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# Half a bishop: A Critical Outline of the So-Called *Classispredikant* in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands

KLAAS-WILLEM DE JONG

“Instead of the current 74 classes, about 8 regional classes will be formed. (...) The chairman of a classis is its personal face. He or she is responsible for the congregations and ministers in his or her region and embodies the togetherness of these congregations. (...) He is not a busybody, but he has a pastoral mission. (...) The activities of the chairman, usually a minister, will be embedded in the meetings of the classis. (...) He will be elected by the regional classis (...). Together with the scribe of the general synod, the chairmen form a committee. (...) Each chairman is authorized to make decisions in conflict situations (...), but only in coordination with this board.”<sup>1</sup> This is a summary of the first profile of the chairmen of the extended classes, which was envisioned in 2015 by the then scribe of the General Synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN).<sup>2</sup> This position is part of a renewal program, called Church 2025, intended to bring the church back to basics in the rapidly evolving, secular context of the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> The general synod of the PCN unanimously decided in the same year to take the document in which this program was set forth as a starting point for further elaboration.<sup>4</sup> A motion to give the envisioned chairman the title of bishop was withdrawn after some discussion.<sup>5</sup> It was considered to be premature.<sup>6</sup> In one of the follow-up reports, several titles were considered: chairman of the region/classis, *pastor pastorum*, scribe of the region/classis, superintendent, deacon and minister of the region/

1 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21–22.

2 It was the first concrete attempt to introduce a bishop-like office in the PCN and its predecessors (cf. Kronenburg, *Episcopus Oecumenicus*, 33–167; cf. also Van den Broeke, “Bishop-in-presbytery,” 140–162, especially 150–159).

3 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 5–11.

4 *Handelingen 2015*, 233–234.

5 *Handelingen 2015*, 230–234.

6 *Handelingen 2015*, 234.

classis.<sup>7</sup> Since it fits the profile best and bishop is a title used in other churches, the drafters of this document preferred the title of ‘minister-bishop’.<sup>8</sup> However, resistance was expected for its connotation of hierarchy, power concentrated in one person, as well as its association with apostolic succession. Therefore, the board of the synod did not propose the title of bishop. Nonetheless, about a quarter of the synod voted in favor of this title; whereas *classispredikant*, minister of the classis, was carried by a large majority.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the Church 2025 plans have been converted into regulations, which have come into force as of 1 May 2018. The first ministers to become *classispredikant* have been elected and called in May and June 2018.

In this contribution, I provide an outline of this new position in the PCN. Subsequently, I discuss recent theology within the PCN which reevaluates the bishop, including some recent developments that give rise to a bishop-like office. Further, I examine the office of the moderator in the United Reformed Church (URC) in the United Kingdom. I picked the URC, because its ecclesiastical structure and its theological convictions – also in its diversity – resemble that of the PCN. The subtle differences between the moderator and the *classispredikant* help to sharpen the view on the *classispredikant*. Finally, I evaluate this new position in the PCN and formulate an answer to my research question to what extent the *classispredikant* can be called a bishop.

### **The rehabilitation of the bishop in recent Reformed theology in the Netherlands**

There always have been episcopal elements in the organization of the Dutch churches of the reformation.<sup>10</sup> Hans Kronenburg relates them to the ordained ministers.<sup>11</sup> Others, like Leon van den Broeke, point particularly to the classis/presbytery.<sup>12</sup> Apart from some individual

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7 *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 15–17.

8 *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 17.

9 *Handelingen 2016*, 60. Unfortunately, the minutes of the synod have not yet been published.

10 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 39–167.

11 The administration of Word and sacrament is restricted to the ordained minister; only an ordained minister has the authority to ordain; some ministers of the classis are appointed to visit the congregations (Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 61–66).

