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Article

# Synodality from a Reformed Perspective

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**Abstract:** For Reformed theologians, the “synodal process” in the Roman Catholic Church is an important ecumenical rapprochement since it is based on the conviction that all believers, and all humans of good will, should have a voice in the Church’s future. While “synod” sounds in Reformed ears as a movement toward formal authority, the opposite is the case: the synodal process aims at communion, participation and mission. This article highlights aspects of the synodal process that dovetail with Reformed emphases and, thus, open ecumenical avenues, particularly journeying together and listening.

**Keywords:** synodal process; reformed theology; ecumenism; ecclesiology

## 1. Introduction

When I first heard about synodality, I was at a loss. Coming from a Protestant tradition which labels itself as “synodical-presbyterian”, the term “synodality” seemed to hint at prolonged meetings of church representatives to reach a binding agreement. For in Reformed contexts, a “synod” or “General Assembly” is a mode to govern the Church in (mostly national) gatherings of representatives. Compared to the actual life of the Church, it is characterized by a very formal structure. This obviously is the opposite of what Pope Francis aimed at in the synodal process he initiated in the Roman Catholic Church. “Synodality” does not refer primarily to a meeting, but it means a return to the original meaning of “synod”: a common journey together. The International Theological Commission describes synodality as follows:

First and foremost, synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. ([Synod of Bishops 2021a](#), § 1.2).

Compare § 1.3 of the same document:

While the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as a gathering of Bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path for the entire People of God. Hence the Synodal Process is no longer only an assembly of Bishops, but a journey for all the faithful, in which every local church has an integral part to play. ([Synod of Bishops 2021a](#)).

Synodality is not primarily about institutions, nor is it simply a slogan, but it is “a style and a way of being by which the Church lives out her mission in the world”. (§ 1.3) Hence the spearheads of communion, participation and mission set the agenda for the Church in the 21st century. The explicit aim is to involve as many people as possible, primarily all believers within the Roman Catholic Church but even people from outside. “Together, all the baptised are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God”. (§ 2.1). The aim is not a democratic process but a spiritual one (§ 2.2).

Not only for a Reformed theologian is this use of the word “synod” potentially misleading. In the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical code, only two synods are identified: diocesan synods and synods of bishops. In both cases, these synods are meant as meetings to support the one highest in hierarchical order. However, Pope Francis moves back an etymological meaning of “synod”, being underway together.



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In this article, I will operate from my standpoint as a Dutch Reformed theologian, and I will do two things. First, I will sketch a contrast between the Roman Catholic hierarchy and synodality on the one hand, and the Reformed synodality, which is designed for more egalitarian purposes, on the other. Both on the theoretical and practical levels, there are lessons to be learned on both sides. Second, I will explore some of the ten thematic nuclei that the preparatory document for the synod notes, particularly the first two: “the journeying companions” and “listening” ([Synod of Bishops 2021b](#)). I will argue that these nuclei can serve as examples of the ecumenical potential in the synodical process, and that they take up the intentions of the 16th century Reformers of the Western Church.

## 2. Reformed Synods

The traditional Reformed Church government is often characterized as “presbytero-synodal”. It is “Synodal” because of the meetings or councils of the church, of which synod is the broadest, in the sense that all churches are represented. A synod is not the *highest* church council because the 16th century Reformation was distinctively non-hierarchical. Members of a synod are elected at smaller meetings just for the purpose of attending a synod. After the set agenda for a synod has been dealt with in various sessions, the synod is closed, and it no longer exists. Between two synods (which are often three years apart), so-called deputies can be appointed for certain tasks. They report to the next synod ([Bouwman 1934](#), pp. 187–233). At the synod of Emden 1571, the fundamental principle was laid down that no church may reign over other churches, and no office bearer over other office bearers. This was stated in the first article of the Church order ([Church Order of Emden 1571](#)). This anti-hierarchical principle is reiterated in all subsequent Reformed church orders in the Dutch Reformed sphere.

