

WHY DO THE CANADIAN REFORMED CHURCHES HAVE THEIR OWN SEMINARY?

In answering this question, the following will be considered.

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 - 1. "Entrust to Reliable Men who will also be Qualified to Teach Others"
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A. Exegetical Arguments for the Church's Responsibility to Train their Ministers

Whose responsibility is the training for ministers of the Word? The church's or an organization which is independent of the church it seeks to serve and over which the church has no direct supervision or responsibility?

In examining what the Bible has to say on the topic, we will need to start with 2 Timothy 2:2. In the history of the Reformed churches in The Netherlands, this has been a key passage for arguing that it is the church's task to take care of the training of ministers. This is also the only Scripture that is specifically mentioned in the official account of the discussions that led to the decision of the 1891 Synod of the churches of the Secession to maintain the principle that the church is called to maintain their own training for the ministry of the Word.¹

¹ *Handelingen van de Synoden der Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederlands in de 19 Zittingen door haar gehouden te Leeuwarden, van 18-29 Augustus 1891* (Leiden: Donner, 1891) Art 172.

As a historical note, it should also be mentioned that the Rev. J. Kok discussed many biblical passages on the topic at hand in his notable address delivered on a special day held for the Theologische Hogeschool in Kampen, The Netherlands, on July 4, 1909. This speech was subsequently published in expanded form as *De Opleiding tot den dienst des Woords: “voor de kerk, door de kerk”* (*The Training for the Ministry of the Word: “By the Church and for the Church”*)²

For the present purpose, let us consider 2 Timothy 2:2 and 1 Timothy 3:15, followed by a brief look at the task of the church. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

1. “Entrust to Reliable Men who will also be Qualified to Teach Others”

2 Timothy 2:2

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. (NIV)

The apostle Paul is addressing Timothy as his own spiritual son. Paul also called Timothy “my fellow worker” (Rom 16:21), “God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ” (1 Thess 3:2), and “servant (*diakonos*) of Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 4:6). Timothy had received the laying on of hands by the elders (1 Tim 4:14) and was exhorted to preach the Word (1 Tim 4:11-13). He did the work of an evangelist (2 Tim 4:5). Clearly he had an important position of leadership in the church at Ephesus.³ To him the apostle, for example, gave instructions about the office of elder (1 Tim 3:1-7; 5:17-19) and entrusted the general care of the congregation (cf. e.g., 1 Tim 4:11-14; 2 Tim 2:14-19).

A key concern for the apostle, who was facing certain death (2 Tim 4:6, 18), was that the gospel be safeguarded (2 Tim 1:13-14; cf. 3:14-17) and proclaimed in truth (2 Tim 4:1-5). In this general context, he mandates Timothy as a close associate of the apostle (“my son” - 2 Tim 2:1), to entrust to reliable men the gospel he has heard so that they may be qualified to teach others

²Published by J. H. Kok in Kampen in 1906.

³When he received the two letters addressed to him, he was labouring in the church at Ephesus. For 1 Timothy, see 1 Tim 1:3; for 2 Timothy the evidence is more indirect. When Paul suggests that Timothy come to him (2 Tim 4:9), he mentions that he is sending Tychius to Ephesus (2 Tim 4:12), presumably as Timothy's replacement. Also, he notes that Timothy will know the services rendered in Ephesus by Onesiphorus (2 Tim 1:18). See further, G. W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 10.

also (2 Tim 2:2).

It is notable when one considers 2 Timothy 2:2 that the apostle specifies that what needs to be entrusted to others is that which Timothy heard from Paul “in the presence of many witnesses.” Although the witnesses may refer to those present at Timothy’s ordination when the apostle exhorted Timothy to bring sound teaching (1 Tim 1:14), the reference to witnesses probably goes beyond that. It includes all those who have witnessed the public preaching and teaching ministry of the apostle Paul.⁴ The phrase “in the presence of many witnesses” thus emphasizes that what is to be handed down is not secret or esoteric but can be testified as the gospel by the many who have heard the apostle preach and teach. The full gospel is to be passed on.

It is also to be noted that the task of entrusting the gospel to others is given to a man like Timothy who had received the laying on of hands and held office in the church. The principle appears to be that those holding office in the church must train office bearers for the church. Office bearers ordained by the church work on behalf of the church.⁵

Here we have a key apostolic mandate for the transmitting of the gospel from one generation to the other with the express purpose that the teaching of this gospel be continued in the future. Those who preach the Word must train others to do the same. “This, then, may be considered as the earliest trace of the formation of *a theological school*, - a school which has for its object not merely the instruction of the ignorant, but the protection and maintenance of a definite body of doctrine.”⁶

As further background to the above, it one can note that behind the relationship that the apostle Paul had with Timothy, there was ultimately the teaching relationship that the Lord Jesus had with his disciples. In the gospels, the Lord is often addressed as teacher (e.g. Matt 8:19; 12:38; 22:16, 24, 36) and he refers to himself as the one Teacher, (“you have one Teacher, the Christ” Matt 23:10). The response to one significant teaching event was that “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matt 7:28-29). His teaching relationship with his disciples also meant that they were

⁴So, e.g., Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 390; W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 246-247.