12 Van den Broeke, “The Protestant Classis: Between Episcopé and Koinonia,” 75–91. Cf. in the same volume Janssen, “The Classis/Presbytery as an Expression of the Apostolicity of the Church,” 63–74.

opinions from the 1930s onwards, the call for a bishop-like office grew, especially among theologians.<sup>13</sup> Yet, it was only after the Lima report *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM, 1982) that this call became substantial.<sup>14</sup> Three PhD studies, defended in 2000 and 2003, mark the broader acceptance of the idea on a theological level. The first study dates back to 2000 and reflects directly on the Lima report.<sup>15</sup> The author, Eddy van der Borght, evaluates the Reformed theology of ministry in the light of this ecumenical document. He is convinced the reformers rejected the bishop out of fear of misuse of power. He himself sees a bishop as a presbyter, a servant of the Word 'not at the local level like the minister, but at the level beyond the local one.' His 'task has a strong liturgical and pastoral content. (...) In this way, he can become a symbol of unity in the church.'<sup>16</sup> Margriet Gosker defended the same theme in her dissertation a few weeks earlier in the very same year. She emphasizes the underlying principle that minister and bishop share the same office.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, unlike Van der Borght she hardly expresses herself about the tasks the bishop should undertake.

In 2003, Hans Kronenburg elaborated these insights into a theology of the bishop. He discerns four motives to support the introduction of an episcopal ministry: a pastoral motive (response to the need for 'leadership with a human face'), an ecclesiological motive (a bridge 'between unity and pluriformity', local and national church, authority and management), an ecumenical motive and a cultural (or missionary) motive.<sup>18</sup> Using the method *lex orandi, lex credendi*, Kronenburg analyzes four rites for the ordination of a bishop to develop a profile of a bishop. In his view, a bishop has the following characteristics. He or she is to be elected by the community, does not work without other office-bearers and is committed to the authority of a synod.<sup>19</sup> He serves 'as *pastor pastorum* (a), as commissioner of those who are sent out (*apostolos*) (b), as teacher and guardian of the tradition of the faith (c), as a sign of unity and as a president of the liturgy (d), as a link between the local and the universal church (e), as the voice

13 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 77–167.

14 Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (= BEM).

15 Van der Borght, *Het ambt her-dacht*. I cite the English version: Van der Borght, *Theology of Ministry*.

16 Quotes in both this sentence and the sentence before: Van der Borght, *Theology of Ministry*, 433.

17 Gosker, *Het ambt in de oecumenische discussie*, 238f, 362.

18 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 225–240, 498.

19 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 500 (cf. 469, 476).

of conscience (f), and as ordainer (g).<sup>20</sup> Kronenburg sees aspect d as the heart of the profile, whereas the aspects a and g, b and f, as well as c and e are closely related: “In all his words and actions, a bishop is accountable for (...) his integrity (...) his spirituality and (...) his willingness to serve”.<sup>21</sup>

As I will later compare the outcome of Kronenburg’s research to the profile of the *classispredikant* in the PCN, I would first like to note a few concerns I have about his work. The first of these involves the method *lex orandi, lex credendi* as such. Kronenburg values the liturgy as normative, although he admits there should be an interplay between liturgy and doctrine.<sup>22</sup> In this case, however, I doubt whether the liturgy has a value of its own. Kronenburg analyzes four relatively recent ordination rites, each of which in my opinion must be considered a well-conceived result of an ecclesiastical process.<sup>23</sup> Kronenburg does not clearly explain what exactly the liturgy adds to the already existing lived doctrine. On the contrary, I believe all he reveals about the profile of a bishop can be found in doctrinal texts too. Secondly, I am concerned about the way Kronenburg applies the method. Kronenburg favorably refers to Geoffrey Wainwright, but he neglects to use the fundamental rules Wainwright sets out, nor does he elaborate the method himself.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it is unclear how Kronenburg determines what parts of the different liturgies are more valuable than others. What seems to be decisive is whether something fits his image of the early Christian tradition or not. Thus, the result of Kronenburg’s thorough examination of the ordination texts is more or less a sum of the various tasks he discovers studying these rites. Note, moreover, that the first two characteristics he mentions are the same as two out of the three ‘Guiding Principles for the Exercise of the Ordained Ministry’ in the BEM report, which have been applied to the bishop.<sup>25</sup> The tasks in the heart of Kronenburg’s profile can be traced back to only a small section of the rite (i.e. the introduction into the examination),

20 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 500 (cf. 469, 476), but cf. also 381.

