformed pastors. By the action of the Council of 200, the Company of Pastors in Geneva sent a representative to check on the life and doctrine of the pastor of each parish, and the magistrates in Geneva sent two councilors to check on the life of the local official.

*In 1546 it was resolved. . . that henceforth visitations should be made of all the parishes of this church of Geneva . . . and order was given that two councilors should accompany the minister—the minister for his part to inquire concerning the doctrine and manner of life of the pastor of the place, and the councilors concerning the manner of life of the (local official).<sup>14</sup>*

One finds in this decision the expectation that the former diocesan parishes, which were now becoming associated with the Reformed church in Geneva, would look to leadership of Geneva for direction and oversight. The continued practice of church visitation within Reformed polity by classes and presbyteries grows out of this decision. The same logic of what was taking place in Geneva was embedded in this practice—authority and oversight were exercised by the representative leadership and reinforced by magisterial power to ensure compliance. **The Organization of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands**

The history of the rise of the Reformed faith within the provinces of the Netherlands is too complex to tell in much detail here. There were, however, a few critical developments in this

<sup>14</sup>The Register of the Company of Pastors.

story which are important to note in understanding how the Reformed polity that was being developed in Geneva found its way into the life and practices of the Reformed church in the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup>

One of these developments concerns the Convent (Synod) of Wezel that is reported as taking place in 1568. Numerous Reformed congregations in the Netherlands had been displaced from their homeland in the mid-1500s as the army of Spain was used to continue to impose Spanish and Catholic order in their homeland. Many of these displaced congregations sought refuge in Germany, and it was at Wezel, Germany in 1568 that church leaders met to bring some order to their movement. The polity they chose to adopt followed largely the same content and logic as that of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* in Geneva, with which these leaders were quite familiar. They did, however, add an important first article that dealt with assemblies. The articles of the polity of Wezel stand as follows:

- Assemblies
- Ministers and Teachers
- Catechism
- Elders
- Deacons
- Sacraments
- Marriage
- Discipline

No magisterial power was in place to impose order on these displaced congregations. Some type of a system of governance needed to be established to bring order to their shared life and ministry. Action was required from the ground up, which led to the development of assemblies—consistories, classes, and a synod. The concept of representation, related in concept

<sup>15</sup> Information in this section was drawn from John Paul Elliot, *Protestantization in the Northern Netherlands* (Ph.D. Thesis at Columbia University, 1990); and from Richard R. Deridder and Leonard J. Hoffman, *Manual on Christian Reformed Church Government* (Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1994).

yet different in practice from that used in Geneva, was utilized to select leaders who gave voice to congregations within a system of regional classes and a shared convent (synod).

Another key development in this story concerns what is known as the Synod of Embden that took place in 1571. Located just to the north of the Netherlands, this town became the location of a synod that consisted mostly of representatives of congregations which were also displaced from their homeland. A key feature of Dutch Reformed polity that emerged with the work of this synod was the further development of what is known as the "consistory." For the first time this title was used to name the gathering of the ministers and elders who served as the leadership of a congregation. Another key feature of Dutch polity from this synod was the agreement that the regional classes were to hold a meeting about every three-to-six months.

The most important development, however, in the formation of Dutch Reformed polity occurred when the Synod of Dordrecht was convened in 1618-19. This took place in the aftermath of the defeat of Spain and within the context of the formation of a national government for the Netherlands. Attention needed to be given to how the church in the Netherlands would be re-organized. The work of this synod created: (a) the organization of a church that was privileged by the state (Dutch Reformed Church); (b) the formulation of a confessional standard (Canons of Dordt), and the implementation of a standardized polity (Church Order of Dordt). This church order reorganized the previous emerging orders of Wezel and Embden into several sections as follows:

- Introduction
- Offices of the Church
- Assemblies of the Church
- Activities of the Church
- Admonition and Discipline

There were 86 articles developed within these five sections which attended to the organization and practices of church life. The content and logic of these articles stand in direct continuity with the content and logic initially developed in Geneva, which were later adapted by the fledgling efforts of the earlier Dutch synods. For our purposes, it is important to note some of the key assumptions that appear to be embedded in this church order as it came to expression through the Synod of Dordrecht.

