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Reconstructing Reformed Identity

Experiences from Church Planting in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Recently some Reformed denominations have embarked on church planting in the major cities in the Netherlands. This was done mainly for evangelistic reasons. From a quantitative perspective this project has been rather successful. However, many of the new churches deviate in some respects from official doctrines and practices of their denominations, as a consequence of contextualization. This has provoked some protest, leading to the failure in at least one case of instituting a new church plant as a full member of one of these Reformed denominations. In this article we add research data to this experience, demonstrating that this is not an isolated discussion. Moreover, we use this experience as a point of departure for an ecclesiological discussion about the continuous reformation of the church. The conclusion is that church planting is an occasion for ecclesial reconstruction with a view to mission, and we make some suggestions how this should happen.

Keywords

ecclesiology – church planting – Reformed identity – innovation – contextualization

Church Planting by Reformed Denominations in the Netherlands

Since the late 1990s the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (CRCN) and the Reformed Churches Liberated (RCL)¹ have embarked on church planting, particularly in the cities. For them this entailed embracing a new practice. Of course, they were familiar with the unfortunate Reformed tradition of confessional splits, but until recently *missionary* church planting in the Netherlands was something done by Baptists and Pentecostals only.² In different capacities, the writers of this article have been involved in most of these Reformed church plants in a coaching or supervising role. As far as we can see, two motives were predominant. The first was a *growth* motive: there were some strong grassroots leaders within these denominations who argued that church planting was a proven instrument for the growth of the church, and therefore indispensable to the missionary calling of their churches. The other motive was a desire to *regain lost territory in the big cities*. Some smaller Reformed denominations had been forced to close their doors in the cities, due to secularization and families moving to the Bible Belt.³ Around the start of the millennium only very few, and mostly dwindling, congregations were left in urban areas (although the RCL affiliates were faring a little bit better than those in the CGCN). Thus, with the benefit of hindsight, we can say that more or less straightforward evangelistic motives were predominant in adopting this new strategy.

By and large, the strategy has been successful. In 2008, a quantitative investigation was carried out regarding the number of churches that had been planted in the Netherlands since 1990. Additional research was done with regard to their

1 In Dutch they are called *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* and *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt*, respectively. The CGCN have been established in 1892, and tally approximately 73,000 members (distributed among about 175 local churches). The RCL were founded in 1944, and have some 120,000 members (and report 250 local churches).

2 For a history of modern missionary church planting in the Netherlands, see Stefan Paas, "Nederland zendingsland: Naoorlogse gemeentestichting" [ET: The Netherlands as mission country: Postwar congregation planting], in: Gerrit Noort et al., *Als een kerk opnieuw begint: Handboek voor missionaire gemeenschapsvorming* [ET: When a church begins anew: Manual for missional formation of congregations], (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2008), 84–109.

3 See Chris M.J. Boon et al., *Vitaal 2000: Een onderzoek naar krimp en groei in een aantal grootstedelijke Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* [ET: Vital 2000: an investigation into shrinking and growth in some large-city Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands] (n.p., 2000).

<http://www.cgk.nl/download.php?f=43e0aa79f8fi6746bb2bf3783c6d6ae>; accessed 7 March 2013.

leadership and to their capacity for contextualization (immigrant churches were excluded from this count).⁴ It was established that among all the hundreds of congregations that had been planted in the Netherlands between 1990 and 2008 (most of which were Baptists, Pentecostals, etc.), the smaller Reformed denominations did an excellent job. Their actual church plants were few (15–25), but most of them were well led. They had good theological expertise, they focused on the most difficult parts of the country (the very secular cities), and—most importantly—they truly tried to contextualize. This means that they did not just copy-paste existing models, but they tried to find out (by research, reflection and experiment) what would be the right response to the unfamiliar, deeply secular context of cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Even more interesting, some multicultural churches emerged, which was (and still is) rather unique in the Netherlands.

These projects have been effective in other respects as well. In another, very recent research project, the ‘conversion rate’ in these Reformed church plants was compared with that of older churches (> 10 years) in the same denominations. This study showed that church plants welcomed 34 times as many new Christians (first-timers) per year as older congregations, and 46 times as many returnees.⁵ Thus, a little bit more than a decade after the first churches were planted, it may be said that the venture was a quantitative success. For the first time in more than two generations more churches were planted in major Dutch major cities than were closed, overall amounting to a very slight amount of net church growth in several of these cities—this, after decades of straight decline.

4 Martijn Vellekoop, *Nieuwe kerken in een nieuwe context: Onderzoek naar gemeentestichting in Nederland en de rol van contextualisatie*, [ET: New churches in a new context: Investigation into church starts in the Netherlands and the role of contextualization] MA thesis VU Amsterdam, 2008 (summary in English). <http://www.novatv.nl/uploaded/FILES/nieuwe-kerken-in-een-nieuwe-context2.pdf>; accessed 7 March 2013. See also, Sake Stoppels, “Omvang en aard van gemeentestichting in Nederland” [ET: Size and Character of church planting in the Netherlands], in: Noort, *Als een kerk* [ET: As a church], 113–123.

5 Alrik Vos, *Hoop: Een onderzoek naar de missionaire effectiviteit van kerkplantingen binnen de NGK, CGK en GKV in Nederland* [ET: Hope: an investigation of the missional effectiveness of churchplanting within the NGK, CGK, and GKV in the Netherlands], MA thesis VU Amsterdam, 2012 (summary in English). <http://www.ea.nl/l/library/download/urn:uuid:ca7fab4d-c56c-440d-a7f4-982e4292e520/hoop++de+effectiviteit+van+kerkplanting+als+missionaire+strategie.pdf> (with summary in English), accessed 7 March 2013. See also Stefan Paas, Alrik Vos, “Nieuwe kerkvorming als kwantitatieve groeistrategie”, *Religie & Samenleving* 8.2 (2013), 265–288 [ET: “New Church formation as quantitative growth strategy”, *Religion and Society*].