21 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 500 (cf. 469, 476).

22 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 276–82.

23 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 282–299 (303).

24 Cf. Wainwright, *Doxology*, 242–250 (especially 243–45) who suggests “three kinds of test – those of origin, of spread, and of ethical correspondence – that help to determine when worship (...) can in fact properly be drawn on as a doctrinal source (245). Cf. also Kay, “The Lex orandi in recent Protestant Theology,” 11–23, especially 21.

25 Cf. BEM, 23 (nº. 26), cf. Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 169f.

which is basically of a doctrinal character itself.<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that almost all tasks can be found in the BEM report as well.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the last three elements of the profile concerning the accountability of the bishop revolve around another small section of the ordination rites, namely the examination.<sup>28</sup> Despite these concerns, I will use Kronenburg's profile because it reflects the essentials mentioned in the BEM report and it is the only detailed and well-substantiated profile tailored to the Dutch protestant context.

### **The practical need for a bishop-like office or officer**

Besides the principal and theological considerations, there are several developments in the PCN which give rise to the need for an office such as the PCN outlined in its Church 2025. The first development is primarily internal. Like many denominations in Western Europe, the PCN is in decline. The same amount of work has to be done by fewer people. It can be especially difficult to complete tasks at a level beyond the local. I want to mention two implications of this development in particular. First, it was difficult to find delegates for the meetings of the classes.<sup>29</sup> Some of these meetings rarely reached a quorum. This was an important reason behind the decision to drastically diminish the number of classes from 74 to initially 8; in the end, the number decided on was 11.<sup>30</sup> Second, it became nearly impossible to find sufficient suitable office-bearers for a specialized and labor-intensive task such as the regular visitation of the congregations.<sup>31</sup> Hence, there was a shortage in both quantity and quality.

The second development I want to point out, in conjunction with the latter aspect, is the waning interest in the regular visitation especially among the congregations. The congregations sometimes experienced it as disappointing or even unnecessary and useless. The meaning of this kind of visitation had become unclear to them. It needed to be improved in form as well as in content.<sup>32</sup> Originally, in the project Church 2025 a

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26 Cf. Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 367–382. Because the rite of the Church of South India omits such an introduction, Kronenburg chooses to consult the doctrine in that case (368). Kronenburg is less explicit in the description of the relationship between the other aspects of the profile and the examined ordination rites.

27 Cf. *BEM*, 24 (n°. 29).

28 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 382–399.

29 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21.

30 *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 10f.

31 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 23.

32 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 23.

less frequent and more qualified visit of the congregations by the chairman and one of the members of the visitation board was foreseen.<sup>33</sup> In a later stage, this task was considered to be more suitable for the *classispredikant*, as a part of his pastoral mission.<sup>34</sup> The visitation board got another responsibility. Until the plans of Church 2025 were implemented, congregations met in both visitation and in the classis meetings. In the new constellation, the board is commissioned to facilitate the encounter between the congregations in other ways.<sup>35</sup>

Thirdly, since the beginning of the 1960s, in the two largest predecessors of the PCN, there has been an ongoing reflection on the pastoral support of ministers.<sup>36</sup> In the Netherlands Reformed Church, the observation that hundreds of ministers felt the need to move to another congregation because of a mismatch with their present congregation, was the initial reason for this reflection.<sup>37</sup> In the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the scope was broader from the outset. They basically investigated the need for pastoral care among and for ministers.<sup>38</sup> However, the *pastor pastorum* was not introduced in these denominations. In the smallest predecessor of the PCN, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, the chairman of the synod, called president, had the duty to appoint one or more ministers as *pastor pastorum*. They functioned on his behalf.<sup>39</sup> The function of *pastor pastorum* ceased to exist when the three churches merged into the PCN in 2004. In 2012 the general synod of the PCN turned down a new proposal to introduce a *pastor pastorum*.<sup>40</sup> It established there was no need for such a figure; ministers and pastoral workers could approach others for pastoral care. Moreover, according to the synod, a *pastor pastorum* might imply a certain hierarchy. Yet, in the context of Church 2025, the subject came up again. Pastoral care was considered necessary for ministers in their often demanding and insecure

33 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 23.

