

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

The Reformed Church in America as a National Church

John Coakley

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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The Reformed Church in America as a National Church

John Coakley

Donald Luidens's organizational case study and Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell's theological essay to follow reflect on a strong, recent tilt in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) toward the idea that the very purpose of the church at the *national* level is to be of service to the church at the *local* level. Mathonnet-VanderWell analyzes this idea as expressed in the RCA's 1997 Mission and Vision Statement, suggesting among other things that the statement "moves away from traditional Reformed theology and its concomitant polity." Luidens argues that the trend in RCA congregations over the past half-century to become more and more preoccupied with their own local concerns has threatened the very survival of the national agency structure of the RCA. He interprets this new "localism" of the national church as an emergency effort to justify that structure and keep it in place. Both authors see the national preoccupation with the local, or at least the extent of that preoccupation, as signaling a new development for the RCA, a new way of thinking of the church as a national entity.

Here, by way of introduction to Luidens and Mathonnet-VanderWell, I sketch some of the historical background to this recent change in the RCA's thinking about itself at the national level. I ask: What is this a change *from*? How has the RCA conceived of itself as a national entity? How has the "national" been related to the "local"?

To discern the roots of the idea of a national church in the RCA, we do well to consider first the denomination's Dutch Reformed origins. The earliest of the congregations that would eventually form the RCA were the Dutch churches of New Netherland, founded in the mid-seventeenth century on Manhattan and Long Island and farther north in towns along the Hudson River. After the British takeover of 1664, these congregations survived and grew in number in colonial

New York and New Jersey.¹ (The greatest concentrations of RCA congregations today are in those mid-Atlantic states and in the states of the upper Midwest that attracted Dutch immigration in the nineteenth century.)²

Supervised by the classis of Amsterdam, they remained part of the Dutch church for most of the remainder of the colonial period. This Dutch Reformed Church was a *national* church in the sense of being territorial, that is, coextensive with the territory of the Dutch nation. This fact put the Dutch churches in America, which existed under British sovereignty, in an anomalous position within the Dutch church, and was ironically one reason for their very subordination to the classis of Amsterdam. Thus, in the decades just before the American War of Independence, the requests of the group of American ministers and elders (who called themselves the “coetus”) to become a bona fide “classis” (see below) were refused because any such genuine assembly of the Dutch church must be “inseparably connected with the government of this country [i.e., the Netherlands]” — an impossibility in the Americans’ case.³ But even so, there is no question that the Americans belonged to the Dutch church.

The relationship of “national” and “local” levels of the Dutch church was spelled out clearly in its church order, as determined by the national Synod of Dordt, which met in 1618-19. That document designates four types of governing “assemblies,” ascending from the local level to the national. The lowest is the consistory, made up of the minister(s) and elders of a local church. The next is the classis (analogous to the Scots’ “presbytery”), consisting of delegated ministers and elders from several neighboring churches. Then comes the particular synod, made up of delegates from neighboring classes, and finally the general synod, made up of delegates from the various particular synods. Thus, the general synod could be said to be the only concrete expression of the church at the national level. On the other hand, it is important to understand that the existence of the general synod did not constitute — that is, did not bring into existence — the church as a national entity; the church was constituted not from the top, but indeed from the bottom, in the sense that the preaching, sacraments, and discipline that defined it were by nature *local* actions occurring in the individual local churches. To be sure, this understanding of “church” is pointedly different from that of the Congregationalists, who were coming to

1. The standard account is Gerald F. De Jong, *The Dutch Reformed Church in the American Colonies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

2. See the demographic map of the RCA in 1990, in Edwin S. Gaustad and Philip L. Barlow, eds., *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 149.

3. *Ecclesiastical Records, State of New York*, ed. Hugh Hastings, vol. 6 (Albany: J. B. Lyon, 1905), p. 3894.

define it not by the presence of word, sacrament, and discipline per se, but rather by the covenant of members with themselves and God — but the point of definition was no less “local” than theirs.⁴

The Church Order of Dordt did not specify the actual tasks of the general synod, and since that synod did not meet again for well over three hundred years, there is little in the historical record to show what they were meant to be. Yet the Church Order states as a general principle that in each of the four assemblies, when considered in relation to its neighbor on the ascending scale from local to national, “no business shall be transacted, except what could not be settled in the lesser Assembly, or such as appertains to the Churches composing the Greater Assembly, in general.”⁵ Thus the general synod apparently could receive appeals and referrals from the particular synods, but could only originate business that affected the whole national church collectively — the most obvious example being the Synod of Dordt’s own definitive formulations of doctrinal standards and church order. The general synod did not *directly* either supervise local churches or address their concerns.