Our explanation for this good missiological outcome of church planting by these particular Reformed denominations is twofold. Not only do they have a lot of experience on their mission fields far away (mainly Africa and Indonesia), they also invest much in theological education (requiring a full academic MA degree from their pastors). This made it possible for them to send out well-trained church planters (some of them with PhD's), with rich theological resources, who were connected to many ex-missionaries with a lot of experience in other parts of the world. Most Evangelical churches⁶ in the Netherlands do not have these advantages, even though they have more practical experience with the planting of churches on Dutch soil. However, their pragmatic focus on 'how-to' (instead of 'why') questions tends to produce an instrumental approach of church (church as an "evangelistic methodology"—Peter Wagner).⁷ In the end, this means that the same church model is cloned time and again. It also infers that most of these Evangelical church plants focus on the Dutch Bible Belt, where they know the tricks (i.e., where they can collect discontented Protestants easily), rather than on the more secularized parts of the country (of course, there are some admirable exceptions to this rule).⁸

Problems

However, there are problems as well. Ironically, these problems may be related to this rather unique fact of having well-trained theologians, with deep missiological resources as church planters. Such people tend to go beyond the

6 In the Netherlands, a distinction is usually made between 'reformed' (*gereformeerd* or *reformatorisch*) and 'evangelical' (*evangelisch*). The Dutch use 'evangelical' as a denominator of churches that have originated as a result of revivals in Europe, and Anglo-Saxon mission to Europe. Usually, their theology is rooted in some form of Arminianism, and they prefer adult baptism over infant baptism (for example, Baptists, Pentecostals, Nazarenes, etc.). The RCL and CGN are Calvinistic denominations with a practice of infant baptism. For the notorious difficulties with the use of the term 'evangelical' in the Dutch ecclesial context, see C. van der Kooi, E. van Staalduijn-Sulman, A.W. Zwiep (eds.), *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Essays Under the Auspices of the Center of Evangelical and Reformation Theology (CERT)*, *AmSTaR* vol. 1, (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012).

7 Cf. C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura: Regal, 1990), 11: "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches".

8 This is a general problem of church planting that is driven too much by quantitative multiplication rather than contextual embodiment of the gospel. See for example, George Lings, Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003).

pragmatic cloning paradigm. Instead of just replicating models and remaining in an 'executive' routine, they will address sometimes hard questions of ecclesiology, soteriology, and contextualization. After all, that is what they are trained to do in the first place. Thus, it appears that some, or even most, of these new churches through their missionary experience adopt beliefs and practices that in some respects deviate from their 'mother' denominations. This causes problems as soon as the new community has grown enough to be incorporated as a mature church within the denomination.

Very recently, a church plant in Amsterdam, called *Stroom* ('stream' or 'current'),⁹ asked to be accepted as a congregation within the RCL. Protests came immediately. A group of 43 church members (among them 26 pastors) within the RCL signed an open letter to the regional classis (regional governing body) of the denomination, demanding to refuse *Stroom* as a RCL congregation. Three objections were made against the inclusion of *Stroom*:

1. *Stroom* accepts women in its leadership board, which is against the policy of the RCL;
2. Candidate elders in *Stroom* are not prepared to sign without reservations the document by which every elder and pastor commits himself to the Reformed confessions that are accepted by the RCL;¹⁰
3. *Stroom* allows parents who object to infant baptism to postpone baptism, until children can decide for themselves. This is against Q&A 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which states that children ought to be baptized.

The protest letter added a warning to these objections: "The decision that the classis must take pertains to the foundation of all churches. It is all about the question what it means to be a *Reformed* church". In an interview with a

9 <http://www.stroomamsterdam.nl>, accessed 7 March 2013.

10 Signing this document was mandatory for ordained ministers, since the Dordt Synod (1618/19). In 1905 the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (from which the RCL separated in 1944) made the signing ceremony a duty for elders and deacons as well (see Articles 53–54 in the RCL Order, on www.kerkrecht.nl). The document states that the three confessions of the RCL "correspond in all parts completely with the Word of God." Elders promise that they will "teach this doctrine with dedication, defend it loyally, and reject everything that deviates from it." In 2008 some pastors in the RCL published an explanation of the RCL Church Order. In this book (chapter 4) it was said that even an "inner reservation" (*een voorbehoud in het hart*) during the signing procedure will make a person unfit for ministry within the RCL. See H.W. van Egmond et al., *Belijdende kerk blijven* (Zwaag: Van Berkum, 2008).

Christian newspaper one of the concerned pastors said that these issues affect the very foundations (*grondslagen*) of what it means to be Reformed.¹¹ As a result of this commotion, *Stroom* has withdrawn its application. It will now become a sister church, more or less like former mission churches in Africa and Asia.

This shows how church planting can bring questions of ecclesial identity¹² to the agenda. In this paper we want to explore some of the questions involved. First, we will work out this case study a little bit further in order to get a clearer view of the issue. Next, we will present some thoughts about Reformed ecclesial identity from a historical perspective. We will conclude with a number of ecclesiological reflections regarding the construction of (Reformed) ecclesial identity.

More and Less Reformed

The issues mentioned are indeed typical of most Reformed church plants in the Netherlands. A couple of years ago another study showed that most Reformed church plants in Amsterdam gave free rein to women in leadership—even if they could not give them access to the offices.¹³ This included pastoral work and preaching in Sunday worship meetings. In fact, these churches had installed a new layer between the church council and the congregation—a ‘leadership team’—in order to make this possible. In this way, the churches could remain loyal to their official denominational policy (which did not allow ordination of women as pastors, or even female elders and deacons), while having women in leadership positions in practice.

11 H.J.C.C.J. Wilschut, one of the initiators of the open letter, in the *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 31 August 2012.

12 Our use of the word ‘ecclesial’ identity’ does not mean that we are looking for a necessarily static, timeless ‘essence’ of what it means to be a (Reformed) church. As will appear below we see this identity as provisional, constantly developing in interaction with culture and other ecclesiologies.

13 Petra de Jong-Heins, *Vrouw & gemeentestichting: Onderzoek naar de positie van de vrouw in Amsterdamse gemeentestichtingen van gereformeerde signatuur* [Woman & congregational planting: Investigation into the position of women in churchplantings of a reformed signatur in Amsterdam], BA Thesis Azusa Theologische Hogeschool, Amsterdam 2009.

<http://topshare.che.nl/downloadattachment/266336/284951/2009--06>; accessed 7 March 2013.

To a large extent, the reason for this policy was contextualization. Most church planters (all of them were men) said that it is impossible in a highly egalitarian society like Amsterdam to maintain a gender imbalance in your church—unless you are very certain that the Bible commands it. Apparently, only one of these leaders was certain enough about that, while some of them were actually in favour of women in leadership—on theological grounds.

The study stated some concern, however, about the future opportunities for women in these churches. It is well known that women usually play a large role in the initial stage of a missionary movement, only to be pushed back later on, when institutionalization proceeds. Since the leadership position of women was not officially sanctioned, this pattern may repeat itself in these Amsterdam churches. Even so, the study did show that the acceptance of women in leadership was a matter of principle in some (not all) of these church plants, and not merely a pragmatic measure.