⁵See J. Van Andel, *Paulus' beide brieven aan Timotheus toegelicht* (Leiden: Donner, 1904), 148-149.

⁶Alfred Plummer, *The Pastoral Epistles* (The Expositor's Bible; 2nd ed.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889) 336 (emphasis is Plummer's). More recently, Knight, e.g., concurs with Plummer's observation. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 392.

always “with him” (Mk 3:14; Acts 1:21). It is also apparent that this teaching process did not stop with the ascension of our Lord; rather among the commands given to the disciples was that they, in turn, would need to teach those whom they discipled and baptized (Matthew 28:20 “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”).

The apostle Paul took along on his missionary journeys several young men whom he left behind to work in congregations. This happened to Timothy who was with Paul (1 Thess 1:1; Rom 16:21) but who also stayed behind in Ephesus to give further instruction for congregational life (1 Tim 1:4, 18), Titus (Titus 1:5) and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25). This was an early form of theological education, from minister to minister.

2. The Church is “the Pillar and Foundation of the Truth”

1 Timothy 3:15

Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. (1 Tim 3:14-15 NIV)

It is important to notice that the church is called “the pillar and foundation of the truth.” The immediate context of qualifications for overseers and deacons (1 Tim 3:1-13), as well as behaving properly in God’s household, the church (1 Tim 3:14) suggests that certain kinds of behaviour can be expected by virtue of the fact that the church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth.” Those who are members are to live up to the ideals of what the church stands for. They must live according to the truth of the gospel.⁷

However, the fact that the church is here called “the pillar and foundation of the truth” carries a major implication for our topic as well. While the precise meaning of the Greek terms translated by “the pillar and foundation of the truth” can be debated,⁸ it is clear that this characterization indicates that central to the task of the church is to uphold, maintain and support

⁷See, e.g., the discussion in I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 510-511.

⁸The phrase has also been rendered, e.g., “support and foundation of the truth” (F. W. Danker, rev. and ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature* [3rd ed., based on the 6th ed. of W. Bauer’s *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 949) and “pillar and bulwark of the truth” (RSV).

the truth which is the gospel (1 Tim 2:4; 4:3; John 17:17).⁹ “The church is fundamental to the gospel ministry.”¹⁰ To the church the gospel has been entrusted (John 17:8, 14). Calvin put it thus: “By these words [of 1 Tim 3:15], Paul means that the church is the faithful keeper of God’s truth in order that it may not perish in the world. For by its ministry and labour God willed to have the preaching of his Word kept pure and to show himself the Father of a family while he feeds us with spiritual food and provides everything that makes for our salvation.”¹¹ When Calvin comments on the meaning of the church as pillar of truth in his commentary, he notes “In consequence, this commendation applies to the ministry of the Word; for if it is removed, God’s truth will fall.”¹² If the above is the case, then training pastors and teachers belongs to the task of the church as the pillar and foundation of the truth and it is not properly the responsibility of an organization independent of the church.

3. The Task of the Church is to Preach the Gospel

Christ to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matt 28:18) gives offices to his church (Eph 4:11-13) and through his Spirit calls and equips them to serve (cf. Acts 20:28). The office of minister is therefore a gift of Christ to his church. Thus when a minister is ordained according to the classical Reformed ordination form, he needs to answer positively the question: “Do you feel in your heart that God himself, through his congregation, has called you to this holy ministry?”

There are two basic elements that need to be noticed here. First, the Lord calls to office and therefore determines how that service is to be executed. Second, the office is given to the church and functions within the context of the church.

The proclamation of the gospel belongs to the very heart and kernel of being church (cf. Matt 28:19-20; Rom 10:14). If the church has the task to proclaim the gospel through the office of preacher given to her (Eph 4:11), then it follows that the church has the first responsibility to

⁹See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 181; C. Bouma, *De Brieven van den Apostel Paulus aan Timotheus en Titus* (Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament XI; Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1942), 145-146.

¹⁰Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 512.

¹¹Calvin, *Institutes* IV.i.10 (Battle’s edition).