These include the following:

1. Territorial Geographic Church—The Dutch Reformed Church would structure its life around the same parish model that had been the practice of the Roman Catholic diocesan/parish system. This meant that there would be one church for each parish. This understanding of church tends to assume that there would be geographic proximity of members to their parish church and the geographic proximity of congregations within each classis.
2. Magisterial Support—While technically not being a state church, the Dutch Reformed Church was privileged by the state such that all public officials were required to be a member in good standing in the church. This understanding of church tends to assume that the church would be a legitimized force within the established social order.
3. Classes—These regional assemblies were formed to provide for the governance of ecclesiastical affairs, primarily addressing issues of the credentialing of ministers and stewarding the oversight of the life and doctrine of the congregations and their leaders. This understanding of church tends to assume that the church is the primary telos of the gospel—with the social community and the church community being the same community.
4. Word, Sacraments, and Discipline—These became the visible marks of the church within the Dutch tradition. This understanding of church tends to assume that attending to the proper exercise of these marks represents the church's carrying out of the mission of God in the world.
5. Stability and Continuity—The parish congregations that were re-organized into the Dutch Reform Church already existed. The organization that was developed accepted the geographic order that was already in place and created a polity to standardize normal operations. This understanding of church tends to assume stability and continuity within the ordered life of the church as well as interchangeable parts—a pastor is a pastor, is a pastor.

These assumptions demonstrate that the Christendom world view was fully operational within the Dutch Reformed Church. It was expected that the church would stand at the center of the social order of the nation and that its life and ministry would be privileged by the state. The question facing the Dutch immigrants who chose to come to the United States in the 1800s, and

who eventually formed the CRC was, "How well did this world view and set of assumptions fit within a pluralistic religious context where multiple denominations existed and where the separation of church and state was already being practiced?"

### **The Formation of the CRC in the United States**

There had been Dutch immigration into the colony of New Amsterdam which dates back to the 1600s, a colony which eventually became known as New York. These early immigrants formed congregations that for over 150 years continued under the oversight of the Classis of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, on which they also relied for the regular supply of pastoral leadership. This stream of Dutch immigrants eventually became Americanized and was organized into what is known today as the Reformed Church in America (RCA).

We pick up the story of immigration that would lead to the formation of the CRC from a different trajectory. There was a split that occurred in the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands in the 1830s. A number of congregations and their leaders sought a more confessional understanding of the faith as well as the freedom to education their children through Christian schools. In order to do so, they formed their own church.

Religious persecution as well as economic hard times led significant numbers of these separatists to immigrate. The locations of choice for most of these immigrants became Western Michigan and Central Iowa. Initially, these new immigrants during the 1840s and early 1850s joined the Dutch church that was already present in the U.S.—the RCA. However, by the mid-1850s, controversies broke out among some of the congregations in Western Michigan over issues such as using only the Psalter and denying lodge membership. Those favoring such practices soon withdrew from the RCA and formed the Holland Christian Reformed Church in 1857. Some of the congregations in Iowa joined them, and large numbers of Dutch immigrants to



the U.S. during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did so as well. During that period, this fledgling denomination of recent Dutch immigrants began to develop its identity as a *denomination* in the pluralistic religious context of the United States. It began to build its institutions—e.g. Calvin College and Calvin Seminary; and also soon began to develop agencies that were patterned after other denominations—e.g. world missions and home missions.

This Americanization process was well underway when the Synod of the Holland Christian Reformed Church met in 1881. At that Synod, attention was given to adopting a church order. Article 4 of the polity that was adopted made the following point:

The Holland Christian Reformed Church has adopted the Church Order of Dordrecht 1618-19 as its accepted church order for the purpose of conducting its ecclesiastical affairs according to it so far as it can fully apply these in America.

Whether the Dordrecht articles could be "fully applied" in America, however, was the crux of the issue that was difficult to examine from within the confines of the Dutch colonies that had been established as immigration centers. The world view as well as the social order still largely reflected Dutch European perspectives and practices. For example, in the City of Grand Rapids in Western Michigan, one of the key Dutch colonies, the city directory in the 1880s was still printed in the Dutch language for its Dutch citizens. This reflected the tightly woven social organization of the Dutch community, which allowed most of these citizens to continue to maintain the patterns and practices of their previous life in the Netherlands.

Even as late as the early 1900s, overtures to the annual Synod came from congregations within distinct neighborhoods of Grand Rapids asking synod to take action to discipline persons who had crossed what were referred to as "parish boundaries" to attend another CRC congregation.<sup>16</sup> The assumptions embedded in the church life and practices of the Netherlands,

<sup>16</sup> The author found several examples of this in a review of the Acts of Synod of the Christian Reformed Church for the years 1900-1910.

stemming from the Synod of Dordrecht, were still manifesting themselves within the U.S. context. But these would require substantial adjustments if the CRC was going to truly become an American denomination.