More recent research has affirmed that there is indeed strong support for female leadership in these (and other) new church plants in Reformed denominations. For example, 77% of the membership in a number of RCL church plants thinks that the leadership of a local church should consist of men and women, while 70% claims that the rejection of female leadership is based on a one-sided exegesis of the Bible.¹⁴

As for baptism, most—if not all of these churches—have a different policy than their denominations. Yet another research project that focussed on a number of churches that were planted by the RCL addresses specifically the question of 'being reformed'.¹⁵ First, a theoretical model of Reformed identity was designed, using Reformed confessions and several systematic theological studies. With the help of the model the researcher conducted several interviews with the leaders of these church plants. Moreover, he sent out a questionnaire to the members and visitors of these churches. The project covered a vast area of issues, including views of baptism. This particular issue shows some mixed results:

14 Mark van Leeuwen, *Stilstand is achteruitgang: Een beschrijving en analyse van de identiteit van enkele pioniersgemeenten binnen de Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt* [*Standing still is going backward: A description and analysis of the identity of several pioneering congregations within the GKV*], MA Thesis Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 2012.

15 Van Leeuwen, *Stilstand*.

Statement on baptism	Agreement (strong/very strong)
A baptized child must <i>not</i> be baptized again when it has become an adult believer (once is enough)	70%
Believer's baptism is the only Biblical way of baptism	4.5% (86% rejects this)
Infant baptism and believer's baptism are equally valid	62%
Infant baptism and believer's baptism must both be possible in one congregation	90%

Apparently, there is very strong support among the members for a dual practice of baptism, while there is little support at the same time for re-baptism. It seems that little enthusiasm is shown for an exclusive defence of either infant baptism or adult baptism. In short, those who are involved in these church plants want the mode of baptism to be optional. When asked to give reasons for this, leaders answer that this is again a matter of responding to contextual sensitivities. Strong confessional or denominational policies tend to erode in the extremely consumption-driven environment of Amsterdam. Also, new urban churches—at least in the Netherlands—tend to draw a more mixed crowd than churches in the much more Christianized eastern part of the country. There are many among the new members who have a background in churches that baptize believers only. Within the small, vulnerable churches in such a big, secular city one cannot afford to break up a community over the issue of baptism. “We must pick our battles here”, said a church planter from Amsterdam to us. “And this is not one of them.”

Finally, the leadership of these church plants—some of them ordained ministers in the RCL—do not seem to accept their confessional documents hook, line and sinker. However, it is exactly such strict adherence that is prescribed through the subscription ceremony that is required from every minister and other members of the church council.¹⁶ This ceremony may be explained as a juridical (admittedly, modern and Western) way to express loyalty to the confessions. However, their reluctance to submit themselves to this ceremony

16 For a survey of the history and background of confessional subscription: Roelf Christiaan Janssen, *By This Our Subscription: Confessional Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition since 1816* (Kampen: Kok, 2009), 30: “Thus GS Dordrecht 1618–1619 not only gave the Dutch Reformed churches their third Reformed confession, the Canons of Dordt, but it also provided them with a renewed church order, including a form of subscription”.

does not mean that these church planters reject the Reformed confessions. On the contrary, in interviews with several of the leaders that formed one of the sources of data in this study, they all voiced great sympathy and respect for the Reformed tradition. All of them could mention more than one point that really inspired them or helped them in their missional practice. Some of the issues they mentioned were the authority of the Bible, salvation by grace, the five 'sola's' (*sola Scriptura, sola gratia*, etc.), the doctrine of the church (rejecting independentism and sectarianism), the objectivity of God's truth (not dependent on feelings and emotions), a sober approach of worship (not manipulative), and the notion of the covenant. On a closer look, it seems therefore that most, if not all, of these church leaders would agree with a qualified subscription of the specific content of the confessions, such as a "system of doctrine", "substance of doctrine", "good faith", or even a "full subscription".¹⁷ What they do object against, however, is a type of subscription that allows no reservation at all against any proposition in the confessional documents.

From the membership questionnaires, it also appears that these 'post-denominational' churches feel strongly related to classic Reformed teaching. It is difficult to imagine that Roman Catholics, liberal mainline Protestants, or Baptists would show the same level of agreement with some or all of the following statements.

Doctrinal statement	Agreement (strong/very strong)
The Bible is God's inspired Word	93 %
The Bible is relevant for every area of life	83 %
Salvation depends on God alone	60 %
Christ's death does not cause universal salvation	65 %
God does not elect on the basis of our previewed faith	65 %
The covenant means very much for my faith	45 %
The ordained ministry is an important way in which Christ builds his church	41 % (21 % disagrees)
The ordained ministry helps the church not to become a business company; it helps the church to maintain its spiritual character	60 %

17 For an explanation of these positions, see R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg: R&R Publishing, 2008), 170–177.

These are high scores, when we take into account that these figures reflect new churches in very secular cities, with more than the average number of members without a Reformed (or even a Christian) background.

As a general rule we may say that church planting (and mission in general) sets us on a course in which we have to redefine what it means to be ‘church’—‘Reformed church’ in this case. This will happen even more in a very demanding context that has proven to be resistant against traditional ways of being church. In such a situation we scrutinize our theological heritage. Some elements move to the background, whereas others step to the forefront. Such a process of redefinition and discovery may result in a position in which one holds no longer entirely the same beliefs and practices as fellow churches in other parts of the country. Yet since these beliefs and practices have been really ‘tested’ they may be held with all the more conviction. In other words, church plants may become less Reformed and more Reformed at the same time. However, as we have seen, this approach of Reformed identity clashes with another approach—one that seems to take every deviation from an established practice as evidence for the *non*-Reformed character of a new church.

In what follows we will look at some of the theological background questions that are involved in this discussion. Through a sketch of the historical process that has led to a rather rigid concept of Reformed identity, we will try to show what is at stake here. After that exploration, we will suggest a path to a more promising approach of finding Reformed ecclesial identity.

The Reformed Principle and Reformed Identity

The spirit and the purpose of the Reformation may be best captured by the Latin principle *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum Verbum Dei* (“The Reformed church must always be reformed according to the Word of God”). As has been noted many times, the two clauses in this line must be held together. It is not a principle that glorifies change in itself; it contains a norm, the Word of God. Reformation is not a matter of ever-new formations; it is a matter of constant *re*-formation—or *re*construction. We could call this the ‘restorative principle’ of the Reformation.

Besides this *principle*, the Reformation has also recognized a *scope* to which reformation applies. The reformation of the church is focused first and foremost on the three marks of the true church. These marks mediate between the marks or attributes of the universal Church in the classic Creeds, and the visible, local congregation. Reformation is focused on the proclamation of the Word, on the sacraments, and on church discipline. These are and remain the core issues.

