

ON THE CONSISTORY BENCH: PRACTICE PREACHING OF THE *PROPOSANS* AND *PROONENTEN* IN THE REFORMED CHURCHES OF THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES¹

by Theodore G. Van Raalte

1. Where to hold one's practice sermons?

REFORMED SEMINARIES DEDICATE SIGNIFICANT ENERGY to devising a curriculum with just the right mix of the academic, the practical, and the spiritual. These three aspects of the training especially come together in student practice preaching—does he handle the text accurately, address relevant matters today, and speak to the heart? This essay explores the setting in which students for the ministry in Reformed churches of the sixteenth and seventeenth century delivered their practice sermons. Were they permitted to do so in the public worship services prior to ordination or not? The answer will vary by time and place, but judging by one decision of the French churches, the hard consistory bench, and certainly not the pulpit, was the appropriate venue. On the other hand, the situation in the Netherlands—where from the 1550s and up to 1620 about one half of the ministers had entered gospel ministry without the recommended academic training—seems particularly to have opened the way for student practice preaching in the official worship services.²

The present essay adds to existing literature on this topic by clarifying what is meant by the word “publicly,” when one reads, for example, that, “on Saturdays between two and three [the students for the ministry in Geneva’s Academy] should publicly preach on a Scripture passage in the presence of one of the pastors who will oversee everything.”³ Further, it is hoped that readers will gain an appreciation for the development of the language: Should one go to Van Dale’s *Groot Woordenboek* and read that a *proponent* is a candidate who has undergone an ecclesiastical exam and is

1. I would like to thank my colleagues at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary, as well as Dr. Art Witten and Dr. Karlo Janssen for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. Fred van Lieburg has developed a database of the 2,667 Reformed preachers who were admitted to the ministry in the Netherlands between 1572 and 1620, and he writes, “I guess that more than half of pastors who entered the ministry prior to 1620, must have come from a pool of capable Reformed laymen.” Fred van Lieburg, “Dutch Reformed Ministers without Academic Education,” in *The Pastor Bonus* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 171.

3. Karin Maag, “Preaching Practice: Reformed Students’ Sermons,” in *The Formation of Clerical and Confessional Identities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Wim Janse and Barbara Pitkin (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 146.

eligible for call, he will run aground invariably if using this definition for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴ Or, when a French provincial synod appealed to the national synod that a certain *proposans* (student for the ministry who could make practice sermons) be assigned to its care, should we assume that the provincial synod was looking for immediate pulpit supply for one of its churches?⁵ This would be a false assumption. Similarly, if one follows Van Dellen and Monsma in their *Church Order Commentary* wherein they state that the Dutch *propositiën* refers either to certain men who are being trained for ministry or to training centers, one will again go wrong. *Propositiën*, in fact, refers to practice sermons, being synonymous with *preekvoorstellen*.⁶ Even in the seventeenth century, the English chaplain John Hales, reporting on discussions at the Synod of Dort in December 1618, wrote about a practice of the Dutch churches wherein youths aspiring to the ministry were examined in “all the Articles of Religion, and if they give satisfaction, then they may be admitted *ad Propositiones*.” But then he added in parentheses, “(what these are I know not).”⁷ A privately published English translation of the acts of the early national synods of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands also suffers significantly from inaccurate and inconsistent renditions of these terms.⁸

In what follows, we will survey the practices of the Reformed Churches of Zurich, Lausanne, and Geneva, and then look at the Reformed Churches of France and the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands.

2. Practice preaching in Zurich, Lausanne, and Geneva

Theological education that included preaching was very important from the beginning of the Reformed churches, though not student preaching in the worship services. Legislated in 1523 but not begun until 1525, the *Prophezei* in Zurich was the earliest form of ministerial training, prior to any bricks-and-mortar institution. Both existing clergy and students of theology were expected to be present at 7:00 a.m. (8:00 a.m. in winter), five days per week (not on Fridays, as that was market day, and not on Sundays). These meetings, in the Grossmünster church building, focused on the Old Testament and treated it in its entirety sequentially; the New Testament was treated

4. C. Kruyskamp, ed., *Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal*, 8th ed. (‘s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1961), *sub* “Proponent.” “(prot.) theoloog die ten minste de graad van kandidaat heeft in die, na het afleggen van een kerkelijk examen, als predikant beroepbaar is verklaard.” That is, “Proponent: (protestant) a theologian who, possessing at least the standing of candidate, after undergoing an ecclesiastical exam, is declared eligible for call as minister.”

5. John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia reformata* (London: Parkhurst & Robinson, 1692), 1:509.

6. Idzerd Van Dellen & Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 89.

7. John Hales, *Golden Remains of the ever memorable Mr. John Hales* (London: Tim Garthwait, 1689), part 2, 15.

8. P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, trans. Richard de Ridder (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1986). Frequently de Ridder does not treat with sufficient care such technical terms as *propositiën*, *kandidaat*, *proponeren*, *proponenten*, and even the adjective *prive*.

by Oswald Myconius in the afternoons in a different church building in Zurich, the Fraumünster.⁹

The curriculum and pedagogical style of the *Prophezei* are noteworthy for their combination of spiritual and academic-exegetical concerns: The study began with a prayer and the reading of a chapter of the Old Testament in Latin, usually by a student. Then one of the professors (Ceporin, later Pelikan) read the chapter in Hebrew and used Latin to explain various points about the Hebrew. Zwingli followed by reading the Greek Septuagint translation and adding his own comments in Latin. The group as whole then discussed the text in Latin. Finally, after an hour, the study switched to Swiss German. All the people of the city were invited for this part, as a regular weekday morning worship service. Prayer was offered, followed by a sermon on the text, and a lengthy intercessory prayer.¹⁰ Although the students did not deliver practice sermons at these meetings, we do well to notice how closely their education was tied to the preaching. Each day began with a sermon. This practice was both spiritual and apprentice-like, and became commonplace in the Academies of Lausanne (1537–) and Geneva (1559–), which required their students to attend these daily morning sermons held in the city churches.¹¹