The story of the CRC during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might best be described as that of a denomination slowly and begrudgingly backing its way into the future. The Americanization process, while being inevitable, was regularly resisted by many. But significant changes did take place over time as new generations of CRC members were birthed, and as these persons more readily assimilated into the broader culture. The changing character of the membership of most of the CRC congregations also led in time to more attention being given to adjusting the church order to more "fully apply" to the American context. Regular calls for revisions to be made in the church order finally led to the appointment of a study committee that eventually reported a revised order to the church at the synod of 1965. Contrasting how the Church Order of Dordrecht and the revised Church Order of the CRC in 1965 understood the process of revising the order is instructive. Article 86 in the Church Order of Dordrecht stated that:

These articles, related to the lawful order of the church, have been so drafted and adopted by common consent, that they, if the profit of the church demand otherwise, *may and ought* to be altered, augmented, or diminished . . . (emphasis added)

Article 86 of the revised Church Order of the CRC in 1965 stated that:

This Church Order, having been adopted by common consent, shall be faithfully observed, and any revision thereof *shall be* made only by synod, (emphasis added)

It would appear that the authors of the revised order of 1965 were trying to say to the church, "Enough change—we have now brought the order up to date. Let this version stand." It is critical to note, however, that this approach of moving away from the more flexible and adaptive expectation of the original church order of Dordrecht took place at the very time that the

cultural context of the United States was entering into a period of massive change. Instead of trying to close off flexibility, the decades following called for the necessity of even more adaptive capacity in understanding how shared structures and organizational practices might best serve the church and its ministry.

As noted in the opening section of this essay, during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the CRC had to face significant challenges in ordering its life in the midst of sweeping cultural changes. This can be seen, for example, in the following: (a) the erosion of the social cohesion of the Dutch colonies with the increased prosperity of many CRC members; (b) an increased immigration from the majority world which Christian Reformed Home Missions strategically targeted in starting new congregations; (c) the feminist movement and the calls to open all the offices to women (which took place in the early 1990s); and (d) the rise of mega churches and the emergent church (which some sought to encourage and others sought to resist). The question implied in the title of this essay now comes more clearly into focus, "How well do the 16<sup>th</sup> century foundations of Reformed ecclesiology and polity serve the church as it seeks to engage a 21<sup>st</sup> century world?"

It is important to point out, at this juncture, that there is much in the polity of the CRC that bears affirmation and which is fruitful for continued utilization as shared structures and organizational practices. This essay has sought to underscore, however, that there is a deeper issue at work within CRC polity that needs to be addressed. This concerns the contextual formation of the polity within a Christian world view and social-political context which were dramatically different from those the CRC now inhabits. Rather than continuing to take the approach of tweaking the existing polity in continuous efforts to adapt it to our present context, this essay is proposing that a more fundamental reassessment is in order. Such a reassessment

must, of course, attend to the cultural realities of our context. But the more strategic dimension that such a reassessment needs to attend to is the utilization of a more substantive biblical and theological framework to engage the development of a polity.

### **Refraining Polity from Biblical and Theological Perspectives**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find ourselves encountering significant changes both in terms of our world view and the biblical and theological frameworks we use to understand God's work in the world. In regard to world view, we now live in a globalized context of many religious faiths where Christianity is just one more religion that competes for adherents. Gone in most places is any privileged place for the church in the social and political order.

In regard to biblical and theological understandings of the Christian faith, we have experienced a significant convergence of theological understanding of the mission of God around the *missio Dei*, and of the kingdom of God as being both *already* and *not yet*. The discipline of missiology, which came into its own in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has helpfully contributed to these perspectives.<sup>17</sup> Through the influence of this discipline, the church has increasingly come to understand its life and ministry as both a calling and a sending to participate in God's mission within the world. It has also come to understand that it is missionary by nature, having been created by the Spirit, and that it is now being led by the Spirit for participation in that mission. This has been coalesced in recent years around the concept of the missional church.<sup>18</sup> Under girding these developments has been resurgence in Trinitarian studies.

<sup>17</sup> Craig Van Gelder, "How Missiology Can Help Inform the Conversation about the Missional Church in Context," in Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 12-43.

<sup>18</sup> The missional church literature that is now available includes: Darrel L. Guder ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Darrel L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); James V. Brownson, ed. *StormFront: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Lois Y. Barrett, ed. *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns*

### Trinitarian Studies and the Missional Church

A vibrant discussion took place during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding ecclesiology—the doctrine of the church. Expressions of this discussion were evident in such developments as: the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1947 from the earlier Faith and Order and Life and Work movements; the merger of the former International Missionary Council (IMC) into the WCC in 1961; Vatican II in the early 1960s; multiple church merges in the United States throughout the 1960s; and a convergence in missiological circles around a mission theology related to the *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God. These various movements and discussions led by century's end to a fresh understanding of ecclesiology from a missiological perspective, what has come to be known as the *missional church*.<sup>19</sup>

The missional church conversation brings together two streams of understanding God's work in the world. First, God has a mission within all of creation—the *missio Dei*. Second, God brought redemption to bear on all of life within creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the kingdom of God. This redemptive work of God through Christ is best understood in terms of its announcement and inauguration by Jesus as the *already* and *not yet* presence of the kingdom of God in the world.