34 *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 8.

35 *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 8f; cf. *Kerk 2025, Waar een Woord is*, 22.

36 Apart from the visitation in which always separate attention was paid to the ministers.

37 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 136–138.

38 Kronenburg, *Episcopus*, 151–153.

39 *Ordeningen voor de Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, X Ordening op het pastoraat over het openbare ambt.

40 *Handelingen 2012* (Utrecht: Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 2014), 324f. Cf. “Pastor Pastorum. Rapport van de Beleidscommissie Predikanten. KT 12-10,” PCN, accessed July 27, 2018, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/download/CAwdEAwUUkNCX0A=&inline=0>

position.<sup>41</sup> Still, in the Church 2025 project this care was made concrete only as a part of measures to improve the mobility of the ministers. Therefore, according to the first Church 2025 report a *classispredikant*, acting as *pastor pastorum*, shall raise the issue of mobility in the meetings with the ministers in his district at regular times.<sup>42</sup>

The fourth development I want to highlight is a direct result of the decreasing popularity of churches. The PCN increasingly faces missionary challenges. The *classispredikant* represents the church in a certain region or province. He or she provides a personal face for the PCN on site, making it more recognizable and approachable.<sup>43</sup>

Fifthly, the traditional way of dealing with conflict and discipline situations proved to be inadequate. Because of the various boards involved, it is slow-moving and laborious process. It is expected that an officer such as the *classispredikant*, having effective powers of intervention in certain situations and subject to certain conditions, would be able to deal with these situations in an earlier stage and generally more effectively.<sup>44</sup> This is supported by the impression that there is a growing demand for personal authority in both church and society.<sup>45</sup> One could argue that the consolidation to approximately ten classes and consequently most of the restructuring at the level of the classis was not only due to shortages of personal resources, but was also meant to financially enable the introduction of a position like the *classispredikant* in order to establish stronger leadership in the PCN.

Taking the foregoing into account, it seems that the enlargement of the classes and the introduction of the *classispredikant* offer considerable benefits. However, there is an important side effect as well which has been acknowledged increasingly during the reorganization process. In the PCN, the classis is not only the most obvious ecclesiastical body for *episkopē*, but for *koinōnia* too.<sup>46</sup> Until 1 May 2018, PCN congregations came together – or were supposed to come together – in the classes. As classes have been enlarged and not every congregation retains a delegate

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41 *Kerk 2025: Waar*, 27f. Cf. *Kerk 2025: Een stap*, 7f. However, cf. also relativizing remarks with regard to ministers: “Apart from pastoral workers (...) also (...) ministers will serve the church in the coming period” (emphasis added) and “However, only raising concerns would conjure up the wrong image.” (*Kerk 2025: Waar*, 27f)

42 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 29.

43 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21.

44 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 22f.

45 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 23.

46 Cf. Van den Broeke, “The Protestant Classis,” 79, 80f, 87f.



in the newly established classis, this opportunity to meet no longer exists for all congregations. Therefore, a new platform has been created where congregations can meet, the so-called *ring*, a regional encounter.<sup>47</sup> This platform has no authority and has been placed under the responsibility of the visitation board of the classis, in particular of its chairman. On the one hand, the task of the visitation board has been reduced: the *classispredikant* has taken over the regular visitation. On the other hand, its responsibilities have been broadened: it also has to take care of the encounter between congregations. The *classispredikant* and the chairman of the visitation board are supposed to cooperate closely.<sup>48</sup> The chairman is a member of the board of the classis, but he only has an advisory role.<sup>49</sup>