The pastors and other leaders in Zurich, however, soon realized the need for practice sermons, and decided that the students were to deliver such sermons every Saturday. This practice becomes clear in the early 1530s, in the successor program to Zwingli's *Prophezei*, namely, Bullinger's *Lectorium*.¹² The students had to deliver sermons both in German and in Latin, in the presence of one of the ministers, who offered corrections.¹³ The Latin requirement would have underlined the necessity of scholarly ability, made accessible to the student far more exegetical material, opened the way to studying abroad, and allowed him in future to engage in debate with non-Reformed authors near and far. The German emphasized the importance of preaching in the vernacular in order to reach the hearts of the people.¹⁴ I do not know how public

9. Eventually, Zwingli's school came to be one of the faculties that contributed to the institution of the University of Zurich, c. 1833.

10. This description is taken from: Karine Crousaz, *L'Academie de Lausanne entre Humanisme et Réforme (ca. 1537–1560)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 55; Karin Maag, *Seminary or University: The Genevan Academy and Reformed Higher Education, 1560–1620* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 131; Reita Yazawa, "The *Prophezei* and *Lectorium*: The Zurich Academy under the Leadership of Zwingli and Bullinger," in *Stromata* 49 (2008), 5.

11. See, for example, Crousaz, *L'Académie de Lausanne*, 409–410.

12. Emidio Campi, "The Reformation in Zurich," in *A Companion to the Swiss Reformation*, ed. Amy Nelson Burnett and Emidio Campi (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 77. "The school at Zurich was variously known as the *Pfarrerschule*, *Carolinum*, *Collegium*, and more commonly as the *Lectorium*. The main purpose of the humanities and theology course taught there was to provide training for the 130 ministers needed in Zurich and its territories." John Patrick Donnelly, trans. and ed., *The Peter Martyr Library: Life, Letters and Sermons* (Truman State UP, 2015), 321, n. 375. Compare Maag, *Seminary or University?* 134–35.

13. Ulrich Ernst, *Geschichte des Zürcherischen Schulwesens bis gegen das Ende des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Winterthur: Bleuler-Hausheer, 1879), 97.

14. Attending the lectures of famous professors at foreign universities was encouraged by the magistrates of Zurich, and indeed by many of the Reformed magistrates, pastors, and professors in other areas. This *peregrinatio academiae* rounded out a student's education and gained him

the practice was, but it does not appear to have taken place in the church's worship services.¹⁵

Other Swiss cantons also got busy with ministerial education either immediately upon adopting the new ways of reform or soon thereafter. The powerful Swiss canton of Bern adopted the Reformation in 1528 and began its own academy immediately, partly following Zurich's *prophezei* model.¹⁶ With Bucer's guidance, Strasbourg established a preparatory school in 1536; later an academy opened, in 1566. Basel's university at first closed when the city followed the ways of reform, but re-opened with Reformed faculty in 1532.¹⁷ Farel and Calvin invited Mathurin Cordier, a very eminent pedagogue of the new humanist strain, to Geneva in 1538 to restart the school there, only to find themselves banished later that year. Cordier accompanied Farel to Neuchâtel where Farel, with his fellow pastors and the magistrates, managed to establish a preparatory school that Cordier led. Farel also instituted training sessions that followed the model of Zurich's *Prophezei*.¹⁸ But Farel's efforts to establish an upper-level Academy for training pastors did not gain the support of Neuchâtel's City Council.¹⁹

After 1536, when Bern took control of many of the other Swiss cantons, it not only required public disputations on religion in order to bring about the adoption of reform, but it also realized that the French-speaking areas of the Swiss Confederacy would need to have a separate training institution for ministers to serve their needs. Thus, in 1537 the magistrates of Bern approved a new academy in Lausanne. For many years Pierre Viret led the academy, and later Théodore de Bèze joined the faculty. Until 1559, this was the only French-language Reformed Academy—Beza stated that between the *schola privata* and *schola publica* they had 700 students in 1558.²⁰ The French-speaking parishes in and around Lausanne numbered about 150 posts that had to be maintained with pastors.²¹

the recommendation of foreign theologians. The Convent of Wesel in 1568 recommended this practice. See Kuyper and Biesterveld, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 8.

15. The defense of various doctrines, via student disputations and declamations, was an exercise distinct from these practice sermons. In various schools, the latter might also take place on Saturdays.

16. Crousaz, *L'Académie de Lausanne*, 58–59.

17. Amy Nelson Burnett, *Teaching the Reformation: Ministers and Their Message in Basel, 1529–1629* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 67.

18. Jason Zuidema, *William Farel* (Darlington: EP Books, 2014) 88.

19. Comité Farel, *Guillaume Farel 1489–1565: Nouvelle Biographie* (Neuchâtel & Paris: Delachaux & Niestle, 1930), 516–17.

20. Crousaz, *L'Académie de Lausanne*, 257. The ministers in Geneva, prior to 1559, did carry out some ongoing ministerial training via Geneva's version of Zurich's *prophezei*. Their training sessions, called *congrégations*, occurred each Friday morning. On Friday afternoons the Company of Pastors met for official business. See Erik de Boer, *The Genevan School of the Prophets: The congrégations of the Company of Pastors and their Influence in 16th Century Europe* (Geneva: Droz, 2012); Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 134–37.