*in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000); Richard H. Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds. *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk. *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church To Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (Allelon Publishing, 2007); Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); Craig Van Gelder ed., *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); and Richard W. Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide to the Missional Congregation: A Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> A helpful summary of the wide variety of missiological and ecclesiological influences during this period is available in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 368-510.

A missional understanding of God's work in the world from this perspective is framed as follows. God is seeking to bring God's kingdom, the redemptive reign of God in Christ, to bear on every dimension of life within all the world so that the larger creation purposes of God can be fulfilled—the *missio Dei*. This missional understanding has the world as its primary horizon and the church is placed at the center of the activity in relating the kingdom of God to the *missio Dei*. The church's self understanding of being missional is grounded in the work of the Spirit of God who calls the church into existence as a gathered community, equips and prepares it, and sends it into the world to participate more fully in God's mission.

Interestingly, the missional church conversation has introduced a new dimension into the discussion about the identity of the church. At the center of this conversation is the relationship of the church to its context in light of a different understanding of the nature, or essence, of the church. In this conversation, mission is no longer understood primarily in functional terms as something the church *does*, as is assumed in the present polity of the CRC. Rather it is understood in terms of something the church *is*, as something that is related to its nature. But also of importance in this conversation, mission is not subsumed under ecclesiology as was the case within the Christendom world view and the church of Europe. In that context, the church was seen as the primary location of God's activity in the world. The missional church, in contrast, shifts the focus to the world as the horizon for understanding the work of God and the identity of the church. To catch the fuller implications of this shift of perspective one needs to understand more fully a Trinitarian framework for polity. **A Trinitarian Framework for Polity**

There have been significant developments in the past few decades in Trinitarian studies regarding an understanding of mission. It should be noted that the emergence of the concept of

mission has its roots in the colonial period of Catholic missions.<sup>20</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the unraveling of the massive colonial systems spawned by both Catholic and Protestant nations over the previous several centuries. In their embarrassment, many churches in the West that had come to be associated with these colonial systems began dropping words like *mission* or *missions* from their ecclesiastical vocabulary during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> However, during this same period, some significant developments took place in Trinitarian studies that began to bring missiology into direct conversation with ecclesiology.

Growing out of the strong tradition of biblical theology that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, several important theological streams began to find their voice shortly after mid-century. One stream was represented in the work done by the former International Missionary Council (IMC). Building on a renewed emphasis on the role of the kingdom of God in relation to mission as expressed during the Whitby gathering in 1947, the Willengen meeting of the IMC in 1952 gave fresh expression to understanding mission. Although not formally used until after the conference when the summary documents were prepared, the concept of *missio Dei* was formulated in Trinitarian terms as the foundation for engaging in mission.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis was placed on the mission of the Triune God in the world in relation to all three persons of the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Subsequent meetings of the IMC and its successor body, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) within the World Council of Churches (WCC), continued to draw on this significant re-conceptualization of mission to formulate an understanding of the role of the church in the world. A primary emphasis was

<sup>20</sup> Bosch, 302-304.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that many previous doctoral programs in missiology have now changed their nomenclature to inter-cultural studies in order to move past the appearance of Western imperialism that is often associated with the word *mission*.

<sup>22</sup> Bosch, 389-393.

placed on the missionary nature of the church, with this missionary nature being the basis of God sending the church into the world to participate in God's mission.

During the 1960s, some mission scholars were writing about the missionary nature of the church on the Protestant side,<sup>23</sup> but the focus tended to remain more on the discussion of the church's mission in the world,<sup>24</sup> rather than engaging in a fuller re-conceptualization of ecclesiology. In contrast, the Catholic Church at Vatican II developed a more substantive understanding of ecclesiology in light of the missionary nature of the church.<sup>25</sup> But by the 1970s, the field of missiology was dominated by a conversation about the *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God. What is intriguing is the remarkable level of convergence that emerged by the 1980s around these concepts among ecumenical, evangelical, and Roman Catholic missiologists.<sup>26</sup> Now after fifty years of wrestling with these issues, their fuller implications for our understanding of the church have begun to come into play. The more intense light of Trinitarian studies in regard to mission is being directed to the field of ecclesiology—an understanding of the church. There are two streams within Trinitarian studies that inform this conversation.