Before we go on, a word is in order about the theological understanding of “church” that underlay this form of church government. The Dutch Reformed Church embraced, as one of its fundamental doctrinal standards, the so-called Belgic Confession of 1561. This document articulates the Augustinian/Calvinist idea of the “true church” as recognizable by two marks: (1) the “pure preaching of the Gospel” and (2) the “pure administration of the sacraments as Christ ordained them,” to which the Belgic added (3) “the exercise of church discipline for the correcting of vices.”⁶ The church’s essential task, in such a view of things, was to maintain the purity and correctness of its preaching, sacraments, and discipline. Endeavors such as the conversion of unbelievers, or the amelioration of society in terms of Christian values, were — however worthy — by implication *not* the church’s explicit tasks. The church was not, in other words, about changing the world, or at least not directly. Rather it was about preserving a faithful and pure witness to God’s revelation; it was not characterized by active enter-

4. According to the Congregational “Cambridge Platform” of 1648, the “form” of the church is “the *Visible Covenant*, Agreement, or consent wherby [*sic*] they give up themselves unto the Lord, to the observing of the ordinances of Christ together in the same society, which is usually called the *Church-Covenant*” (chap. 2 sec. 3). *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, ed. Williston Walker (New York: Scribner, 1893), pp. 207-8. See the comments on the “essence” of the church in Reformed polity in Allan Janssen, *Constitutional Theology: Notes on the “Book of Church Order” of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 221-23.

5. “Church-Order [of Dordt],” article 30, in *Ecclesiastical Records*, 6:4221.

6. The Belgic Confession, article 29, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1877), 3:419-20.

prise so much as by steadfastness. Did the Dutch Reformed Church of this period lack a sense of “mission,” then? Not necessarily. Certainly the adherents of the Belgic Confession believed that the gospel was meant for the world and that its light was not to be kept under a bushel. But for them, as for the other Protestants of the Reformation, it was precisely the faithfulness and purity of the church’s preaching of the Word of God — its steadfastness — that served such mission most directly. This is because the Reformers believed in the active power of the Word of God itself, truly proclaimed, and therefore, as David Bosch has put it, were confident that “it is the gospel itself that ‘missionizes,’ and in this process enlists human beings.”⁷ As for the activist work of establishing places for the gospel to be heard, what we would now call “church extension,” the Belgic Confession assigned this not to the church per se, but rather to the civil government. It is the magistrates, not the ministers, elders, deacons, or assemblies of the church, who are charged to “promote the kingdom of Jesus Christ and to take care that the word of the gospel be preached everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by everyone, as he commands in his word.”⁸

When the Dutch Reformed churches in America constituted themselves as a national church in their own right in the years surrounding the War of Independence — the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States (a name employed with minor variations until it was changed to Reformed Church in America in 1867) — they retained the ecclesiology of the Dutch church in most respects. They did make one important change almost immediately, namely, to reject any role for the magistrate in church affairs.⁹ But otherwise they embraced the Belgic Confession and the other two Dutch Reformed doctrinal standards (the Heidelberg Catechism and the canons of the Synod of Dordt) as well as, in its essentials, the Church Order of Dordt. Even in their assertion of church-state separation we can discern the traditional Reformed idea of “church.” According to the preface to the 1792 constitution approved by the general synod of this new church,

Whether the Church of Christ will not be more effectually patronised in a civil government where full freedom of conscience and worship is equally protected and insured to all men, and where truth is left to vindicate her own sovereign authority and influence, than where men in power promote

7. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), p. 244.