### Theological motives

Thus far in this contribution, I have set out the motives behind the introduction of the *classispredikant*. With exception of the representative task, the responsibilities ascribed to him or her not only belonged to the responsibilities of the classis but remain, for the function of the *classispredikant* is principally embedded in the classis. These responsibilities have been shown to be largely of a practical and functional nature. In the initial document of Church 2025, they have been substantiated theologically in a constrained way, only referring to the unity in Christ and the embodiment of this unity in a person rather than in a board.<sup>50</sup> In fact, a sounder theological basis was laid afterwards in a follow-up report, using the story of Barnabas – visiting the congregation of Antiochia, counseling it and encouraging it to remain faithful – and explicitly referring to the unity in Christ, the catholicity of the church and the episcopal role of both classis and *classispredikant*.<sup>51</sup> Some of these aspects are also processed into the official job description of the *classispredikant*.<sup>52</sup>

47 “Kerk 2025. Deel 1: Classes en kerkelijke presentie. Toelichting op het voorstel voor de tweede lezing,” accessed July 31, 2018, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/download/CAwdeAwUukRHxkk=&type=pdf> (6-9); *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 22; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 5, 8–9.

48 E.g. *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 9; “Kerk 2025. Deel 1,” 23f.

49 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 22, 23; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 9; “Kerk 2025. Deel 1,” 26f.

50 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 16, 23.

51 *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 7f.

52 “Profiel, functieomschrijving en benoeming van de classispredikant – versie 5,” accessed 1 August, 2018, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/download/CAwdeAwUukZKW0A=&type=pdf>

### Comparison with the moderator in the URC

The *classispredikant* resembles the office of the moderator of the URC in the United Kingdom, although there are resemblances to moderators in other churches as well.<sup>53</sup> The moderator functions at the same regional level as the *classispredikant*, which is called a synod in the URC. A covenant between the URC and several other denominations in the early 1980s implied that the URC moderator, as it was, was not acknowledged as a bishop because of the absence of apostolic succession, apparently at least not by the Church of England at that time.<sup>54</sup>

Hereafter I will discuss the main provisions in the URC Manual regarding a moderator and compare them with the regulations in the recently revised PCN church order. I do so to get a sharper image of the *classispredikant* and the choices made in the designing of his profile.

In both churches there is no indication of the office or function in the founding legislation.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the provisions for the moderator are literarily embedded in the rulings of the regional synod. The moderator functions within the frameworks of the synod; he is a part of it, just as the *classispredikant* is meant to be in the PCN.

At the heart of the tasks of both moderator and *classispredikant* is the commission to execute a pastoral office towards ministers and congregations.<sup>56</sup> It seems logical therefore that in both churches the office-bearer must be a minister. This minister shall, in the words of the URC, 'be separated from any local pastoral charge'.<sup>57</sup> Initially, in the PCN it seemed that it was not absolutely necessary for the *classispredikant* to be an

53 Cf. "The Manual. Section B: The Structure of the United Reformed Church," accessed July 31, 2018, [https://www.urch.org.uk/images/the\\_manual/B\\_The\\_structure\\_of\\_the\\_URC\\_18\\_10\\_17.pdf](https://www.urch.org.uk/images/the_manual/B_The_structure_of_the_URC_18_10_17.pdf) (6). Cf. e.g. "Office of the Moderator of the General Assembly Regulations," accessed July 31, 2018, [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/14836/2013-reg-2-Duties-of-the-Moderator.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/14836/2013-reg-2-Duties-of-the-Moderator.pdf) (Church of Scotland). Note these regulations are meant for a moderator at a national level.

54 Cf. Camroux, *Ecumenism in Retreat*.

55 PCN: "Kerkorde en Ordinantie van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland versie mei 2018," accessed July 31, 2018, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/download/CAwdeAwUukVGvKE=&inline=0> (esp. 3-11); URC: "The Manual. Section A: The Basis of the Union," accessed July 31, 2018, [https://www.urch.org.uk/images/the\\_manual/A\\_The\\_Basis\\_of\\_union\\_18\\_10\\_17.pdf](https://www.urch.org.uk/images/the_manual/A_The_Basis_of_union_18_10_17.pdf) (especially 1-8).

56 PCN: *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 7f; "Kerkorde," 45 (ord. 4-16-3); URC: "The Manual. Section B," 6.