21. Crousaz, *L'Académie de Lausanne*, 284.

A variety of approaches to practice preaching were taken by these city councils and churches. Karin Maag, who has been studying Reformed ministerial training of the sixteenth century for some time, concluded that “various factors made it difficult for the Reformed church authorities to establish a consistent pattern of homiletical training.”²² She noticed on the one hand a significant measure of practical on-the-job training, whether the training was almost entirely under existing pastors in an apprentice-like manner or was a combination of “academic” training at a university followed by practical training on the job. But, on the other hand,

Other Reformed areas expected that training in preaching would be part of the regular curriculum that theology students took. Thus, the 1559 statutes of the Genevan Academy detail how students were meant to acquire preaching skills: “Those who wish to practice their exegetical skills should write their names on a list, and on Saturdays between two and three they should publicly preach on a Scripture passage in the presence of one of the pastors who will oversee everything. Then they should listen to the critique of the minister who oversaw the session. During the critique, each of those present is allowed to give his opinion modestly and in the fear of the Lord.”²³

Those who took part in this practice preaching exercise in Geneva were called *proposants* because they were delivering a sermon proposal. One scholar correctly described this, “The Saturday afternoon was reserved for the public training exercises of the *proposants* and the first Friday of the month for thesis defenses.”²⁴ Although Maag called this preaching “public” we need to understand that it took place often in the boarding houses of the students, in former convents or monasteries, in school buildings, or in church building alcoves, not in the public worship services. In this matter Geneva was following the model that had been established earlier in Lausanne, where one of the school’s regulations stated, “These [students receiving the bursary from the magistrates of Bern], when they preach in their boarding house, should be heard in turn by the pastors and also by the other professors (except for those of the

22. Maag, “Preaching Practice,” 146. Maag is currently working on a larger project regarding practical aspects of the training for the ministry in Reformed contexts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe.

23. Maag, “Preaching Practice,” 135–36. Compare Stanford S. Reid, “Calvin and the Founding of the Academy of Geneva,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 18, no.1 (November 1955): 32. Geneva’s education system was divided into a *schola privata* for youth aged seven through thirteen and a *schola publica* for ages thirteen through twenty. The *schola publica* is usually called the “academy.” Although similar to a university, the academy lacked a bull or writ of institution, and thus did not offer formal degrees.

24. “Le samedi apres-midi était réservé aux exercices publics des proposants et le premier vendredi du mois aux soutenances de thèses.” Charles Borgeaud, *Histoire de l’Université de Genève: L’Académie de Calvin, 1559–1798* (Geneva: Kündig, 1900), 53. Compare Elmer L. Towns, “John Calvin (1509–1564),” in *A History of Religious Educators* (1975). Available online at http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/towns_books/24. Accessed 1 June 2017.

arts) and they should be admonished about their responsibility.”²⁵ Thus, when the Lausanne Academy’s Rector, Jean Ribit, recommended a student to a particular church for this ability to expound the Scriptures, he was basing this on the semi-public preaching opportunities just mentioned, not on an activity of the student that had occurred in the church services in Lausanne.²⁶ Later Geneva would send its more experienced students to at least one small village church to lead its worship services, but as far as I know this never occurred in Geneva itself (see below).

One must remember that the universities and academies of this era did not give separate lectures in homiletics, unless one counts some of the instruction in rhetoric that the schoolboys received in the last stage of the trivium. But the Reformed academies and universities did pay more attention to this aspect than was done in the centuries before the Reformation, when only the itinerant orders like the Dominicans might provide some such training for their monks. As noted above, they typically required their students to be present at daily morning sermons in the church buildings of each major Reformed city. The students could thereby learn by example, and then practice the same skills in the semi-public gatherings on Saturday afternoons (or other times, as they may have varied by place and time).

Maag thinks that this practical training made the Reformed institutions attractive to students. Thus, she writes elsewhere:

The Genevan academy’s curriculum, for instance, reserved regular sessions every Saturday afternoon for preaching practice, during which each candidate would preach a sermon on a weekly rotation and have it critiqued by his peers and by individual pastors in turn. By the end of the sixteenth century, bursary students at the University of Basel who had received their masters’ degrees preached regularly in the Franciscan church, and all theology students were

25. “Hi concionantes in contubernio, a Pastoribus Ecclesiae et Professoribus item reliquis, artium excepto, per vices audiuntur et officii admonentor.” Translated by Crousaz as, “Que ceux-ci, lorsqu’ils prêchent dans leur pension, soient entendues tour à tour par les pasteurs et aussi par les autres professeurs, excepté celui des arts, et qu’ils soient rappelés à leur devoir.” Crousaz, *L’Académie de Lausanne*, 498–99. The exclusion of the arts professors occurred because they were not directly involved in exegesis and doctrine. The arts professors taught the seven traditional liberal arts, with a little adaptation (grammar, logic/dialectic, rhetoric, mathematics, natural philosophy, geometry, and astronomy; music was not taught). Crousaz, *L’Académie de Lausanne*, 387.