8. The Belgic Confession, article 36, p. 432.

9. The magistrate had the responsibility, as the Belgic Confession put it, “to maintain the sacred ministry so as to root out all idolatry and false worship of God.” The Belgic Confession, article 36, p. 432.

their favorite denominations by temporal emoluments and partial discriminations, will now, in America, have a fair trial; and all who know and love the truth will rejoice in the prospect which such a happy situation affords for the triumph of the Gospel and the reign of peace and love.¹⁰

It is true that the envisioning of a “reign of peace and love” here suggests an un-Augustinian optimism about the future of Christian society that would have been foreign to much of the early Reformed tradition and that anticipates the millennialism that would become commonplace in the American Christianity of the decades to follow. It is also true that the preface presents the very exclusion of the magistrates from church affairs — without any reassignment of missionary functions to the church itself, or indeed to anyone else¹¹ — as something positive and hopeful. The idea here is that the very freedom accorded the gospel in such a situation would constitute the best condition for the envisioned social change. But significantly, the preface does not present the church as an *agent* to bring about that change. Instead it speaks of the church in passive terms, as something to be “patronised,” apparently in the sense that citizens will have access to it for what it has to offer, in the same way, if with greater foreseen success, as when it was under government protection. What the church offered in that case was precisely its preaching, and sacraments, and discipline; we find ourselves here still within the realm of the earlier Reformed ecclesiology.

As for the infant RCA’s notion of the “national” church, and by implication that of the “local” church, again it followed the Church Order of Dordt fairly closely. Indeed, the section of the constitution on church order is called the “Explanatory Articles on the Church Order of Dordt.” The same four assemblies are set forth in the same ascending order beginning with the local consistory, and related to each other in the same way as in the older document. The church is still understood as fundamentally local in its marks, and none of the assemblies can trump its lower neighbor’s proper authority.

Thus, in substance, the RCA remained true to the earlier tradition. But in its understanding of the work of the church at the national level, a new tone is discernible in the articles. On the subject of the general synod, they say more than Dordt had said: “A General Synod represents the whole body. It is the highest judicatory, the last resort in all questions, which relate to the government, peace and unity of the church. To this is committed superintending the

10. “Preface to the Entire Constitution, Embracing Doctrines, Liturgy and Government, 1792,” in Edward C. Corwin, ed., *A Digest of Synodical Legislation in the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Board of Publication of the R.C.A., 1906), p. vi.

11. Marvin D. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 15-16.

interests of religion, the maintaining harmony, and faithfully preserving the churches in principles and practice of their holy religion.”¹² Here the general synod is given something of its own to do — maintaining standards of doctrine and practice and also, vaguely but broadly, “superintending the interests of religion.” It looks to be, potentially anyway, more an activist body than the old church order envisioned.

The articles go on to say that the general synod has the power of “nominating and appointing Professors of Theology” and holding them accountable to itself, corresponding with other churches, and constituting and receiving appeals from particular synods. They also speak of “deputies” to be appointed to be present at classis examinations of candidates for ministry (presumably exercising the synod’s responsibility to maintain standards of doctrine and practice).¹³ The drafters of the explanatory articles seem to have been quite deliberate in attempting to envision the functioning of the church at the national level, even if the phrase “superintending the interests of religion” remains somewhat vague.

This activism at the national level would soon be more than merely a matter of tone. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, a new idea of “church” gained currency in the RCA, with important implications at the national level. This was the idea that, whatever the church’s commitments to steadfastness and purity in preaching and sacraments, it must also be a zealous agent to bring and apply the gospel to the world, especially through evangelism. It was an idea that was also taking hold in other American churches at the time, and that underlay the new phenomenon of the American “denomination” as (to use Sidney Mead’s term) a “purposive” and ecumenically cooperative body aimed at the Christianization of the republic as well as of the whole globe. Typically, American churches expressed this zeal at first by supporting voluntary societies for missions and other Christian initiatives, and then, roughly from midcentury onward, began to form their own respective structures of agencies for these purposes.¹⁴ In the RCA case, after a period of unsuccessful

12. “Articles Explanatory of the Government and Discipline of the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States of America,” art. 51, in *A Digest of Constitutional and Synodical Legislation of the Reformed Church in America*, ed. Edward Tanjore Corwin (New York: Board of Publications of the RCA, 1906), p. lviii.