57 "The Manual. Section B," 6. Cf. *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21, 23; *Kerk 2025, Een stap verder*, 9f. The wording in the URC Manual is principled, whereas it is in the PCN more practical.

ordained minister; in a later stage of the project, however, it was made clear that this would indeed be necessary.<sup>58</sup> As a minister, he fits the bishop-like profile the abovementioned theologians created. Furthermore, in both churches the officers meet with their colleagues regularly.<sup>59</sup> Yet, in other respects the descriptions of moderator and *classispredikant* differ subtly.

While the moderator is appointed by the URC general assembly, in the PCN it is the classis itself which elects the *classispredikant* after it has consulted the general synod.<sup>60</sup> In my opinion, the election and appointment by another authority than the classis can strengthen the independent position of a *classispredikant*. However, he would then lack a solid basis in both the classis which he serves and the congregations belonging to the classis. Moreover, in the reorganization process of Church 2025 a considerable number of congregations expressed the opinion that the diminishing of the number of classis, and thus the enlarging of each classis, increases the distance between the local basis of the church and the assemblies at a regional and a national level.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, from a tactical point of view it would not have been wise to introduce a *classispredikant* elected by the general synod. In the recent regulations of the PCN in which the *classispredikant* is embedded, he cannot even be elected into the general synod and represent the classis there as a delegate.<sup>62</sup>

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58 Cf. *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21, and *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 10. In the before also mentioned Church of Scotland it also may be a deacon or and elder (“Church Courts Act (Act III 2000),” accessed 31 July, 2018, [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/45734/2000\\_Act\\_3\\_Church\\_Courts\\_consolidating\\_act\\_from\\_1\\_January\\_2018.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/45734/2000_Act_3_Church_Courts_consolidating_act_from_1_January_2018.pdf) (art. 7 (a)).

59 PCN: *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 22; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 9; there is no provision referring to this meeting in the “Kerkorde”; URC: “The Manual. Section B,” 6.

60 URC: “The Manual. Section B,” 6, 13; PCN: *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21; *Kerk 2025: Een stap*, 10; “Kerkorde,” 45 (ord. 4-16-2). Though the board of the general synod, in my opinion, only had a limited authority according to the prevailing church order, it heavily influenced the election of the *classispredikanten* in May and June 2018 (see my blog “Landelijke bemoeienis op regionaal niveau – de classispredikant,” accessed 31 July 2018, <http://blog.kerkenrecht.nl/2018/05/21/landelijke-bemoeienis-op-regionaal-niveau-de-classispredikant/>

61 Cf. “Kerk 2025. Deel 1,” 3f.

62 “Kerkorde,” 49 (ord. 4-24-3).

Next, a task of the moderator is to ‘preside over the meetings of the synod.’<sup>63</sup> Initially, this was also the case in the PCN.<sup>64</sup> At a later stage, there were objections regarding the large range of tasks of the *classispredikant*, including his chairmanship. The major objection, however, was that the *classispredikant* may make certain decisions on his own in urgent situations, but in all cases these decisions need to be subsequently confirmed by the board of the classis.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, he has to be accountable in full classis meetings for the decisions he has made in the preceding period.<sup>66</sup> If the *classispredikant* serves as the chairman of these meetings, it may be difficult to ensure his accountability. In the URC, the moderator lacks this kind of power and accountability to his own synod, for he is elected by the general synod.

Furthermore, attention should be drawn to the additional support a *classispredikant* can call upon when executing his major, pastoral mission. As I mentioned above, every classis must appoint a board for the visitation. In the initial plans the *classispredikant* was empowered to summon this board to execute an extraordinary visitation in conflict situations and to give him its advisory opinion.<sup>67</sup> In a later, definite phase, the proposals were weakened and each of them became its own responsibility. The *classispredikant* is explicitly allowed to ask for an extraordinary visitation, but the visitation board itself makes the decision.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, if the board is of the opinion that a visitation shall be executed, it has to consult the *classispredikant* first.<sup>69</sup> On the basis of the visitation report, though, it is the board of the classis which must decide whether measures should be taken, taking the advice of the chairman of the visitation board into account.<sup>70</sup>

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63 URC: “The Manual. Section B,” 6.