26. For example, “Pource qu’ycy les escholiers et estudiantz s’exercent a exposer et declairer les escriptures le dict Schamatis n’a pas esté des derniers tellement qu’on a bonne opinion de son scavoir et de sa maniere prescher, voyons qu’il ha grand grace, il ha aussi desir de servir au ministere quand legitiment il y seroit appellé.” Translation: “Because the scholars and students here are practicing their explaining and proclaiming of the scriptures, the said Schamatis [a student] has not been one of the least, but rather does so well that we have a good opinion of his knowledge and his way of preaching, seeing that he has great grace, and also has a desire to serve in the ministry whenever he might be lawfully called.” Crousaz, *L’Académie de Lausanne*, appendix 7.1.3, 504. See also page 356 for remarks about the attestations given by professors to the churches that might include remarks about the student’s ability to preach in French.

to preach regularly in German. Adding practical training of this kind made Protestant academies and universities even more attractive to church authorities. Not only did students get some valuable practice in preaching before beginning work in a parish, but churches could also expect an assessment of the student's preaching skills from the pastor or professor who oversaw the training.²⁷

Maag does not specify what was the setting for the preaching in Basel, but I would assume that because the students had obtained their Master's degree, the preaching was in the official worship services. Burnett confirms that stating in the 1570s pastors-elect in the territories of Basel underwent a period of probationary service before being formally ordained. At the least, this included preaching.²⁸ Many of the Reformed training institutions enjoyed a rather symbiotic relationship with their cities and the churches of their cities, so that sometimes the university's examination was sufficient to admit a student to the ministry once he had received and accepted a call (this was true in Leiden, for example). Whatever the case, in most of these institutions, as Anja-Silvia Goering states, "Sermon preaching was a subject in the exams, and students were retained for half a year if performance in the exams did not meet the expectations of the jury."²⁹ She adds, "[Compared to the existing Roman Catholic institutions] these Protestant institutions did innovate in terms of the academic subjects and practical training considered vital for future pastors."³⁰

One reason for not giving the students permission to preach in the churches was because vagrant preachers might take advantage of the situation. The synods of the time warned about these false preachers and even gave physical descriptions of them, in order to equip the churches against them. Some of these men were ex-monks who claimed to be attached to the Reformed churches. They showed up in out-of-the-way villages to preach, but knew little of the Scriptures, preached badly, and led the churches astray.³¹

3. Practice preaching in the Reformed Churches of France

The Reformed Churches of France formed a federation in 1559. Around the year 1562, they numbered about 816 churches with consistories (*églises dressées*), and about

27. Karin Maag, "The Reformation and Higher Education," in *Protestantism after 500 Years*, ed. Howard and Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 127. The term "candidate" in the quotation should not be taken to refer only to those "eligible for call" but for students who were training for the ministry. As far as I can tell, the Church of Geneva did not have a special category of men eligible for call, but simply ordained men when the Company of Pastors and the City Council considered them to be ready.

28. Burnett, *Teaching the Reformation*, 205–206.

29. Anja-Silvia Goering, *Storing, Archiving, Organizing: The Changing Dynamics of Scholarly Information Management in Post-Reformation Zurich* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 175; compare Maag, "Preaching Practice," 139.

30. Goering, *Scholarly Information Management in Zurich*, 128.

31. For example, see the discussion in Comité Farel, *Guillaume Farel*, 516, and the lists and synod discussions in Quick, *Synodicon*, 1:46–47, 60–62.

2150 assemblies or churches altogether. The larger number includes *églises* that were not *dressées*, such as preaching points, assemblies in noblemen's castles, etc.³²

Already in 1560, in their second national synod, they decided, "In each church we will establish some candidates who will propound (*proposeront*) the Word of God, as the places will accommodate it, and the text for making their trial will be taken from some places of Holy Scripture which would be suitable to the present times and circumstances."³³ Later their church order stated the rule as follows, "In each church we will establish a propounding (*proposition*) of the Word of God among the scholars, as the places and persons can accommodate it, in which the pastors will help both by presiding over it and by shaping the said proposers (*proposans*)."³⁴ These opportunities mirror what we already know about Lausanne and Geneva—the practice preaching normally occurred outside the worship services. We know this because the French synods sometimes found the need to admonish their own churches, or foreign churches where their students were being trained, that they not permit them to preach in the churches.

In 1563 the National Synod of Lyons reproached some of their own—"those of Caën"—who were sending *proposans* here and there to preach. This can only mean that the pastors of Caën were training ministerial students in their city and then sending them out to preach without ordination. The men of Caën had two responses: first, the churches had already allowed "deacons" to catechize without being ordained as

32. Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod, "Les 2150 'Églises' réformées de France en 1561–1562," in *Revue historique* 311 (2009): 551. There may be a theological point overlooked in the essay by Benedict and Fornerod, namely that an assembly without a consistory could still be called an *église*. In this way of understanding, the number of *churches* tallied by Beza (2150) would be quite correct.

33. "On établira des Candidats qui proposeront la parole de Dieu dans chaque Eglise, selon que la commodité des lieux le permetta, et leur Texte, pour faire leur Essai, sera pris de quelques endroits de la sainte Ecriture qui conviendront au tems et aux conjonctures presentes." Jean Aymon, *Tous les synodes nationaux des Eglises Reformées de France* (Den Hague: Delo, 1710), 1:16. One of the practices typical of the classes and synods of the time included various delegates making a hand-written copy of the minutes to carry to their churches. This resulted in significant variations in the manuscripts and to date no critical edition of the acts of the national synods of France has been established. In the seventeenth century John Quick made this English translation, "A Proposition out of the Word of God shall be made by the Scholars of every Church, as time and place may conveniently bear it; at which Exercises Pastors shall be present to preside and order the said Proposans." Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata*, xxvii. We do not know in each case what manuscripts Quick relied upon, but scholars suggest that his sources were actually better than what we have in French from Jean Aymon. See Bernard Roussel and Solange Deyon, "'Pour un nouvel 'Aymon': Les premiers Synodes nationaux des Églises réformées en France (1559–1567)," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire du protestantisme français* 139, no.4 (October 1993): 545–595. See also Françoise Chevalier, "Les Actes des synods nationaux: Édition et Études, un bilan historiographique," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Française*, 150, no. 1 (January 2004): 63–72.