13. Corwin, *Digest*, p. lviii.

14. Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 103; Russell E. Richey, “The Social Sources of Denominationalism: Methodism,” in *Denominationalism*, ed. Russell E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), pp. 63-84, esp. 166-71. For the processes of agency-formation in other denominations in the nineteenth century, analogous to that of the RCA, see C. Conrad Wright, “The Growth of Denominational Bureaucracies: A Neglected Aspect of American Church History,” *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984): 177-94.

experimentation in which the general synod attempted to sponsor missionary work through, successively, a committee of its own, a particular synod (that of Albany), and a voluntary missionary society, the general synod created in 1831 its own Board of Missions (renamed in 1844 the Board of Domestic Missions). This was an agency distinct from the synod that eventually had its own staff, and yet also served at the synod's pleasure and entirely under its direction.¹⁵ Insofar as it was thus both discrete from and dependent upon the synod, it established a model for several other boards that soon came into being, all under the synod's direction: the Board of Foreign Missions (1832), the Board of Education (1832), the Board of the Sabbath School Union (1839, abolished 1863), the Board of Publication (1854), the Women's Board of Foreign Missions (1875), the Women's Executive Committee for Domestic Missions (1882).¹⁶

By forming and directing these boards for the pursuit of various missional purposes, the general synod was not only taking on a new task, but signaling a genuinely new understanding of the church as a national entity within the terms of its own tradition. The Church Order of Dordt had not foreseen such a function, and indeed the activist idea of mission that this function presupposes is patently not the same as that of the early Reformed tradition, as assumed by the old church order that was still enshrined in the RCA constitution. The church indeed recognized this in the late decades of the nineteenth century, and after some years of debate passed a constitutional amendment in 1901 specifying that

to the General Synod also belongs the power and duty to institute and organize such general agencies as shall best enable the church to fulfill the command of the Lord Jesus Christ by which he has enjoined on all His disciples the duty of teaching all nations and preaching the Gospel to every creature; to maintain, supervise and direct such agencies when erected in the conduct of missionary operations at home and abroad, and to recommend such methods in the church as shall effectively sustain such agencies and tend to secure the largest dissemination of the Gospel.¹⁷

Thus, the great task of mission came to be lodged officially at the national level of the RCA; and the national entity became — or had already become — the premier expression of the church as missional.

This idea of the national entity as the spearhead of mission remained in place through most of the twentieth century. It found particularly strong expres-

15. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, pp. 20-32.

16. Corwin, *Digest*, pp. 94-96.

17. Minutes of General Synod, 1879, p. 378, quoted in Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, p. 44.

sion in the second half of the century, characterized by a certain sense of urgency about the work of the general synod's agencies and a chronic impulse to reorganize them for greater efficiency and effectiveness — a process influenced by organizational models derived from the corporate business world. In 1952 a Stewardship Council was established which coordinated the agencies' work and presented a single budget to the general synod, in contrast to the previous system whereby each agency had made its own direct request to the synod for funding. Then in 1961 the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) was formed to provide a similar focus and coordination for all the other work of the synod. Then in 1968 the General Program Council (GPC) was created to supersede the Stewardship Council, and carried consolidation of program significantly further by literally merging the boards and agencies into a single corporation with its own representative board and staff.¹⁸ The GPC, after some reorganization of its own in 1980, eventually went out of existence in 1992 when a new, single General Synod Council (GSC) took over both its functions and those of the GSEC; and the GSC itself has recently conducted an "organizational audit" with a view to clarifying its own position and tasks.¹⁹ Throughout this long period of reorganization, the professional staff of the national agencies have emerged as important players, especially the general secretary, whose position (given its present name in 1968) evolved out of the old functionary position of clerk of the GS (general synod), to become in effect CEO of the whole structure of national agencies.²⁰ In all these developments the idea of the church as "purposive" body, intent on effective action, is very much in evidence.

That heightened sense of purposiveness about the national work of the church indeed forms the immediate background of the changes discussed by Luidens and Mathonnet-VanderWell; but before we return to those changes, there is one more element to consider in the historical record. I have suggested that from the nineteenth century onward the national entity took on new tasks. But that does not mean it ceased to be what it had been. We have so far discerned two operative ideas of "church": the older Reformed doctrine that defines it in terms of the purity of its ordinances, expressed within a territorially defined polity, and the more recent idea of the church as inherently purposive, defined by its mission. The more recent idea dominates any account of the national church in the last century and a half. Yet it has not supplanted the older one in the RCA, but has coexisted with it fairly harmoniously. To be sure, concerns were raised in the long debates that preceded the 1901 constitutional

18. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, pp. 92-199.