Finally, there are certain *rules* that help us to assess proposals for reformation. After all, if a church cannot make any difference between legitimate and illegitimate reformations, it probably does not have an identity in the first place. If anything can be ‘church,’ nothing really is ‘church.’ Such rules are given in the form of creeds and confessions. For our purposes we distinguish between the creeds of the ancient church and the confessions that were designed in the course of the Reformation from the 16th century onwards.

A *creed* can be defined as an “abbreviated, authorized, and adequate summary of both the biblical witness and the preaching and teaching of the universal church” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer).¹⁸ Creeds are associated with the seven ecumenical councils of the ancient church. They narrow down the number of legitimate Bible interpretations by a *regula fidei*, and they define the purpose and calling of the church in this world. Already in the New Testament we find brief creedal formulations (such as “Jesus is Lord”) and summaries of authoritative tradition (e.g. Philippians 2:5–11). Summaries like these were given to new Christians in order to help them interpret the Bible and (more likely) the sermons and songs they heard in worship meetings. Creeds are anchors for interpretation, and they restrict the space for reformations. By subscribing to the universal creeds a local church (whether in accordance with its denomination or on its own) makes a connection with the Church Catholic of all ages.¹⁹ Basically, this means that reformations must remain within the boundaries of the ecumenical creeds. To engage in the reformation of the church, is to become a participant in the ‘Great Tradition’ of theology. This was what the early Reformers, like Calvin, wanted.

Both creeds and confessions contain statements of commitment and statements of content.²⁰ Yet, while creeds distinguish the teaching of the Christian Church from the philosophies of the world (including other religions) when there was one Church, *confessions* (in our definition) are of a more provincial nature. Confessions do not primarily distinguish the church from the world; they are mostly designed to distinguish churches from each other, although

18 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 450.

19 It is true that doctrinal differences have left many scars in the body of the church. But it is too simple to set the unity of the church against doctrine, since the unity of the church itself is a doctrine. As Kevin Vanhoozer says: “Church unity is more than a pragmatic goal; it is a doctrinal imperative (...). Note well: unity is not to be pursued at the expense of doctrinal truth but precisely because of it” (Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 422).

20 Cf. Conrad Wethmar, “Confessionality and Identity of the Church—A Reformed Perspective”, in: Eduardus van der Borcht (ed.), *Christian Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

confessions are also intended as a summary of the faith of the Church. Confessions came into being with the Reformation in the 16th century.²¹ Most of these confessions bear national or regional titles, showing their more limited scope in relation to the creeds.²² As we will show in the next section, confessions have been used with sad results. But at their best, confessions reflect impressive responses of regional and national churches to their historical contexts that contain profound lessons for the rest of the church. They teach the church how to reconstruct the universal identity of the Church in particular circumstances. Thus, they are important case studies that can help the church—and some churches in particular—to find similar profound answers in their own context. In short, while the creeds regulate reformation by *rule*, confessions do so by *example*; they are authoritative instructions, not to be copied blindly, but to be studied with respect and constantly re-contextualised.

So, we have a *principle*, a *scope*, a *rule*, and *examples*. Essentially, this may be what Reformed ecclesial identity is all about: restoration as the principle, the Bible read through the lens of the *regula fidei* as the rule, and the three marks as the scope in which reformation happens, by imitating faithfully the great examples of the past. Thus, a Reformed church will passionately try to build a church where the Bible is the authority of common and individual life,²³ where the sacraments are administered regularly, and where people live holy lives. In doing so the body will strive for a confessional (supralocal and transcultural) quality of its beliefs and practices.

21 Cf. *TRE*, s.v. “Bekennnisschriften” [ET: Confession documents].

22 “Reformed confessions are always formulated *in tempore et in loco*, and therefore are only provisional approximations of the final truth” (Wethmar, “Confessionality”, 149). According to Eberhard Bush, the great diversity in contextual Reformed confessions “belongs to the distinctiveness of this confession”. See “Reformed Strength in Its Denominational Weakness”, in: Wallace M. Alston Jr., Michael Welker, (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2003), 22. Cf. also: Eberhard Busch, *Reformiert: Profil einer Konfession* (Zürich: tvz, 2007), 11–29. According to Karl Barth (*Die Theologie der Reformierten Bekenntnisschriften*, Gesamtausgabe Abt. II, [tvz: Zürich, 1998], 20–39), Reformed confessions are 1) explicitly local statements that 2) pretend to avoid being a ‘symbol’ like the Apostolicum, Nicaenum or Athanasianum.

23 See e.g. Christoph Schwöbel, “The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers”, in: Colin E. Gunton, Daniel W. Hardy (eds), *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 110–155.

Confessionalization

This Reformed identity has been capable of producing many ecclesial varieties. Take, for example, the Anabaptists in the 16th century. They agreed on the core elements of this Reformed identity, especially on the restorative principle. After all, they were not called ‘Radical Reformers’ for nothing. But their pursuit of reforming Christian life in accordance with the Bible’s authority produced a different view on the church that led to the rejection of infant baptism, to declare all of Europe a mission field, and to accept a strong form of Congregationalism.²⁴

The Reformed principle and scope were also clearly advocated by the early Baptists in the 17th century. For example, in 1649 the Particular (Calvinist) Baptist church in Glaziers’ Hall, London, sent out several missionaries to plant churches in Wales, with the commission “to gather a company or society of people holding forth and practising the doctrine, worship, order and discipline of the Gospel according to the primitive institution.”²⁵

And let us not forget John Wesley, whose intense desire it was to restore the church to its New Testament origins. For him, this meant an embrace of a mild Arminianism and a strong stress on holiness, but also the instalment of ‘apostolic’ (itinerary) ministries, and eventually with great hesitation the institution of a new church (1784).

We all know that this variety of beliefs and practices has led to a multitude of churches. We may call them the Reformed family,²⁶ even if it is a rather dysfunctional family at times. Why did this fragmentation happen? The Reformed identity, as we have sketched it in section 4, does not lead automatically to schism and separation—at least not on such a scale. It will exclude, of course,

24 See, e.g., Wolfgang Schäufele, *Das missionarische Bewußtsein und Wirken der Täufer: Dargestellt nach oberdeutschen Quellen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966); Wilbert R. Shenk (ed.), *Anabaptism and Mission* (Eugene: Wipf&Stock, 2001).

25 Quote in B.R. White, “John Miles and the Structures of the Calvinistic Baptist Mission to South Wales, 1649–1660”, in: Mansel John (ed.), *Welsh Baptist Studies* (Llandysul: The South Wales Baptist College, 1976), 36.