The “presbyterian” emphasis in “synodal-presbyterian” originates in the office of the elder, which is the central office in the church polity John Calvin designed, based on the insights of Martin Bucer, the Reformer of Strasburg ([Van 't Spijker 1996](#)). For Calvin, the office of the elders is the expression of both New Testament terms *presbyteros* and *episkopos*, the terms that, generally speaking, have evolved to “priest” and “bishop”, respectively (*Inst.* 4.3.8; 4.4.2–4) ([Calvin 1936](#)). The locally elected and temporal figure of the elder replaced the ecclesial hierarchy of priests and bishops. This centrality of the elder in the Reformed church polity led the 20th century Dutch Reformed theologian Oepke Noordmans to conclude that Calvin had checkmated the Pope with the pawn of the elder ([Noordmans 1980](#), p. 434). Elders rule the Church, and they are the central figures in the single permanent body of church polity: the Presbytery. Whereas broader meetings such as synods cease to exist after the final discussion, the consistory is always there. Moreover, pastors are considered to be elders also; the only difference between them and other elders is their special mandate from the congregation: they are exempt from other tasks to focus on the ministry of the Word and are therefore financed by the local church. The deacons complete the church council: with all three offices in place, the local congregation counts as a complete church, *ecclesia completa*. Synods only come into view when issues arise that a single church cannot organize (such as a seminary to train future pastors, overseas missions, or contacts with the national government) or that require an assessment from outside the smaller, local circle (such as matters of appeal). Because of the emphasis on the local church, Reformed denominations often have the plural “churches” in their name to underline that the church is found primarily in its local expression rather than on the national or universal level ([Deddens 1992](#), p. 45).

The presupposition of this synodal system is that local churches comply with the decision made at the synod, although the right to appeal is in place. This unanimity was so important that at the synod of Emden, votes took place in two rounds: after a first round in which a majority was found for a certain decision, a second vote followed in which all were supposed to vote in favor unanimously. This was not meant as strict discipline but as a cordial consensus.

In practice, things are more complicated than this. The authority of synods is subject to inflation. This already starts with the election of representatives. Since a general synod in a (Dutch) Reformed denomination typically takes three weeks of sessions and as much time in preparation, elders who have a day job consider using up all their holidays for two years just to be able to attend a synod. Obviously, only the elderly and the independent remain as eligible, which does not reflect the variety in the life of the church. Also, local churches may not be fond of the idea that their pastor spends weeks in a synod instead of in the pastorate. In general, the local context becomes ever more important: deacons from various denominations take responsibility for caring for the poor and elderly. Meanwhile, when the plurality within a denomination increases, it becomes more difficult to reach a decision to which all local churches comply. Since no hierarchy exists, there is virtually no means to make a local church comply: all depends on the goodwill invested in the larger body of churches.

While in a Reformed context the emphasis on synodality could sound like a shift toward the more formal and hierarchical, the exact opposite is meant in the Roman Catholic synodal process. Moreover, there are relevant points of contact between the intentions of the 16th century Reformers and the intentions behind the synodal process. A fundamental principle in John Calvin's theology of the offices is that God's Church should be governed by many, not by few, because a concentration of power with a few persons leads to corruption (*Inst.* 4.4.4) (Calvin 1936). This is not merely a democratic principle: it is an expression of the conviction that the Spirit is given to all believers and that all believers can therefore contribute in the Church. This dovetails nicely with the synodal process' emphasis on listening at the local level with special attention to the many that often are not heard (*Synod of Bishops 2021a*, §1.5). It should be noted that exactly because of these principles of the universal work of the Spirit and of subsidiarity did Calvin have far less power in Geneva than is often presupposed. He remained dependent on the decisions of the various councils in the city and the Church (Van 't Spijker 2001, pp. 160–62).

Major differences remain between the Reformers' ideas concerning offices and the Roman Catholic practice. Most importantly, according to Reformed understanding, church offices are not a matter of *magisterium* but of *ministerium*, a matter of service (Trimp 1982). This service takes place without hierarchy or indelible character and with a new understanding of apostolic succession (as a function of the Word of God) through the recognition of gifts to serve by other believers. Since Christ lives in the congregation, it is filled with his Spirit and as such called to serve. No opposition exists between gifts (*charismata*) and offices in the Church: the latter presupposes the former, and the former needs the structuring activity of the latter. The priesthood of all believers and Christ's institution of the offices cohere. Fundamentally, believers receive one another as brothers and sisters as a single family around Jesus Christ. They have not chosen each other but are God's gift to one another. By receiving and discerning the work of the Spirit in the other, by which God leads the believer, the Church takes shape.

Obviously, these principles of a Reformed view of the offices are also ingredients of the synodal Church that Pope Francis envisages. Meanwhile, whereas Reformed synods are often focused on the internal life of the Church, the Roman Catholic focus on communion, participation and mission, which also takes the mission of the Church in the world in view: "A synodal Church is a Church 'going forth,' a missionary Church 'whose doors are open'". (*Synod of Bishops 2021b*, §15; Francis 2013). It remains to be seen whether this will also be the outcome of the entire synodal process. In the listening phase of the process, many believers have indicated that they would like to see "a hospitable, friendly and open culture", "a community where everyone may contribute on the basis of equality". (*Diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch 2022*, pp. 3, 9). Reports emphasize the participation of women, a longing for more inspiring celebrations and a stronger participation of all believers (*Diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch 2022*, pp. 5–8).