34. "En chacune Eglise on dressera Proposition de la parole de Dieu entre les Escoliers, selon que la commodité des lieux et des personnes le portera, ausquelles assisteront les Pasteurs, tant pour y presider, que pour dresser lesdits Proposans." Isaac d'Huisseau, *La Discipline des Eglises Reformées de France* (Geneva: Pean and Lesnier, 1666), 68.

ministers; second they had sent these *proposans* to places that could not support a minister.³⁵ The synod replied that these deacons were only permitted to do so when they were entirely resolved to become ministers, and, moreover, that catechizing was different from preaching.³⁶ The national synod then confirmed the decision of the Provincial Synod of Rouan, to strongly reproach those in Caën who had done this. Aymon, in the index of his edition of synod acts, describes this decision as, “It was forbidden for them [the *proposans*] to go and preach outside their personal lodgings.”³⁷ Another early decision, this one from the National Synod of Vertueil in 1567, advised that the elders and deacons could assist the ministers in evaluating the *propositions*. This only makes sense if the *propositions* were being delivered outside the worship services, in meetings where the elders and deacons were not normally present.³⁸

As for admonitions towards foreign churches, the Synod of Gergeau in 1601 decreed, “We do not find it good to introduce the custom of several foreign churches, who send their *proposans* scholars to preach in the villages for several months before they lay on hands.”³⁹ At the Synod of La Rochelle III, in 1607, the same point was made, with a decision to write a letter to the church of Geneva expressing these concerns.⁴⁰ Though not named in 1601, the synod probably already had Geneva in its targets. Evidently the use of *proposans* in Geneva had developed since 1559. Indeed, the Genevans were in the habit of sending the most advanced to serve the village church of Chêne, without ordination.⁴¹ The Synod of Gergeau, mentioned above, also sent a letter to the pastors and teachers at the University of Leiden to ask them to cease ordaining (laying hands upon) their *proposans*, and instead to be sure to send them back to France for ordination, in accordance with the *Discipline Ecclesiastique* of the French churches.⁴² In this way the French churches could ensure that their ministerial

35. Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:42. I cannot find a corresponding article in Quick’s collection. Note that the spelling of *proposans* later occurs as *proposants*. Spelling in the sixteenth century—especially in Dutch—was non-standardized.

36. In the first five years of the French Reformed Churches, in some places the term “deacon” referred to a minister’s assistant who wanted to become a minister himself. This was a carry-over from older Roman Catholic usage and practices. See Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod, ed., *L’organisation et l’action des églises réformées de France (1557-1563): Synodes provinciaux et autres documents* (Geneva: Droz, 2012), lv–lvii.

37. “Il leur est défendu d’aller prêcher hors du Lieu de leur Domicile.” Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, index, *sub* Proposans. The words, “lieu de leur domicile,” refer to the student’s personal lodgings, not the entire town of Caën.

38. Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:74–75.

39. “Il n’a pas été trouvé bon d’introduire la coutume de quelques Eglises étrangères, qui envoient les Ecoliers Proposans prêcher quelques mois dans les Villages avant que de leur imposer les mains.” Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:245. Similar issues arise in the pages 264–65 regarding “deacons” who come from the Kingdom of Béarn (a region in the south of France that was historically independent) and presume to act as ordained ministers based on their prior role in the Béarn. The Synod required that they be properly ordained in the French churches.

40. Quick, *Synodicon*, 1:269.

41. Maag, “Preaching Practice,” 138.

42. Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:246

students did not preach in public worship services prior to ordination, and that the churches, not the university, would ordain these men to office.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Synod of Vitré in 1617 strongly admonished the churches' consistories and the academic councils of the theological academies to have their more advanced *proposans* read Scripture in the worship services before the preaching, and to reproach those students who refused to do this.⁴³ This certainly suggests that the *proposans* were not already leading worship services or preaching, since reading Scripture was generally regarded to be a less weighty matter than preaching (in the Dutch churches non-ordained readers called *voorlezers* were not uncommon).⁴⁴ Moreover, the decision even speaks of the more advanced *proposans*, showing that these men had already been delivering sermon proposals for some time in the semi-public gatherings of ministers, teachers, and divinity students, and yet had not even so much as read Scripture in the worship services.

Even more clear was the decision of the Synod of Charenton III in 1644/1645. As translated by Quick, the synod decided:

In ratifying the Canons of the National Synods of Gergeau, Gap, and the Third held at Rochel concerning Proposans, who presume to get into the Pulpits, and from thence to hold forth their Propositions, which can be none other than an Authoritative Preaching unto the People, especially if it be on the usual Days and Hours of their Publick Meetings; this Assembly at the Request of the Province of Xaintonge, doth forbid all Pastors and Consistories, to suffer this Practice to creep into any of their Churches; nor shall they of their own Heads introduce it.⁴⁵

In 1657 a Provincial Synod of Gévaudan meeting at Saint-Hippolyte had to deal with a complaint that abuses were slipping into the practices of the *proposans*. In response, the synod went back to a decision from 1607 to the following effect:

That no student can give practice sermons (*proposer*) unless it would appear that he has studied for a full year in sacred theology; that he will only give practice sermons on the texts which have been assigned by the pastors in the presence of the consistory; that he will give practice sermons in private before doing it in public; that these practice sermons not be made on Sunday but on a day of the week; that such exercises not be made in the pulpits in the church

43. Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 2:124; Quick, *Synodicon*, 1:514. It should be noted that the ideal envisioned by the French synods was that each of their provincial synods would institute its own academy. From about 1600 to 1685 the French churches generally had five to eight ministerial training centers in operation. Those of Saumur and Montauban were probably the most famous, while those of Nîmes, Montpellier, and Sedan were also important.