64 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 22; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 9

65 “Kerk 2025. Deel 1: (...) tweede lezing,” 4f. In *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 22, this authority is worded in a essentially different way: the *classispredikant* only can take a decision “in consultation with” the board of the classis (so, confirmation beforehand is needed). The context shows this must be due to sloppiness.

66 “Kerkorde,” 45 (ord. 4–16–7, cf. 4–15–8); cf. in general terms *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 21f; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 8.

67 *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is*, 22f; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, 8f.

68 “Kerkorde,” 45 (ord. 4–16–4).

69 “Kerkorde,” 65 (ord. 10–5–2).

70 “Kerkorde,” 45 (ord. 4–16–4). Strictly speaking, the chairman of the visitation board only has a right to advice when the *classispredikant* has asked for an extraordinary visitation.

However, the moderator in the URC too has a few competences that the *classispredikant* does not.<sup>71</sup> He fulfills the responsibility ascribed to him under the URC Disciplinary Process and the Incapacity Procedure. In both procedures he conducts a leading role in the preliminary phase.<sup>72</sup> For example, under certain conditions he himself may suspend the minister concerned.<sup>73</sup> Apart from these far-reaching executive powers, he nominates potential candidates for vacant pastorates and presides at ordinations and/or inductions or appoints a deputy to preside. All these tasks are in line with his pastoral office, but also refer to the episcopal task of ordaining ministers. They empower him to effectively influence the ecclesiastical life in his region. In this respect, the competences of the *classispredikant* are very limited, even in his task to promote the mobility of ministers. He can only use his personal influence. As far as I can see, the role of the URC moderator in the Disciplinary Process and the Incapacity Procedure in the preparatory stage of proceedings is more profound than the power of the *classispredikant* to intervene. On the other hand, the power invested in the *classispredikant* is not confined to disciplinary proceedings but covers measures which can be used in a broader variety of cases.<sup>74</sup> In my opinion, in both denominations it is questionable to what extent one can confide in the *pastor pastorum*. What one says in confidence at one moment can be used against him at another.<sup>75</sup>

Finally, from a missionary point of view, it is important to note the authority to speak on behalf of the classis outside the PCN – ‘in contacts with other denominations, civil society organizations, governments and media within its jurisdiction’ – has been put into words explicitly in the PCN.<sup>76</sup> In the URC the moderator lacks such an authority, though, it is

71 Cf. “The Manual. Section B,” 6.

72 “The Manual. Section O: The Ministerial Disciplinary Process,” accessed July 31, 2018, [https://urc.org.uk/images/the\\_manual/O\\_Ministerial\\_disciplinary\\_process.pdf](https://urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/O_Ministerial_disciplinary_process.pdf); “The Manual. Section P: Procedure for dealing with cases of incapacity involving ministers or church-related community workers,” accessed 31 July, 2018, [https://urc.org.uk/images/the\\_manual/IP\\_from\\_March\\_2016.pdf](https://urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/IP_from_March_2016.pdf).

73 “The Manual. Section O,” B.7.1ff, E; “The Manual. Section P,” B.1.2ff.

74 In fact, in urgent cases he is entitled to take all measures the board of the classis is entitled to take (“Kerkorde,” 45 (ord. 4–16–5)).

75 Perhaps a solution can be found outside the office of the *classispredikant* in the appointment of an independent counselor for the pastorate regarding ministers.

76 “Kerkorde,” 45 (ord. 4–16–6).

not excluded completely. He shall ‘stimulate and encourage the work of the URC within the province or nation.’<sup>77</sup>

In conclusion, it appears that in comparison with the moderator the *classispredikant* has a less independent position and has less authority. This may be explained by the fear of misuse of power Van der Borgh perceives in Reformed theology, in particular in the Netherlands.

### Conclusion

The motives behind the introduction of a bishop identified by Hans Kronenburg can be recognized in the ideals of the Church 2025 project and the rules connected with them. To determine whether the *classispredikant* can be considered a bishop, I look at whether the position meets the criteria established by Kronenburg.