26 Cf. Lukas Vischer, “The Reformed Tradition and Its Multiple Facets”, in: Jean-Jaques Bauswein, Lukas Vischer, Lukas (eds.), *The Reformed Family Worldwide: A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools, and International Organizations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1–33. Note that we perceive this family a bit wider than just all denominations with ‘reformed’ in their names. A better name might be “family of the Reformation”, to denote that we mean all churches that adhere to the core elements of a Reformed identity that we have mentioned.

movements that do not take the Bible as norm, groups that reject the creeds, or communities that do not celebrate Communion or refuse the Trinitarian formula for baptism. But will it also reject Congregationalist churches, or churches that baptize adults instead of children (or vice versa)? Will it consider churches as un-Reformed, because they ordain women?

It is very well possible to think of a church that includes all or most of these movements somehow in one ecclesial body. Of course, this church will look different from what most Reformed people are familiar with today. But it is not beyond all imagination, especially in this dawning post-denominational age.

For actual fragmentation into different churches, often denying the legitimacy of each others' Baptism and sometimes even barring the Communion table for each other, something else is required: a close connection between ecclesiality and *agreement*—not just agreement on some core principles or a shared life-style, but agreement on many if not most beliefs and practices. If this is the case, differences in doctrine and practice will easily produce new churches.

For a long time, this *has* been the case in Europe. In recent scholarship this is called “confessionalization.” This is the process in which communities define themselves along the lines of their core convictions (confessions), rather than by their common descent, a shared interest, or shared practices; and subsequently educate or discipline their members to be faithful to these convictions. In other words, it is a strategy that forms communities on the basis of *consent* (either voluntary or enforced). This process operates on the level of churches, but also on the level of nations—especially in early modern Germany. Historians are quite prepared to use the term as “a descriptor for all Christian communities in early modern Europe.”²⁷ Unfortunately, this has affected the Reformed family to its very core.

Confessionalization implies several aspects that stimulate the formation of new churches.²⁸ First, it turns theology into a battleground. Originally, confessions were meant to *unite*: they were expressions of mutual recognition by a number of churches in their desire “to live according to the Gospel” (Belgic Confession, 1563). Through the process of confessionalization, however, churches in post-Reformation Europe used their confessions increasingly to

27 Thomas A. Brady Jr., “Confessionalization: The Career of a Concept”, in: John M. Headley et al. (eds), *Confessionalization in Europe, 1555–1700: Essays in Honor and Memory of Bodo Nischan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 15.

28 Cf. Markus Wriedt, “‘Founding a New Church ...’: The Early Ecclesiology of Martin Luther in the Light of the Debate about Confessionalization”, in: Headley, *Confessionalization*, 57–59.

define themselves (i.e., justify their existence) by stressing their *differences* with other churches. All major confessional documents written in those days bear the stamp of this polemical climate.

Secondly, this desire to distinguish one group from another tends to make ecclesial identities increasingly 'thicker.' In such a climate it is important to have at least a number of issues on which one disagrees with other groups—and these issues must, of course, be important enough to justify separate ways. In other words, ever-new issues were raised to the level of *status confessionis*, including specific interpretations of Bible passages, certain dress-codes, congregational structures and models, end time views, and so forth. This entails, of course, a huge loss of flexibility. A church where almost everything has been declared non-negotiable will not be able to deal with cultural changes very well.

Thirdly, confessionalization emphasizes the necessity of agreement on a number of core issues between members of the same church. This results in a continuous screening of the orthodoxy of its leaders and, to a lesser extent, its members. To enable this screening, the church must set up an elaborate system of control, producing high levels of centralization, bureaucratization, and regulation. The obligatory signing of 'contracts' by ministers and elders, and a constant demand for detailed promises by members (e.g., when they marry or bring their children for baptism) is part and parcel of such a culture.

And finally, confessionalization leads to an increase of group discipline and therefore to a great pressure on all 'impure' elements (in terms of rituals, traditions, doctrines and people). In its strongest varieties, confessionalization will lead churches to be very much focused on weeding out what is wrong rather than sowing and harvesting or rejoicing in what is good. Thus, it will foster a spirit of critique and wariness rather than a culture of encouragement and risk-taking.

It is not difficult to see how these characteristics produced ever-new impulses towards separation.

Reformed Denominations and Church Planting

Confessionalization, or unity on the basis of agreement, did not become extinct after the 17th century. On the contrary, some scholars claim that "the process of differentiation, discrimination, and internalization, which anchored the respective confessional identities so deeply in patterns of mentality and behaviour" accelerated in the 18th century, while the real peak of confessional

cultures probably fell during the 19th century.²⁹ As a British Methodist wrote in 1834, their doctrine required

that *present* and *entire* sanctification of soul, which is absolutely necessary to our ultimate admission into the Kingdom of Heaven. The difference is so great that—unless the Clergy, as a body, are prepared to embrace the doctrinal views of the Methodists, on these essential points of Christian doctrine—there *can be no union*.³⁰

Also in the Netherlands, the middle and second part of that century saw the emergence of a handful new denominations. In a confessionalized climate every difference of theological opinion could easily become a driver of separation. It is this climate that has eventually produced the two denominations that are the subject of this paper: the CGCN (1892) and the RCL (1944). Although these churches are not entirely homogeneous, there are considerable parties in their ranks who think and act within this paradigm of confessionalization.

What does this mean for church planting? First, it will lead to what Stuart Murray has called “sectarian” church planting, i.e. the planting of churches in order to express confessional differences with other churches.³¹ Or, in other words, missionary motives (addressing the world) will always be submitted to confessional motives (addressing doctrinal identity markers). Also, since ecclesial identities in a confessionalized climate are ‘thick’ identities, church planting will leave little room for experimentation or reconstruction. Only superficial issues are negotiable; usually this will mean a separation between ‘form’ and ‘content’ (with much that belongs to the latter category).

This confessionalized attitude was clearly visible in the case of *Stroom*, which we have discussed in section 2. It struck us that the critics who signed the open letter apparently made no distinction between different levels of being ‘Reformed’. Is signing a document in itself really a ‘Reformed’ thing, or is it a juridical, culturally determined expression of loyalty to Reformed confessions? And are female pastors and elders really the core issue for Reformed ecclesial identity? Or is even the fact that the Heidelberg Catechism (74) states that

29 Brady, “Confessionalization”, 13, citing Etienne François.

30 Quote in J.C.D. Clark, “The Eighteenth Century Context”, in: William J. Abraham, James E. Kirby (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20. Italics in the original.