44. I am not certain, however, when the Dutch practice of using *voorlezers* began.

45. Quick, *Synodicon*, 2: 446; Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 2:653. The last national synod (Loudun, 1659) that was permitted by the French king before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, repeated this strong censure.

buildings, but on the bench (!) of the consistory and will not be able to take the place of the preaching or prayer.⁴⁶

As on other occasions, recourse to such a past decision was backed up with the threat of firm censures in case the churches, pastors, or students did not abide by it.

But if the *proposans* were not normally permitted to preach in the worship services, why did some provinces petition the national synods to have a certain student assigned to their province as *proposan*?⁴⁷ If one looks in the synod records, every provincial synod gave financial support to a significant number of *proposans*.⁴⁸ Every “fifth penny in all collections for the poor” was to support the *proposans*, and if they failed to enter the ministry, they were to return the monies.⁴⁹ I would suggest that the churches considered it an honour to provide financial support to the students of divinity. Also, when they were soon to need a new pastor, they could already help bind a student to themselves by supporting him. Many of the pastors served one congregation for life, and as the present pastor aged, the church would realize that the time for a replacement was approaching. In this system, the likelier way to obtain a new pastor was to support a young man who would stay with the church for his career, rather than call a minister from another church. Thus, the request for a *proposans* was not because they needed one to lead their worship services at the time but in view of their future needs.⁵⁰

This is not to say that all of the churches were agreed, one for one, that divinity students should not gain experience leading church services before they were ordained. The strong warnings issued by several synods show that some churches went their own way on this point—indeed, a letter from the church of Rouen to Geneva in 1613 asked them to give some preaching experience in the villages to a student they

46. “qu’aucun étudiant ne pourra proposer qu’il n’apparaisse qu’il n’a étudié une année entiere en la Sainte Théologie; qu’il ne proposera que sur les textes qui lui auront esté donnés sur les pasteurs en presence du Consistoire; qu’il proposera en particulier avant que de proposer en public; que ces propositions ne se fairont point un jour de dimanche mais un jour sur semaine; que tels exercices ne se fairont point sur les chaires des temples, mais au banc du Consistoire et ne pourront tenir lieu de prêche ou de prière.” Poton, “L’élection des proposants,” 181.

47. For instance, the provincial synod of Normandy asked the national synod of Vitry for a Saumur-trained Spaniard, Monsieur Solera, to be assigned to their province as *proposan*. See Quick, *Synodicon*, 1:509.

48. Starting in 1603 the national synod minutes render an accounting of the dispensing of the royal monies granted to the churches. Each provincial synod supported a number of *proposans*, usually five to ten percent of the number of pastors it supported. For example, the Provincial Synod of Dolphiny and Orange supported fifty-nine pastors and eight *proposans*. Quick, *Synodicon*, 1:247.

49. One finds this throughout the synod minutes. See, for example, Quick, *Synodicon*, 1: 229; Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:70, 80, 126. On returning the monies, see Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:197, 315.

50. The church of Metz sponsored the studies of four men in Geneva in the 1580s, all of whom “ended up as ministers in the Metz church.” Maag, *Seminary or University?* 111–112. Churches could also formally arrange support for a student in return for a promise that said student would serve them afterward. *Ibid.*, 104–105.

were supporting.⁵¹ But the agreement reached by the French churches in their national synods consistently opposed this.

When the revocation of the Edict of Nantes was nearing, and persecution of the Huguenots increased, they were prevented from holding synods and thus from following the usual procedures for ordaining men to office. Thus, men were called to the function of pastor and carried it out without having received the laying on of hands. But this was only because of the times and circumstances. The report on the *proposans* Fulcran Rey, the first martyr of the Reformed Churches after the Edict was revoked, underlines this: “God and his conscience making up for the lack of a synod, they called him to the function of minister....”⁵²

A bit later, in the eighteenth century, the French churches held their “Synods of the Desert.” From the beginning they suffered from almost a complete absence of pastors. *Proposants* then had to function in place of pastors, and we can read of one that he spent seven years as *proposant*, preaching to all with much edification.⁵³ As soon as feasible, however, he was ordained. As the number of pastors increased, the churches became stricter about who could be a *proposant*, but they did make an allowance that the earlier French Reformed Churches had not generally permitted, allowing *proposants* to deliver sermons in the worship services. Yet these men were not to administer the sacraments or exercise discipline, unless their body of elders pointedly authorized them to do so in situations of great necessity.⁵⁴

A few other noteworthy points regarding the training of the French *proposans* may be passed on: The Synod of Paris in 1565 agreed that *proposans* ought to be permitted to sit in consistory meetings so they could learn how to govern, and suggested that the pastors might from time to time ask the students to give advice, to test their wisdom. This point became part of the French *Discipline ecclésiastique* (their church order), in chapter V.VI.⁵⁵ Later, in 1617, the Synod of Vitré spoke of some *proposans* presuming that they are entitled to admittance to the colloquies, classes, and synods. The Synod denied this strongly—they could be invited, but it was not their prerogative.⁵⁶ When one of the provincial synods asked that all exams of *proposans* at synods and colloquies (classes) be made of equal time, the national synod replied that it was better to leave the matter of time taken and topics covered in the

51. Maag, “Preaching Practice,” 139–40.

52. “Le proposant Fulcran Rey, de Nîmes: Premier martyr des Églises Réformées, après la revocation de l’Édit de Nantes. 1686,” in *Bulletin de la société de l’histoire de la protestantisme français* 10 (1861): 123.