¹²Calvin on 1 Tim 3:15 in D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, eds., *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (T. A. Smail, trans.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964), 232.

see to it that the gospel can continue to be proclaimed by training future ministers of the Word. This is not a duty that can be readily given to another organization. The proclamation of the gospel belongs to the very reason why the church exists. Without preaching there is no church!

How can the church pray for more labourers in the harvest (cf. Matt 9:37-38) without at the same time taking responsibility that good labourers are available, in so far as she is able? To ask the question is to answer it. As we see in 2 Timothy 2:2 “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.”

4. Conclusions

On the basis of the above, three (somewhat overlapping) conclusions can be drawn.

1. The apostolic injunction to Timothy, “*the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*” (2 Tim 2:2), indicates that those ordained by the church should work to supply the church with future preachers. They will have to ensure that these ministers are able to preach and teach.
2. The church as “*the pillar and foundation of the truth*”(1 Tim 3:15) indicates that to her the gospel has been entrusted and therefore to her falls the responsibility to proclaim and maintain that gospel, also by training faithful pastors and teachers.
3. Since the office of preacher has been given to the church, it is the task of the church to preach the gospel. This responsibility also means that the church has to see to it that this proclamation can continue. Besides praying for future labourers, the church must therefore also provide training so that such labourers can be properly prepared and sent out.

B. Historical Notes on the Role of the Church in the Training for the Ministry.

In order to put the whole issue of responsibility for theological education into our present

day perspective, it may be useful to have a brief historical overview.¹³

1. The Medieval and Reformation Eras

The specific form which the training for the ministry assumed often depended to a great extent on the historical circumstances. At some time during the patristic period, local overseers became regional bishops. This led to these bishops establishing schools where future ministers could be educated. To give an example, the Council of Orange 529 determined that bishops and presbyters had to open their houses for young men to train them as fathers, to instruct them in the Holy Scriptures and to educate them so they could assume their office. According to this church decision, theological training of future ministers was entrusted to ministers with regional or local authority. Such seminaries were founded in several places in Italy, in England, Gaul and Spain.¹⁴

During the later Middle Ages, universities came into existence and this changed the manner of education. Originally the universities consisted of groups of people devoted to study who were more or less self-sufficient. These students selected and supported teachers of their choice. Gradually, however, the universities organized themselves into formal schools, governed and funded by the cities. Rather than being supported by their students, the professors were in the employ of the city and paid by them. At the same time, these professors were subject to the jurisdiction of the church.¹⁵

When the Reformation of the church took place during the sixteenth century, the training for the ministry had to be reestablished. In agreement with the custom of that time when the government determined the public religion of their nations, this was done by the government. Calvin urged the city council of Geneva to establish a seminary, as it was the right of the church to have an institute for theological training. Similarly, in the Palatinate it was the Elector Frederick who had changed the *Collegium Sapientiae* into a theological school, and had placed it under the supervision of the church council. The city of Leiden in the Netherlands, as a reward for their faithfulness, received a university from Prince William of Orange, which was first of all

¹³There has always been a general acceptance of the fact that future ministers need to be trained and educated before they can be ordained. To be sure, some sixteenth century spiritualist groups were of the opinion that leaders of the congregation did not need any education, but this approach was an exception.

¹⁴ H. Bavinck, *Het doctorenambt* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1899), 20-21, 24-25.

¹⁵ H. Bavinck, *Het doctorenambt*, 27-34.

intended for establishing a training for the ministry.¹⁶

From the major ecclesiastical assemblies held in seventeenth century Holland, it is clear that the churches always insisted that the professors of theology be subject to the teaching of the church, even though they were appointed by the government to the universities. The Synod of Dordrecht of 1618-1619 determined that from now on “the theological professors must appear at synod and there give an account of their teaching and submit themselves to the judgment of synod.”¹⁷

These examples date from times different from our own. Then the established church was closely connected with the state and lived under its patronage. As a result, theological education was also seen as being the responsibility of the government. However, the church did what it could to exercise their responsibility over those who taught future ministers.

Two changes took place in the nineteenth century. We will focus on what happened in The Netherlands.

2. Nineteenth Century Holland

The first change concerned the public universities. The Dutch Parliament adopted a law in 1876 which transformed the university departments of theology into those of religion, a shift in emphasis from revelation to piety. The theological professors were appointed by the university. However, the national church, the Nederlands Hervormde Kerk received the right to appoint one professor at each of the universities who would teach the doctrine of the church as an addition to the scholarly training given at the universities.¹⁸ However, since that time, theological education in the Netherlands takes place in the context of the separation of church and state. As a result, many parts of theology were taught from a (usually liberal) scholarly perspective, without consideration of the life of the church.