31 Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 89. Cf. *ibid.*, 96: “... to provide opportunities for the congregational expression of deeply held convictions about doctrinal and ecclesiological matters.”

children ought to be baptized, the issue on which our Reformed identity depends? This is suggested by a journal that circulates in the conservative wing of the RCL. Here, infant baptism is mentioned in one breath with the traditional Dutch introduction of the Apostolic Confession: the “articles of undoubted Christian faith”. Only the *mode* of baptism (either by immersion or by sprinkling water on the head of a baby) is considered as a matter of minor importance.³² This amounts to elevating infant baptism to creedal level, which is obviously untrue. The ecumenical creeds do not talk about *infant* baptism; moreover, there are large sectors within the family of the Reformation that do not recognize infant baptism and yet subscribe to the creeds.

During the commotion around the application of *Stroom*, we wrote an article in the Christian press, together with a colleague. We suggested that not all the objections addressed the same level of Reformed identity.³³ However, this encountered strong disagreement on the part of some of the signees. As one pastor put it in a personal letter: my heart beats in my breast, but I also feel it beating in my wrist and in my neck. It is the same heartbeat everywhere.

In our opinion there are at least two major problems here. The first is that further reformation is virtually made impossible. In fact, confessionalization suggests that this particular church or denomination has finished the process of reformation. It has reached a level of insight in the Scriptures and the creeds that cannot be surpassed anymore. Therefore, the main task that lies ahead is keeping this insight and the expressions that it has generated as intact as possible. Of course, there are formal procedures that allow a theoretical possibility to change the confessions, but this is mostly a theoretical possibility indeed. So, confessionalization is actually in *conflict* with a Reformed ecclesial identity. It is an inconsistent attitude.

The second problem is that this ‘thick’ confessionalized identity applies for virtually every aspect of congregational life: doctrine, order, practices, and routines. In such a climate it is not possible to make careful distinctions between different levels of ‘Reformed’ (creedal, confessional, denominational); every-

32 Henk Drost, “Nieuwe gereformeerde kerken planten” [ET: Planting new reformed churches], *Nader Bekeken* [ET: *Closer Look*] 19 (10 October 2012), 293.

33 Mark van Leeuwen, Hans Schaeffer, Stefan Paas, “Pioniersgemeenten zijn in belijden heel klassiek gereformeerd” [ET: Pioneer congregations are in their confessing very classically reformed], *Nederlands Dagblad* (4 Sept. 2012). For different levels in ecclesiology, see also Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today's Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), 186–198.

thing belongs to the ‘heartbeat’ of the church.³⁴ This amounts to a sectarian attitude, since it makes it very difficult to recognize Christians of other confessions (or even Christians with other practices and routines) as true (Reformed) churches.

These problems indicate that this is not the way to decide about questions of ecclesial identity. In the next sections we will make the point that confession-ization is dependent on an ecclesiology ‘from above’ or a ‘blueprint ecclesiology’, whereas church planting necessarily depends on a more complex (but also more truthful) ecclesiology.

Deductive Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is reflection on the nature, order and mission of the church. However, because of its dual nature as a Divine-human institution, the church is a very complicated subject of research. The word ‘church’ contains at least four levels of reflection and experience: the church of the Bible, the church of systematic theology (or, rather, *theologies*), the church as an historical reality with all its failures and victories, and the church as a socio-cultural community of people. In other words, if anyone speaks about ‘the’ church, the proper response is: “Which church do you mean?”

Traditionally, this problem—if it was recognized at all—was solved by a deductive approach. The nature of the church was defined top-down, by deriving it more or less directly from the Trinity or from the exalted Christ. Subsequently, these macro-definitions were applied on local situations. This is an important approach, and we must maintain it somehow. Nevertheless, many contemporary ecclesiologists (and our case study above) have shown that this approach is deficient.

The problem is not that this approach forgets the ‘real’ church as opposed to a theological construction. For this would mean that we valorise a social-scientific approach of ‘church’ over a systematic-theological approach—which would not do justice to the dual nature of the church. The actual problem is one of *implausibility*, or—as a recent study calls it—“methodological laziness in ecclesiology”. A deductive approach of the church talks about social realities in ways that lack credibility. If you page through a more or less traditional

34 For an attempt to trace this tendency back to its historical roots in the theology of Klaas Schilder, see: H.J.D. Smit, “Kerk en organisatie. Motieven en achtergronden: Een peiling”, in: H.J.D. Smit e.a., *Toekomst voor gereformeerde organisaties* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1994), 35–104.

(in terms of methodology) ecclesiological study, you will find assertions about the empirical church where there is no evidence. Sometimes, whole arguments are based on anecdote and the selective treatment of experience.³⁵ In short, it seems that serious theologians, who would not dream of treating history and philosophy in such a sloppy way, turn into second-rate journalists as soon as the social and cultural reality of the church comes into view.³⁶

Behind this implausibility of a deductive ecclesiology are deeper philosophical and theological flaws.

To begin with, this approach seems to be unaware of (or indifferent to) the *cultural nature of our knowledge*. Our ecclesiology has been shaped largely within a European framework, whereas the majority of Christians live outside the West. Ecclesiology must take into account the limited nature of our models. Sometimes our models even hinder the Gospel, when we impose them on different contexts.

Also, this approach tends to construct universal pictures of *'the'* church, whereas there have always been *many historical and cultural expressions of the church*—even within one ecclesial tradition. It may be relatively easy to define what Reformed ecclesiology is from behind a desk, but such an approach may forget precisely what the church *is*. This approach looks like an anthropology that consists of philosophical reflection only, without any knowledge of recent biology or social science. Most often, living people do not fit into this picture of a generalized 'mankind'.³⁷

Finally, a deductive ecclesiology may reflect an inadequate account of revelation. If God has indeed revealed himself decisively by taking the 'form' (*mor-*

35 Pete Ward, "Introduction", in: Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 4.

36 A good recent example in Dutch is A. van de Beek, *Lichaam en Geest van Christus: De theologie van de kerk en de Heilige Geest* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2012). It is a very creative, high-level systematic ecclesiology, with many profound insights. Yet, as soon as the author talks about aspects of contemporary church life in the Netherlands he turns into a preacher: almost everything is based completely on his own experience, selected anecdotes, or mere impressions.