From the fact that the *classispredikant* is not mentioned in the founding legislation of the PCN, I deduce this office is not crucial for the organization of the PCN, in any case not from a theological point of view. The introduction of the *classispredikant* serves mainly practical purposes. Still, this does not exclude the implicit application of underlying theological principles.

The framework for the *classispredikant* is the framework Kronenburg outlines: elected by the community (in this case, the classis), working with other office-bearers, and committed to the authority of a synod (again, in this case, the classis).

According to Kronenburg, a bishop should be a sign of unity. This key notion is found in several underlying documents of the Church 2025 project, but this aspect is only scarcely included in the final, practically phrased regulations: the *classispredikant* embodies the responsibility of the classis to supervise – as part of the *episkopē* – congregations and office-bearers.<sup>78</sup> However, this does not compel the *classispredikant* to restrain himself from behaving as a bishop and being observed as such.

The same applies for most of the other characteristics. Admittedly, the *classispredikant* is officially encouraged to serve as a pastor for both congregations and office-bearers, but he is not explicitly encouraged to witness publicly, to stimulate missionary activities, to teach and guard the tradition of faith, or to link the local and universal church. However, he is not forbidden from engaging in these activities either. On the contrary, outside the PCN he is given the opportunity to speak on behalf of the

<sup>77</sup> URC: “The Manual. Section B,” 6.

<sup>78</sup> “Kerkorde,” 45 (ord. 4–16–1), cf. 9 (art. XII–4) and 43 (ord. 4–14–1).

classis. I expect a charismatic *classispredikant* will in practice be able to fulfill almost all requirements.

Only one of Kronenburg's characteristics is missing completely, namely the ordainer. References to this, such as can be seen in the URC, are completely absent. The *classispredikant* will not be ordained in apostolic succession, nor has he himself the exclusive authority to ordain others, let alone to ordain others in this succession.<sup>79</sup> Hence, probably most episcopal churches will not acknowledge him as a bishop. Nevertheless, provisions as in the URC to propose candidates for vacancies and to be present (or to be represented) at ordinations and inductions, could be inserted easily in the prevailing church order. If the PCN strives for a more bishop-like office or officer, it could consider taking over such regulations and/or introducing concrete regulations to promote the mobility of ministers.

Despite the acknowledgment by other denominations of the *classispredikant* as a bishop, according to the current PCN regulations he is at most half a bishop; however, he does have the potential to develop into an almost whole one.

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79 Cf. also Gosker, *Het ambt*, 240 (cf. 362), Van der Borght, *Theology*, 295–338 and 421–423).

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# Balancing Tensions and Encouraging Health: The Classis Renewal Movement in the Christian Reformed Church in North America

KATHLEEN S. SMITH

## Introduction

Ten years ago, a conference was held at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey, U.S.A., on “A Collegial Bishop? Classis and Presbytery at Issue.” Following the conference, a book was published containing the conference presentations, and in that book, Leon van den Broeke identified two different understandings of the classis in his chapter, “Between Episcopè and Koinonia.”<sup>1</sup> He wrote of the difference between an understanding of the classis as providing oversight and functioning as a bishop, contrasted with a newer understanding of the classis as a place for sharing, relationships, and community.

These two different understandings of the classis – *episkopè* and *koinōnia* – are also operative in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). In fact, in 2018, many classes in the CRCNA are leaning in the direction of the newer understanding of the classis as *koinōnia*, and this has resulted in a need to balance the tensions between these two understandings in this denomination.

This essay will describe how the classis functions in the CRCNA, what the historic and currently changing ecclesiastical vision for the classis is in this North American denomination, and how that vision relates to the leadership of the denomination. It will also describe how the CRCNA is balancing the tensions between different understandings of the classis, while also encouraging health and growth in its churches and classes.

## The function of the classis in the CRCNA

Throughout its history, the CRCNA has understood the classis as a gathering of delegates from the churches in a geographical region, an understanding inherited from the Synod of Dordt of 1618-1619. These

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1 Janssen/Van den Broeke, *A Collegial Bishop?*, 75–91.