19. Minutes of General Synod, 2000, pp. 71-72.

20. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, pp. 121-23.

amendment that making the agencies constitutional altered the traditional polity unnecessarily; and in years of continual postwar restructuring the fear has been expressed that the agencies would take over the proper responsibilities allotted to the general synod by the ancient Reformed polity.²¹ Yet fundamentally, not only the historical polity but also the basic Reformed doctrines remained in place; the RCA has continued to embrace the Belgic Confession and the other Dutch Reformed doctrinal standards; and its *Book of Church Order* has continued to maintain, in essentials, the polity of the Church Order of Dordt. Insofar as the general synod remains in charge of the national agencies, one might even say that the delegation of missional tasks to the general synod as specified in the constitutional amendment of 1901 marked an instance of what the Church Order of Dordt envisioned in specifying a Greater Assembly's business as that which "appertains to the Churches composing the Greater Assembly, in general." In this sense the national church did not alter, over the course of the last century and a half of "purposive" action, the basic relationship to the local church it always had. There has been a balance or harmony in the RCA between its two guiding ideas of "church."

Now let us return to the present and the newly prevailing idea that the business of the national church is to serve the local church. What precisely has changed? What has not?

One thing that has *not* changed is the notion of the church as *fundamentally* local. Often one hears voices of alarm in the RCA that label the new sensibilities within the denomination as evidence of creeping "congregationalism," as though the emphasis on the local itself violated the historic presbyterial polity of the RCA. There may be evidence for this in particular cases (such as the Mission Statement's characterization of the RCA as a "fellowship of congregations"). But in the RCA's tradition the very definition of the church as the locus of preaching and sacrament already construes the church as something essentially local. Churches with true "congregational" polity have a different way of defining the church as something local, and they have a different (more voluntarist) notion of the relationship between the local and national levels of the church. But that does

21. *Christian Intelligencer*, November 19, 1888, p. 8; a pastor who was president of the general synod in 1961 wrote in alarm to the stated clerk complaining about the latter's newly enlarged powers: "The role of the Stated Clerk in the Executive Committee should, it seems to me, be of a truly secretarial nature; . . . the Stated Clerk would somewhat embarrass his position at church headquarters if he assumes direct responsibility for the 'coordination of the work of the Boards and agencies of the church' [cf. Minutes of General Synod, 1961, p. 342]. This responsibility should always clearly rest with the Committee rather than the person, whether he be president of the Synod, Stated Clerk or whatever." Norman Thomas to Marion de Velder, November 16, 1961, RCA Archives A/81-1, box no. 3.

not make their conception of church any more “local” than the RCA’s — or any less national, for that matter; indeed, Congregationalists (and other churches of congregational polity) have strong traditions of national witness, in many cases rivaling that of the RCA. Strong assertions within the RCA of the local nature of the church do not, in themselves anyway, constitute a breach from tradition.

A second thing that has not changed, at least not since the emergence of the RCA as a “denomination” in the nineteenth century, is the conviction that the church must be “purposive,” activist, about its mission. That conviction, which from the early nineteenth century marked a departure from the sensibility of the Reformation, has if anything gained in strength since enshrined in the RCA constitution in 1901; the spirit of the Mission Statement of 1997 is nothing if not purposive.

As for what *has* changed, again I point to two things. One is exactly the balance between the older and newer notions of “church” that derive from the RCA’s tradition. I wonder if it will soon be no longer appropriate to speak of such a balance at all. Specifically, I wonder if mission in the “purposive” sense is increasingly being considered as the very essence of the church. As Mathonnet-VanderWell’s essay shows, the single-mindedness of the Mission Statement in this respect causes it to obscure or subtly revise elements of the older polity, such that little sense remains of a “territorial” notion of church with its attributes of steadfastness and purity. (In this context it is also worth noting that the practice of infant baptism, historically inseparable from that idea of church, is being seriously questioned in many parts of the RCA.) The provocative phrase in the Mission Statement, “we will not do business as usual, or the usual business,” is sometimes invoked in the context of the questioning of existing structures of polity.

In the second place, and perhaps most obviously, the assumption that it is the national entity that most properly has the job of “mission” has come in for severe criticism. That assumption seems to have been so strong in the nineteenth century as not to need any particular argument to justify it; similarly now, the contrary assertion — that the local church is the proper locus of mission — is set forth (as, for instance, in the Mission Statement) as something self-evident. Loren Mead has pointed to this change of emphasis on the broader stage of American Christianity, calling it a paradigm shift, one of those changes that is too profound for people quite to spot or understand it when it first happens; and that characterization seems apt.²² The following case study and theological essay explore the implications of this, as it has appeared in the national structures of this one denomination, in fascinating detail.

22. Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1991), pp. 8-29.