37 Something like this was present in the discussion around *Stroom*. Apparently, those who objected against the incorporation of this church plant believed that other congregations within the RCL are all 'Reformed' according to their own, ideal standards. The question remains, however, what church members and pastors in older churches would answer if the same questions were asked to them. As mentioned above, Reformed church plants tend to become more Reformed and less Reformed at the same time. It may be possible that there are a number of older congregations, which are *less* Reformed than new churches, on several issues.

phè) of a human being, then ecclesiology must find a way to describe a reality that is Divine and human at the same time. And to be human means to be firmly located in a specific historical and cultural framework. If ecclesiology cannot describe the church in this way, it does not describe the church at all. Moreover, it is important, pneumatologically, to underline that the Spirit of God does not work outside human beings or in place of them (*extra nos, pro nobis*), but through and with human beings (*in nos, cum nobis*). In the church, humans are God's "co-workers" (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1).

A More Balanced Theological Approach

Some recent theologians have tried to develop a more balanced ecclesiology, which combines an approach 'from above' with an approach 'from below' (Roger Haight).³⁸ In this way, ecclesiology can do justice to the actual nature of the church as a spiritual, theological, historical, and socio-cultural reality.

Of course, the challenge is to create, on the one hand, the possibility to speak of the church in many socio-cultural forms, but on the other hand to maintain the necessity to define what it means to call these expressions '*church*' in the first place. In other words, we need an ecclesiology that is fully contextual and yet capable of a transcultural vision.

The work of Nicholas Healy may be helpful here. Like many others, Healy rejects what he calls "blueprint ecclesiologies".³⁹ This kind of deductive approach mistakenly suggests that it is important to get our *thinking* on the church straight before we can work on our *practice*. In other words, a typically modern 'theory vs. practice' model is involved in this kind of ecclesiology. Unfortunately, this opens a wide gap between an ideal picture of the church and the concrete reality of the church as it is. In this approach, it is almost inevitable to consider the historical church (that we all know) as a corrupted version of a theoretically constructed template (that nobody has ever seen). As presented earlier, this problem tends to become particularly visible when older churches evaluate the results of church planting work. In the RCL case, standards of Reformed ecclesial identity were derived from confessional texts and jurisprudence, apparently without much doubt that these theoretical standards aptly described the socio-cultural reality in the RCL. These idealistic standards were

38 Roger Haight, SJ, *Christian Community in History*, Vol. 1 (New York: Continuum, 2004).

39 Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25–51.

subsequently applied to new churches, without much sensitivity for contextual issues. In other words, new churches are forced to carry this docetist burden for the whole denomination.

Instead of this older blueprint approach, Healy underlines the dual nature of the church as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. However, for Healy the Spirit is not primarily the universal, life-giving, creational, dynamic presence of God who leads the church in ever-new expressions. That would mean, practically, to identify the reformation of the church with developments in society. In other words, it would mean to glorify change in itself. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of *Jesus Christ*. “The Spirit will testify about me”, Jesus said (John 15:26). Therefore, the church as the community of the Spirit identifies itself as a *testifying* community. This means that the church is missionary in its very nature.

If we begin with what the church does, one of the things we must say about it is that it has been entrusted with the apostolic task. The church's responsibility is to witness to its Lord, to make known throughout the world the Good News of salvation in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

(p. 6)

For Healy, this determines the transcultural task of ecclesiology. Its priority is not in constructing theoretical pictures of the church, but to find this apostolic identity in every new context. Ecclesiology must help the church to understand its context, both in how she is corrupted by this context, and in how she should witness to God's work in Christ precisely here and now. As Healy puts it: “We can assess any ecclesiological proposal by how well it helps the church respond to its context”.⁴⁰ In other words, Healy's proposal provides a doctrinal *purpose* for church reformation: it is all about renewing our witness to Jesus Christ in new conditions. In our opinion, this is essentially a *creedal* purpose—and not just in its terminology. It is concerned with the witness of the Christian Church to the *world* rather than to delineate a certain confessional heritage against other churches. Therefore, this purpose is not optional; it belongs to the ‘rule’ part of the reformation of the church (see section 4). In a way, the constant reformation of the church is regulated from the future. We do not know what the church is, unless we embark on the course that her Master has showed her, by discipling people in ever-new contexts until the ends of the earth and the end of time. Mission, seen from this perspective, is a constant discovery of the

40 Healy, *Church*, 22.

nature of the church. The church is what emerges when parts of the world turn to Christ and form a local witness to his gospel.⁴¹

Every ecclesiology is, therefore, practical and prophetic. It is *practical* because theological reflection is always orientated towards the concrete, apostolic task of the church. It is *prophetic*, because ecclesiology always reflects theologically and critically on the practices of the church, with the purpose to call it to greater faithfulness. In every new context the church must respond, not primarily to the changed sociological situation, but to its transcultural calling as a witness to the Gospel.

Ecclesial cultural identity is constructed as a struggle, not to preserve some essential identity, but to construct and reconstruct that identity in light of an orientation to what it alone seeks, the truth revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That identity is constructed by experimentation, by bricolage and by retrieval of earlier forms. Conflict, error and sin are inherent aspects of the concrete church, and so self-criticism is a necessary element in its further construction.⁴²

This 'construction' or 'reconstruction' may also be called 'improvisation' or 'dramatic enactment' (Hans-Urs von Balthasar, N.T. Wright, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Samuel Wells).⁴³ Currently, there is a wealth of theological writing exploring these metaphors in order to develop a more holistic ecclesiology. The crucial issue is, time and again, that, while it is impossible to determine what the church is out of context, even so we can only speak of 'church' in every new context if we find something there that transcends this very context, in response to what God has done in his son Jesus.⁴⁴

41 Cf. Nicholas M. Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions", in: Ward, *Perspectives*, 198–199.

42 Healy, *Church*, 175.

43 Cf. Healy, *Church*, 52–76. See further Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004); Vanhoozer, *Drama*.

44 Of course, this more holistic approach of ecclesiology leads to a more varied set of instruments. The times are gone when theologians could study the church by using books only. Currently, our methodological toolkit is enriched with questionnaires, observation techniques, document analysis (including websites and songbooks), interviewing, and audio or video recordings / transcripts (Ward, "Introduction", 8). These methods help us to get into view how the church constructs its identity in a given context, which resources it uses to do so, and how the results may be assessed in the light of the church's mission to testify to Jesus Christ.

Church Planting as a Way to (Re)construct Ecclesial Identity

To admit that ecclesial identity is in constant reconstruction means to accept that church planting cannot merely be assessed in terms of its loyalty to a fixed standard. “Conflict, error and sin” are involved in church planting (as well as in other churches), and therefore must every church plant be accountable to other churches.⁴⁵ However, the accountability is *mutual*. It is not just a matter of a new church that must pass an ecclesial exam. There is also a challenging question emerging from such a new church plant: to what extent are the older churches really open to constant reformation according to the norm of the Word, regulated by the creeds, learning from confessional examples, with the purpose of ‘dramatizing’ the gospel of Christ to the watching world?