*The Western Emphasis on the Economic Trinity*—One stream is represented by the theological perspective usually associated with the Augustinian tradition in the Western church. This stream focused on the one nature of the Godhead and the work of the three persons in light of this nature—the economic Trinity. A 20<sup>th</sup> century example of this can be found in the work of Lesslie Newbigin.<sup>27</sup> His focus was on the sending work of God—God sending the Son into the

Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962).

<sup>24</sup> J.C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1964).

<sup>25</sup> See especially the "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*," as available in Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of the Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975).

<sup>26</sup> This convergence is helpfully discussed by James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 19-64.



world to accomplish redemption, and the Father and the Son sending the Spirit into the world to create the church and lead it into participation in God's mission. This stream of Trinitarian studies comes directly into the missional church conversation through the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network,<sup>28</sup> and especially through the widely read edited volume published in 1998 entitled, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America?*<sup>9</sup> There are several key implications this perspective has for an understanding of polity.

1. *The church is missionary by nature*—This means that polity needs to support the ministry of the church, which in turn flows out of the very nature of the church. A church order needs to start by identifying what this ministry is and then proceed to consider the necessary shared structures and organizational practices which support this ministry.
2. *The world is the horizon of God's mission*—This means that polity needs to create structures and practices that help congregations and classes develop bridges into the world for carrying out this ministry as they seek to participate in God's mission. Related to this, polity needs to start its consideration of offices with the office of every believer and how to support the ministry of the priesthood of believers in the world, and then move to the development of other offices in support of this most basic office.
3. *Every context is a mission location*—This means that polity needs to help connect congregations and classes to the specific contexts within which they are located and to assist them in making their ministries relevant within those contexts. This also means that polity needs to help the church develop capacity *to form* in new contexts as new congregations are planted.

*The Eastern Emphasis on Perichoresis*—The Eastern church, especially the Cappadocian Fathers placed an emphasis on the relationality within the Godhead—the inter-relationships between the three persons of God. The social reality of the Godhead, in this approach, becomes the theological foundation for understanding the work of God in the world. Created humanity reflects this social reality of God through the *imago Dei*—humans being created in the image of God.<sup>30</sup> The church, through the redemptive work of Christ, is created by the Spirit as a social community that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God's mission

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The website of this network can be accessed at <[www.gocn.org](http://www.gocn.org)>.

<sup>29</sup> Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press/2001), 23-57.

in the world. A work that continues to be very influential in stressing this emphasis is by John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church?*<sup>11</sup> Another work that reflects this Trinitarian approach is Miroslav Volf's, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. There are several key implications this perspective has for an understanding of polity.

1. *The church is relational community*—This means that polity needs to help cultivate and nurture the formation of meaningful Christian community at congregational, classical, and synodical levels. This also means that how power is conceived and practiced must be in support of the formation of such community.
2. *The church values difference and seeks out otherness*—This means that polity needs to promote diversity and foster unity in the midst of this diversity. This also means that polity needs to create space for difference to be present where shared organizational practices are flexible enough to incorporate diverse cultural patterns.
3. *The church lives in mutuality*—This means that in the midst of the necessary place of office and the exercise of authority that polity needs to also promote shared acceptance of one another and practices that support the building up of one another.

Engaging both of these theological streams of Trinitarian studies is essential for gaining a large enough framework for re-thinking both the polity of the CRC and the role of the classis. Such a framework provides for an understanding of the nature, ministry, and organization of the missional church,<sup>33</sup> which, in turn, provides the necessary perspective for the development of a polity—shared structures and organizational practices.

### Summary

The purpose of this essay has been to invite a critical yet, hopefully, constructive critique of the polity of the CRC, in general, and the role of the classis within that polity, in particular. There is much about both that needs to be affirmed. But this essay has attempted to point out that there are some important assumptions embedded in their historical and contextual formation, and

<sup>11</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (St Vladimirs Semin Pr., 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

<sup>33</sup> This is the position argued by Van Gelder in *The Essence of the Church*.

that these assumptions need to be unpacked and reframed if the CRC is going to faithfully and effectively engage in ministry at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This essay has further argued that the key to such reframing is to start with a biblical and theological framework that utilizes Trinitarian perspectives. This essay has largely been suggestive of what such a reframing might look like. There is much work to be done in order to bring about a more thorough-going assessment as well as a constructive formulation of a polity in light of such an approach. The reader is encouraged and invited to join this conversation.