53. Edmond Hughes, *Les Synodes du Désert* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1885), 1:14–15, 63. The term used in the present source is *proposant* instead of *proposan*. I do not know whether this orthography reflects the eighteenth century (when the events occurred) or nineteenth century (when the work was published).

54. Henry M. Baird, “The French synods of the desert,” in *The Presbyterian Review* (Jan 1888): 9. Available online at <http://www.christianstudylibrary.org/files/pub/articles/20150216%20-%20Baird%20HM%20-%20The%20French%20Synods%20of%20the%20Desert.pdf>. Accessed 15 June 2017.

55. Quick, *Synodicon*, xxx; Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:65.

56. Quick, *Synodicon*, 1:479.

freedom of the assemblies.⁵⁷ Just as in Zurich the students were encouraged to be able to exhort both in their vernacular German and in scholarly Latin, so in the French churches the students were expected to deliver practice sermons both in Latin and in French.⁵⁸

Our conclusion regarding the practices of the French Reformed Churches—and for the most part, of the Reformed Churches in the Swiss territories as well—must be that their high regard for the office of minister of the Word and for the preaching that he did as one given this office from God, prevented them from permitting any preaching in the regular worship services by non-ordained men. This was certainly true of the major cities. At the same time, they paid close attention to the homiletical training of their students for the ministry, maintaining a structure for the students to deliver practice sermons in their academies and having the pastors in the larger churches (such as Caën) train students privately in preaching. In recognition of the office God had entrusted to the elders and deacons, they too were encouraged to offer critique of the students' *propositions*. The churches certainly wanted capable and well-trained preachers, and thus instituted patterns that, in their minds, provided the training and upheld the sanctity of the pulpit. Although we have not examined the following matter closely, the persecuted French Reformed Churches of the eighteenth century allowed *proposants* to preach for the congregations, but not to administer the sacraments. This permission seems not so much to have been granted for the purpose of training, but more due to the exigencies of the times, wherein the arrangements for ordination may have been logistically difficult and the number of pastors was few.

4. Practice preaching in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands

In 1571, when their first synod was held in Emden, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands came together as a federated body on the same principles as the French had.⁵⁹ The articles of the so-called Convent of Wesel—an assembly whose existence has always been rather mysterious—have recently been shown to have been composed by Petrus Dathenus, and circulated for the purpose of gaining signatures of support, in anticipation of the need for ecclesiastical regulations.⁶⁰ In those articles, Dathenus proposed a system like to that of the French churches. He made the following recommendation in chapter 2, article 26:

57. Quick, *Synodicon*, 1:273; Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:313.

58. Poton, "L'élection des proposants," 184. Interestingly, Poton also lists the texts assigned to the *proposants* in the fourteen provincial synods of Gévaudan between 1663 and 1682 for practice preaching. Most were from Romans and Ephesians. No Old Testament texts were chosen, and 85% were from the writings of the apostle Paul. *Ibid.*, 185.

59. Theodore G. Van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods of the Seventeenth Century," in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches from Henri IV to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, ed. Martin I. Klauber (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 57, 69.

60. Jesse Spohnholz, *The Convent of Wesel: The Event that Never was and the Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 40–117.

However, everywhere in the larger cities and more populous churches, where this can suitably be done, we highly recommend that special practice sermons (*bijzondere propositiën*) be held, wherein men who are good prospects for serving in the church of God and taking public office may practice in-house, and do so under the oversight and guidance of one of the ministers or at least of the prophets and teachers.⁶¹

This recommendation was in continuity with the practices of the French churches. It also fit well with Dathenus's introductory remarks in chapter 1, article 1, where he stated, "No one doubts that the knowledge of the [biblical] languages and academic disciplines and continual exhorting in the explanation of the Scriptures (which are called practice sermons or prophesyings [*propositiën of profetiën*]) can contribute most to [obtaining qualified ministers and pastors]."⁶² What this remark and recommendation do not appear to clarify is whether Dathenus envisioned this practice preaching occurring in the worship services of the church or in a semi-private pedagogical setting. The word *binnenshuis*, which I have translated "in-house" might indicate that if students were lodged in the boarding house of some pastor or professor (as was common) or some eminent citizen, they might deliver practice sermons in that setting. As noted above, this was the regulation some years prior in the city of Lausanne. The French Reformed Churches, making use a bench where the consistory met, did not offer their students quite the same level of comfort and familiarity!

In fact, we can confirm that the training was not envisioned to occur in the worship services on the basis of Dathenus's specification of "the oversight and guidance of one of the ministers or at least of the prophets and teachers."⁶³ After all, the consistory, not the minister, would have been considered to have oversight of the worship services. Once again, aside from some unique Dathenian elements, we find

61. "Overall echter in de grootere steden en talrijker kerken, waar dit geschikt zal kunnen geschieden, raden wij ten zeerste aan, dat men bijzondere propositiën zal houden, waarin degenen, angaande wie goede hope is, dat zij eens de kerke Gods kunnen dienen en naar openbare ambten staan, binnenshuis zich oefenen en dat onder het bestuur en de leiding van één van de Dienaren of althans van de Profeten en Leeraren." P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje* (Kampen: Bos, 1905), 12–13. The translations of the *Kerkelijk Handboekje* are my own. The translation of Richard de Ridder should be noted, but I have not followed it, particularly because his translations are inaccurate regarding the *propositiën* and all things associated therewith. P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, trans. Richard de Ridder (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1986).