### 3. Journeying Together

The preparatory document for the synodal process indicates ten thematic nuclei ([Synod of Bishops 2021b](#), pp. 34–37). Particularly, the first two are interesting from a Reformed perspective. The first thematic kernel is “Companions on the Journey”. The question is who the ones that are journeying together are. “Who are the road companions, including those outside the ecclesial perimeters?” ([Synod of Bishops 2021b](#), p. 34). Those in the margins are also taken into account.

This nucleus gives room to reflect on the dynamic of being inside or outside a group. This touches present debates on diversity, identity politics, “othering”, critical theory and decolonization but places these in the perspective of pilgrimage. One can discern fellow travelers primarily by the identification of the ultimate destination, by Christ and His Kingdom, but the document emphasizes considering those at the margins. Since the pilgrimage of the Church is oriented toward the world to come, in which the last will be the first, it is crucial that the Church turns toward those who are not usually invited to the table when decisions are being made. But the voice of those that have often been silenced needs to be heard, particularly in the Church as the people of God.

Note what is remarkably absent from this statement: a fellowship of travelers is not primarily defined by hierarchy. This fits well in Pope Francis’ anti-clericalist tactics ([Sarot 2022](#)). Since everyone can contribute, it becomes ever more difficult for bishops to shut themselves off from the voices of the many. Pope Francis seems determined to engage lay people and women in the government of the Church. The anti-clericalist, anti-formalist and (to a lesser degree) anti-hierarchical tendencies can be illustrated by the emphasis on *sensus fidei* (the sense of the faith). One of the documents the Vatican recommends within the synodal process is the document on *Sensus fidei* in the life of the Church ([International Theological Commission 2014](#)). *Sensus fidei*, the sense of the believing community, is a term that functions as part of the discussion of the Church as people of God in *Lumen Gentium*, primarily as part of the discussion of the people of God (LG 12), and only vaguely in the context of hierarchy. For Pope Francis, the Church as people of God, as *communio*, becomes more important when compared to traditional hierarchical structures. When all share in the same Spirit, all need to be heard. Of course, this does not imply even the beginning of the abolition of the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. The communion Pope Francis aims at presupposes a hierarchical church. But the emphasis on the Spirit given to all opens avenues for ecumenical dialogue.

### 4. Listening

The second nucleus is inextricably interwoven with the first. Without listening (the second nucleus), it is impossible to identify who the fellows on the journey toward the kingdom of God are. But without fellows on the way, there can be no situation of listening to the other. “Listening is the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudices” ([Synod of Bishops 2021b](#), p. 34). The fact that this listening comes before the third element, speaking out, is telling. Listening not only has a higher priority than speaking out, but it also presupposes a different level of engagement and a different manner of conduct. This can be illustrated by way of a brief phenomenology of listening.

First, listening presupposes a direct form of communication, being in the presence of the other. This can be illustrated by the difference with reading. When one reads a text, one is in charge of the interpretation of the text and of the entire “communicative” project (in quotation marks: one can question whether this really is communication). When the reader no longer feels like reading, he can close the book and stack it. The book will not protest. Even if the author of the book were in the same room as the reader, the author is not the authoritative voice when it comes to the interpretation of the text. In this sense, as Roland Barthes said, the author is dead ([Barthes 1968](#)). Interpretation is a matter of the reader who employs a text. Even if one denies the validity of this postmodern deconstruction of the relation between a reader and an author, and wishes to advocate authorial intent, the communication between author and reader remains indirect at best.



Listening, however, presupposes that there is someone addressing the one who listens (Dalferth 2018, pp. 110–12). One cannot step away from the communicative situation of a dialogue in the same way one closes a book. The intersubjective commitment is large; to stop listening is an act of desertion, maybe even of betrayal.

Second, the present time plays a much larger role in listening than it does in reading. One can read books from centuries ago, but one can only enter into a dialogue with someone in the same moment. While reading is a way of understanding one's life in the broader context of the history of humankind, across borders of time, language and space, listening is an act in the "now". Existentially, it is always the present: one moves in a continuum of the present, while the past increases and the future remains beyond reach. Of course, this phenomenological observation describes the ideal situation of listening. Much can go wrong. The past can make such an impression, or the future can pose such a threat, that listening in the present becomes virtually impossible. Inattentiveness is another threat to successful listening. But these possible modes of listening gone wrong only underline the point that the present time is crucial for listening.