The second change which impacted on theological education was the establishing of theological seminaries outside of the control of the government. The Secession, a reformation

¹⁶ H. H. Kuyper, *De opleiding tot den dienst des woords bij de gereformeerden* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1891), 156, 431-432; E. K. Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus* (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche, 33; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 1972), 237-238.

¹⁷ See the decision of Dordrecht in F. L. Bos, *De Orde der Kerk* ('s-Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Guido de Bres, 1950) 79. See also the decision of Gorinchem 1622 on the same page.

¹⁸ D. Nauta, “Opleiding van predikanten”, in F. W. Grosheide and G. P. van Itterzon, *Christelijke Encyclopedie* (6 vols, 2nd ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1956-1961) 1.318.

movement beginning in 1834 within the tolerant national church, prompted a basic reconsideration of the way in which the training for the ministry should be organized. There was a desperate shortage of ministers within these churches, for during the early years, there were only seven ministers working within the seceded churches. However, within a year after the Secession had begun, the number of congregations grew to about seventy. The few ministers did what they could, by, for instance, preaching three to four times on the Sundays. Worship services were also organized during the week, so that some ministers preached anywhere between 15 and 20 times in a week.¹⁹ It was obvious to all that something needed to be done about the lack of ministers.

The churches decided that they should organize the training for the ministry. The provincial Synod of Groningen of 1839 appointed Hendrik De Cock to teach men who were suitable and willing to become ministers. In the province of Friesland, Rev. T.F. De Haan was appointed for the same task. When De Cock had passed away, De Haan accepted the request to teach the students from both provinces. The churches determined who would teach, and through these ministers they took care of the theological training, however primitive this may have been during those early years.²⁰

It was soon felt that this way of training future ministers was insufficient, and that there should be one theological school for the whole church. Rev. De Haan was charged to draw up a proposal for a theological school for all Secession churches. His proposal of appointing two ministers as full time teachers was bettered by the decision of Synod 1849 to appoint three ministers.²¹ When the seminary was officially opened in 1854, four ministers were charged to be “teachers of the theological school.”²² The seminary of the Secession churches can be characterized as a church school, for ministers appointed by the general synod of these churches took charge of the theological training of its ministers.

Within the State Church, another reformation movement, called *Doleantie*, took place in 1886. Prior to that, in 1880, Dr. A. Kuyper, one of the leaders of the *Doleantie*, had already

¹⁹ W. de Graaf, *Een monument der afscheiding* (Kampen: Kok, 1955) 5-6; H. Bouma, ‘De voorgeschiedenis der opleiding’, in *Tot de prediking van het woord des geloofs* (Kampen: Comité van Uitgave, 1953), 15.

²⁰ H. Bouma, ‘De voorgeschiedenis’, 21-26.

²¹ W. de Graaf, *Een monument der afscheiding*, 15-18.

²² H. Veltman, ‘Zo God voor ons is’, *Tot de prediking van het Woord des geloofs: Opstellen ter gelegenheid van de herdenking van de oprichting der Theologische School A.D. 1854 te Kampen* (Kampen: Comité van Uitgave, [1953]), 68; W. de Graaf, *Een monument der afscheiding*, 35-41.

established a university.²³ This university began with three departments, including a department of theology. When the churches from the Secession and from the Doleantie discussed unification, theological education was a major point of discussion.

The churches of the Secession emphasized that the churches themselves should maintain a Theological School for the training of future ministers. In 1891, one year before the union, the Synod of the Secession churches adopted the proposal of Friesland by which the Synod maintained the principle that the church is called to have its own institution for the education of its ministers, at least as far as their theological training is concerned.²⁴

The General Synod of the Doleantie churches of 1891 was satisfied with the statement made by the Synod of the Secession churches concerning the training for the ministry. However, it decided to qualify it by declaring that the purpose of this statement is not: 1. to destroy the traditional reformed principle of free study; nor 2. to change the Reformed manner of ecclesiastical examination of future ministers; nor 3. to take anything away from the demand for scholarly study which had always been demanded by the Reformed churches; nor 4. to deny that the united churches at a later date have to judge the regulation of this issue.²⁵ In this decision, both the need for an church seminary and the need for scholarly study were emphasized within the Reformed churches in which Secession and Doleantie came together.

It took a while before the relationship between the united churches and the theological department at the Free University was official. A. Kuiper posited that a fundamental difference existed between a seminary and the theological department of a university. Even as late as 1912 he maintained a fundamental distinction between a seminary and a university. In his opinion, a seminary trains future ministers for the churches, but the Theological Department of the Free University should not demean itself to become a training institution for future ministers. It has to do that, too, but its first task is to present theology in a scholarly way.²⁶

Nevertheless, the Reformed Churches did supervise the theological teaching at the Free University. The deputies appointed to maintain the contact between the Reformed Churches and

²³ F. Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuiper* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia, 1978), 97-99.

