
Allan J. Janssen’s study of A.A. van Ruler was originally submitted as a dissertation to the Free University in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and is published as part of ‘The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America’. The name of the subject of the study is not one that will necessarily register as familiar beyond a particular linguistic and ecclesiastical circle, given that only a limited amount of van Ruler’s thought has been translated into English from the original Dutch. Equally, the particular Reformed context in which it was written is not one that for cultural, as well as linguistic, reasons has had much impact in the United Kingdom, albeit that it’s influence is felt in the United States of America. However, it should be said that this lack of impact has been to the detriment of the Church in the United Kingdom, especially within the Reformed community as well as ecumenically.

A.A. van Ruler (1908-1970) was born, and lived his entire life, in the Netherlands, graduating from the University of Groningen before entering the pastorate of a ‘confessional’ church in the Netherlands Reformed Church, at Kubaard in 1933. The move to a further pastorate at Hilversum in 1940 coincided with the onset of the Second World War, and during these years he commenced a dissertation on ‘the relation of God’s revelation to human existence’ which was completed in 1947, in which year he was also appointed professor at the University of Utrecht. It was during his time at Hilversum that he was appointed to a commission of the General Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church, charged with developing a proposal for an agreed church order, and Janssen suggests that, in response, van Ruler advocated an “apostolic” church order (pp. 27-28).

It is to this feature of van Ruler’s work that Janssen devotes his attention, with his own study taking its point of departure from the discussion on ministry in the 1982 Faith and Order document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and the questions raised there for the Reformed community with respect to ‘the theology of office’. Janssen notes that there is no consensus among the Reformed, for example, as to whether ‘office’ emerges ‘from below’ or ‘from above’, or on the nature of the three-fold ministry. In response to this Reformed non-consensus Janssen offers the contribution of van Ruler, and so notes that for him the three-fold ministry is exemplified in the ‘presbyterial-synodical polity that includes within itself the three-fold office of minister, elder, and deacon’ (pp. 17-18, 185-236). What claims did van Ruler make for this
model? ‘Personally, I am convinced that the presbyterial-synodical form of church governance is the purest, the most catholic and the closest to the New Testament that has been reached thus far’ (pp. 29-30). Equally, with respect to the question of the origin of the ‘office’, Janssen suggests that for van Ruler ‘office stands “over and against” the church’ and is ‘an expression of the apostolic nature of the church’. Further, he notes that ‘office’ does not emerge from ‘the priesthood of believers’ (pp. 31-31).

As Janssen is clearly aware, van Ruler’s thought places him at a distance from much Reformed thinking, but the contours of his thought place him within the mainstream of ecumenical discussion and intimate a contribution to that discussion which is worthy of a hearing. This sense is strengthened when we hear van Ruler state:

> Because the church as communion exists only around the church as institution, thus the visible communion of the congregation is holy … And because the church as institution exists only in the church as communion, thus all the visible things of preaching, sacraments, and offices are not worldly gestalts, but together are signs, holy signs of the kingdom. (p. 110)

For van Ruler, the church is a ‘cathedral of love’ where ‘the church is the communion with the mediator, with the triune God and with each other in Christ’ (p. 112). It is within this context that we understand van Ruler’s concept of ‘office’, where he describes it as ‘the self-presentation of God in Christ in the congregation’ (p. 126 n. 2). The ‘office’, in its representation of Christ, represents the fullness of the Christ of the munus triplex, albeit that van Ruler does not seek to derive the particular ‘offices’ of minister, elder and deacon from the particulars of the munus triplex p. (145).

What then is the relation of the ‘offices’ to the ministry of the Apostles? Janssen suggests that in ‘an episcopal ecclesiological understanding’ the bishop succeeds the apostle, and ‘the offices originate in a prior office because … the deacon and the priest … ontically subsist in the prior office’ of bishop. Against this view, Janssen states that, for van Ruler, we ‘cannot say that the three offices found in Reformed theology and church order subsist in the office of the apostle’. The apostle exercised an ‘extraordinary’ ministry and is an ‘eschatological figure’, such that: ‘The office of the apostle is not primarily an office in the church but an office in the kingdom’. Van Ruler stresses the importance of ‘apostolic succession’ to the Reformation, and identifies our responsive hearing of the ‘deposit of the apostolic kerygma’ in the New Testament as the primary source of our continuity in their teaching. Janssen