Third, listening means silencing—if for a moment—the many voices in one's own mind and heart. This is what is meant by "an open mind and heart, without prejudices" (Synod of Bishops 2021b, p. 34). Of course, it is impossible to expunge all prejudices, and it is equally impossible to listen without any form of pre-understanding or preliminary judgment. Listening, however, implies the attitude of being prepared to put one's own convictions and ideas at stake, or at least to put them between brackets. This is an act of humility: one can only put one's own ideas at stake if one is willing to be corrected, if one faces the possibility that one's ideas may be wrong.

This may seem to imply relativism because risking all one's convictions seems to leave one without any certainty. The typical Protestant reply to this objection is that the believer is what she is through hearing, that is: hearing the Word of God. "Faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17). One is created into who one is not by one's own creativity but by one's receptivity.

Fourth, listening is not merely a physical activity of the ear and the entire auditory function but an act of the entire person; a Christian could call this the soul. For not only an open ear, but also an open mind and an open heart are necessary. This implies sensitivity beyond the mere understanding of any locution, the thing being said. The various contexts, the person who speaks, the intentions and the history behind the words spoken all resound. Every human being has only a limited sensitivity to discern all of these aspects. Therefore, the more sensitive one gets in the process of listening to the other, the humbler one becomes: there is always more to be discerned, more to be heard. Therefore, the soul, or the ability to listen, must be cultivated to be able to hear creatively beyond the statement made, beyond the questions asked and beyond the silence kept. It is in this respect that the ecclesial hierarchy and the different protestant churches have often failed, by giving priority to the wealthy over the poor and to the powerful over the weak. By beginning to listen with open hearts and minds, the synodal process can lead to a renewal and new vitality.

## 5. Ecumenism

The seventh nucleus emphatically opens avenues of ecumenism: "The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey" (Synod of Bishops 2021b, p. 36). It shows that the "baptised" are not only found in the Roman Catholic Church, but also in other churches. Baptisms are recognized across the varieties of Christian churches. Here, the idea of "synodality" crosses many borders. This continues in the final, tenth nucleus about "forming ourselves in synodality", (Synod of Bishops 2021b, p. 37) which redefines synodality as the "spirituality of journeying together". This is particularly advised for the formation of people in positions of authority, of leaders. The intriguing question for the future, not only of the Roman Catholic Church, is how leaders will listen to the ones they are supposed to lead. The dangers of authoritarianism that does not listen to the people, and of populism that reiterates popular

opinion, are each other's mirror images. The wise leader will seek dialogue with people and truly listen to them but still lead.

For the ecumenical dialogue, the balance between leadership (and hierarchy) on the one hand, and respectful dialogue (listening) on the other, is a matter to be disputed. From my Protestant perspective, the critical question concerning the entire synodal process is whether a hierarchical church is ever able to enter into a fruitful dialogue. There is reason to fear that after the rounds of consultations and listening, the Synod of October 2023 will reach decisions that will disappoint many people who had reason to believe their voice had been heard. Naturally, hearing many voices does not equal doing what the majority wishes. In this sense, the synodal process may be a recipe for disappointment. But if the synodal process does not halt after the 2023 Synod, but is a continuing process, this may well renew the clerical, hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church in the long run.

## 6. Conclusions

From a Reformed perspective, the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis is a promising avenue. It takes up aspects of Reformers' ecclesiology and theology of the offices, emphasizing that every baptized person deserves to be heard. It softens the clericalist and hierarchical organization of the Roman Catholic Church. The first results of the listening phase of the synodal process indicate that many Roman Catholics have similar wishes to Protestants. Even if the Bishops in the Synod of 2023 reach other decisions, an awareness has been awakened that will probably not go away soon.

Particularly, the emphasis on listening as discerning is theologically promising. A church that listens before it speaks, and that seeks to discern wisdom through dialogue, does more than conform to democratic times. The act of listening to those who previously were not heard is an act of liberation itself: a liberation of the marginalized but also of those who were confined within their own constraints of society, class and the Church.

For Protestants, the synodal process in the Roman Catholic Church raises the question of how Protestant synods relate to this process. Originally, synods fit in a system of subsidiarity, in which matters discussed were only those that were too large or too complex for the local context. The question of whether the idea of subsidiarity still works as intended when the presbyterian-synodal system was designed deserves further scrutiny. In any case, the Roman Catholic synodal process is an incentive to cultivate dialogue and listening, which is also the case in Protestant circles.

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