²⁴ *Handelingen van de Synode der Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland in de 19 Zittingen door haar gehouden te Leeuwarden, van 18-29 Augustus 1891* (Leiden: Donner, 1891), Art. 172 (pp. 95-96); see also W. De Graaf, *Een monument der afscheiding*, 175.

²⁵ W. De Graaf, *Een monument der Afscheiding*, 177-178.

²⁶ J.C. Rullmann, *De Vrije Universiteit: Haar ontstaan en haar bestaan*, (Amsterdam: De Standaard, 1930) 110-111.

the Theological Department of the Free University stated that it was their mandate to evaluate:

- the appropriateness of the education as training for the ministry
- to be on guard against deviation from the Reformed Confession
- to evaluate whether there were weaknesses in the education
- to provide the faculty with an evaluation concerning an upcoming appointments
- to make known to the faculty comments or wishes concerning the theological students

and their conduct

- to make sure that no one receives a doctor's degree in theology without having subscribed to the Form agreed to for that purpose.²⁷

In conclusion, the following can be noted. When the Reformed Church became independent from the state, it maintained the rule that the church itself should take care of the theological training of its ministers. When the churches of the Secession and the Doleantie came together, they acknowledged, in word and deed, the principle of the churches maintaining a theological training for preparing ministers of the Word. Kampen was maintained. Also, the important place of the churches in theological education was acknowledged by granting the Reformed Churches the authority to supervise the theological training at the Free University.

3. North American Developments

The two related principles that ministers teach ministers, and that the church takes care of this training were applied by the Reformed churches on this continent. To limit ourselves to the sister church of the Secession churches, the Christian Reformed Church maintained from the beginning the principle that the church is responsible for teaching its future ministers. At the February Classis of 1861, the question was discussed whether the churches should not open the way to training of young men to the ministry. The July Classis of 1863 entrusted that task to Rev. W. H. Van Leeuwen. Later, another minister, D. J. Van der Werp, trained students in addition to the work in his congregation. The first minister who was set aside for the training of the ministry was Rev. G. Boer, who was appointed in 1886 to teach students for the ministry.²⁸

When after World War II, the Canadian Reformed Churches were established, the matter

²⁷ *Acta der Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland gehouden te Utrecht van 22 Augustus tot 7 September 1905*, (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, n.d.) 191.

²⁸H. Beets, *De Chr. Geref. Kerk in N.A.: Zestig jaren van strijd en zegen* (Grand Rapids MI: Grand Rapids Printing Company, 1918) 147-151; see for further history of the training for the ministry, 206-212; 293-300.

of the training for the ministry was on the agenda of the very first General Synod of Homewood-Carman (1954) which appointed deputies “to be diligent concerning the whole matter of the training” (Art 88). Every subsequent general synod dealt with this matter. General Synod Orangeville (1968) established the Theological College and appointed the first professors. Synod also decided that:

to be admitted to the ecclesiastical examinations candidates shall submit proof that they have completed their studies at our own Theological College. Candidates who took their theological training at other institutions shall present a Certificate issued by the Staff of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches stating that they have followed and/or complemented a course of studies conforming with the training provided by the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches. (Art 171)

It can be noted that although Synod clearly expected future ministers to be trained at the school of the churches, it nevertheless left the door open for the possibility that a student study elsewhere. In that case, it was up to the College to evaluate such education and possibly request additional training at the Theological College. In practice this has meant an extra year of study at the Theological College prior to being admitted to the Classical examination..

4. Conclusions

On the basis of the above, the following can be concluded:

1. From the earliest records available, it is evident that the training of future ministers had an official ecclesiastical character. However, historical circumstances did not always allow the churches to assume their responsibility for this training since the civil government at times considered this training to be their task.

2. The churches of the Secession considered that the churches had the biblical duty to train future ministers themselves. This could not be left up to the civil authorities. This conviction led to the eventual establishment of the Theologische Hogeschool in Kampen. Even with the Union of 1892, the principle that the churches were responsible was maintained. Not only was the Theologische Hogeschool in Kampen maintained, but theological professors who were involved in training students for the ministry at the Free University were placed under the supervision of the Reformed Churches.

3. This heritage has had consequences for North America. It led to the establishing of Calvin

Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids in the nineteenth century and the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in the twentieth century.

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of the Canadian Reformed Churches*

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