This question is silenced prematurely when the mission of the church is reduced to a one-way relationship between the sending church and the planted church. Instead, the mission of the church is *triangular* in shape: both churches (‘mother’ and ‘child’) must learn from the experience in order to reconstruct their shared identity in Christ. This can be seen, for example, in the Book of Acts. When the church in Jerusalem hears that a new church has emerged in Antioch, they decide to send Barnabas. On his arrival, “he saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all *to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts*” (Acts 11:23). Significantly, Barnabas did not encourage the new church to remain faithful to the church in Jerusalem, but to the Lord.

Most, if not all, of the new church plants in the CGCN and the RCL have been planted in two or three big cities in the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht. These are very secular, highly individualistic, and extremely consumerist contexts. Elsewhere it has been worked out what this means for churches. For example:⁴⁶

1. They work in a deeply post-Christian environment, where very basic questions of faith are much more important than confessional differences (for church members as well as for ‘outsiders’).

45 For this in more detail, see Stefan Paas, “Kerken vormen: De gemeenschappelijke structuur van het Evangelie anno nu” [ET: Shaping Churches: The commonality structure of the Gospel in the year ‘now’], *Soteria* 23.1 (2006), 6–26.

46 Stefan Paas, “Ecclesiology in Context: Urban Church Planting in the Netherlands”, in: Van der Kooi, *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, 131–147; Idem, “Mission among Individual Consumers”, in: Ryan Bolger (ed.), *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 150–163.

2. They must work in a religious market rather than a monopoly (they are 'restaurants' rather than 'families').
3. They will have to work with an egalitarian network structure rather than with strong denominational structures.
4. They will invest more in shared goals, a common culture, and agreement on mission than in doctrinal agreement on everything.
5. They will have looser and more dynamic structures of belonging.
6. Their leadership will exercise influence more through modelling and relational skills than through self-evident structures of authority.

These characteristics, which are rapidly spreading in the more secularized parts of the world, will affect the way in which these new congregations relate to their Reformed heritage. On the other hand, these church plants will tell us to what extent the Reformed ecclesial identity, as we know it, depends on cultural conditions that are disappearing with great speed. To trust that God has given the church a genuine heritage in the Reformation must imply that we are not afraid to plant churches within this very demanding newer environment.

Would this mean, for example, that accepting a dual practice of baptism within Reformed congregations may be the next stage in the continuous reformation of the church? This is not the place to answer this question.⁴⁷ However, we believe that the sheer fact that this practice is so universally accepted in the new Reformed church plants (and apparently not because of a liberal view of the Bible), has something to tell us.⁴⁸

Moreover, the reconstruction of ecclesial identity by these Reformed church-plants is not an isolated phenomenon. Recently, a number of churches in the Netherlands have signed a joint declaration in which they recognize

47 As far as we know, several denominations in the USA have accepted this practice, such as the Nazarene Church, American Evangelical Covenant Church, French Reformed Church, and Presbyterian Church (USA). In the Netherlands and Belgium, the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN) allows parents not to baptize their children, just as in the Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in België (VPKB). See e.g., Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, *Over dopen in de Protestantse Kerk: Handleiding voor kerkenraden* (n.p., 2012) [ET: About baptizing in the Protestant Church: Manual for church boards], 17–22. <http://www.pkn.nl/Lists/PKN-Bibliotheek/Over-dopen-in-de-Protestantse-Kerk-handreiking-voor-gesprek-kerkenraden-2012.pdf>; accessed 7 March 2013.

48 It is interesting to note that Veli Kärkkäinen treats Karl Barth's opinion on baptism as a revision of the traditional Reformed ecclesiology. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 56–58. For a discussion of different views of baptism, including dual practice baptism, see David F. Wright (ed.), *Baptism: Three Views* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009).

every baptism that has been administered in faith and obedience to the commandment of Jesus (Mat. 28:19), in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that has been administered with water, within the congregation involved and according to the rules that are valid there. A baptism that has been administered and received in this way is once and for all, and not repeatable.⁴⁹

The declaration was signed by ten church bodies (including the Roman Catholic Church), all with a regular practice of infant baptism. Thus, at least one obstacle for full recognition of the ecclesiality of (ana)baptist churches was removed. Moreover, an additional declaration of rapprochement was signed by two denominations which practise forms of adult baptism, namely the United Pentecostal and Gospel Congregations (*Verenigde Pinkster-en Evangeliegemeenten*), and the *Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit* (General Society of Anabaptists [Mennonites]).⁵⁰ Although they could not recognize infant baptism as a true baptism, they agreed that there are “very valuable thoughts” (*zeer waardevolle gedachten*) behind infant baptism, such as the emphasis on God’s initiative and the inclusion of children in the church. All subscribing churches expressed a “growing appreciation” for each other’s views. Also, there was fundamental agreement on the Lima statement that baptism is part of a life-long growth in Christ rather than a single moment of conversion. Finally, the (ana)baptist subscribers promised to deal “prudently” (*prudent*) with Christians who come over from other churches, and have been baptized as children only. In several local congregations in these denominations there is a form of ‘open membership,’ which implies full access to congregational life for those who have only received infant baptism.

Although the Dutch Baptist churches could not sign either of these declarations, even among them voices are heard to recognize the infant baptism of new members rather than requiring a new (or believer’s) baptism. This proposal has been rejected by the Baptist Union in the Netherlands, but it is a unique fact in itself that this voice is heard in a church that has made adult baptism its identity marker par excellence.

49 “Een gemeenschappelijke verklaring van kerken in Nederland: De Doop” (29 May 2012). <http://www.nd.nl/images/library/PDF/verklaringendoop.pdf>, accessed 7 March 2013. [ET: A common declaration of churches in the Netherlands: Baptism]. The statement expresses fundamental agreement with the concerns of the 1982 Lima Declaration (WCCC).

50 “Onderlinge toenadering rond de doop: Een verklaring” (29 May 2012). [ET: Mutual advance concerning baptism: A clarification]. <http://www.nd.nl/images/library/PDF/verklaringendoop.pdf>, accessed 7 March 2013.

Might it be true that a faithful reconstruction of Reformed ecclesial identity in a post-Christian culture implies relaxation on the issue of baptism—leaving it to the conscience of Christians whether they will have their children baptized or not? And could this stance eventually achieve the same confessional quality in our context as older answers (either from Baptist or Reformed children of the Reformation) have achieved in theirs? Could this mean a more faithful mediation between the local church and the creeds of the universal church than maintaining a confessional tradition that was written for another age with different questions? With these questions we conclude this article.