62. "Niemand betwijfelt, dat de kennis der talen en wetenschappen en de voortdurende oefeningen in het uitleggen der Schriften (welke men propositiën of profetiën noemt) daartoe het meest kunnen baten." Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 2.

63. The reference to "prophets" and "teachers" is later explained not to be a distinct office in the church. Spohnholz, *The Convent of Wesel*, 61. In connection with this, one can take note of Eph 4:11 which mentions that the ascended Christ gave "apostles," "prophets," "evangelists," "pastors," and "teachers." Also, the association of preaching with prophecy was derived from 1 Cor 14, was resident in the Reformed tradition from Zwingli onward, and connected with the Reformed critique that preaching to the people in Latin amounted to speaking in tongues without interpretation (also from 1 Cor 14).

him recommending continuity with the French practices. Similar remarks could be added about Geneva's regulation that "one of the pastors will oversee everything" when the *proposans* were to deliver their practice sermons on Saturday afternoons.⁶⁴

When the Dutch churches first met in an official synod, outside the Dutch borders, at Emden in 1571, they made a stipulation in line with Dathenus's thoughts, even though we have no record that the regulations drawn up by Dathenus were even present at the meeting or indeed consulted at all.⁶⁵ Evidently this system of homiletical training was already known to the delegates of the synod.

It will be fitting that in large congregations certain men who show promise that they will be able at some time to serve the church of God should [participate] in special training, that is, in practice sermons (*int besonder oeffene, int proponeren*). To the end that this may be done in an orderly way, a minister of the church shall preside over this activity.⁶⁶

This time the wording about oversight is clearer; the mention of prophets and teachers does not occur and it is agreed that the minister of the church shall "preside." As noted already, since consistories were considered to preside over worship services, the article has in mind "prophesying" in special training exercises outside of the worship services. The exhorting done by the students was private or semi-public. Not surprisingly, we have here a continuity with the practices of the Reformed Churches in France.

Both the Synod of Dordrecht in 1574, art. 21 and the Synod of Middelburg in 1581 continued this agreement, as one can see from the acts of the latter, chapter 2, article 14:

The congregations shall endeavour that there be students in theology who are given support from public funds. Also, in congregations where there are qualified men the use of practice sermons (*Propositien*) shall be introduced so that by such an exercise these men may be prepared for the ministry of the Word.⁶⁷

With the Synod of Den Hague, in 1586, a new distinction was introduced, which we will see in a moment. First, the synod clarified that the *propositiën* that had been encouraged in the past were not intended for the worship services, "it being clearly

64. See note 23 above.

65. Spohnholz, *The Convent of Wesel*, 100–101.

66. "In groote Ghemeenten salt oorbaerlijck zijn, dat men sommighen die hope gheven, datse de Kercke Gods t' eeniger tijdt sullen connen dienen, int besonder oeffene, int proponeren: ende op dat het ordentlijck gheschiede, sal een Kercken-Dienaer over die Actie presideren." Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 47.

67. "De Ghemeijnten sullen arbeijden datter studenten inder Theologie zijn, die *ex bonis publicis* onderhouden werden. Men sal oock inden Ghemeijnten, daer men bequame personen heeft, tgebruijck der Propositionen aenstellen, op datse door sulcke eene oeffeninghe tot den dienste des Woordts bereijdet moghen werden." Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 145–46.

understood that no candidates shall teach the congregations from the pulpit.” Indeed, the lack of mention of an ecclesiastical exam in the acts of the previous synods underlined the point. At the same time, the clarification advanced by the synod suggests that some Dutch churches had been permitting their unordained *proponenten* to speak in the worship services and that the churches as a whole, via their national synod, wanted to regulate this. The decision was as follows:

In churches that have more capable ministers, the use of practice sermons (*propositien*) shall be introduced in order to prepare men for the ministry of the Word by such exercises, it being clearly understood that no *proponenten* shall teach the congregations publicly from the pulpit except those who have been lawfully examined in the university or classis and are known to be qualified, and they shall not be permitted to administer the sacraments until such time as they have been assuredly called and ordained.⁶⁸

In addition to the added clarity, the synod herewith created a new distinction and a new provision: the words, “except those who have been lawfully examined in the university or classis and are known to be qualified,” show that by 1586 the Dutch were prepared to allow what the French were not: unordained *proponenten* (French: *proposans*) who expounded Scripture in the worship service. The mention of both the university and the classis reflects the reality that men were coming to the ministry by way of two distinct tracks.

As noted above, up to half the Dutch ministers between 1572 and 1620 were admitted to the ministry without university training, via what became later article 8 of the Church Order.⁶⁹ Before this time, from about 1550 to 1572, many of the Dutch preachers also had a non-academic background.⁷⁰ The Dutch situation thus introduces an important distinction between two tracks of students for the ministry: the studied and the unstudied.

The Synod of Dordrecht, in 1574, was the first to formulate a regulation for the admittance of the unstudied to the delivering of *propositiën*, which in time became the famous article 8, just mentioned. The synod decided that,

Regarding the proposal, whether any of those who have not studied and nevertheless, having good intelligence, are desirous to enter into some kind of ecclesiastical service, should be permitted to make practice sermons

68. “In de kerken daer meer bequame predicanten sijn, salmen het ghebruijck der propositien aenstellen, om doer sulken oefeninghen eenighe tot de dienst des woerts te bereyden; wel verstaende dat gheen proponenten de Gemeynten openbaerlyck vanden predicstoel sullen leeren, dan die wettelyken gheexamineert ende bequaem ghekent sijn inde vniuerseteijt ofte Classe ; ende en sullen nochtans haer niet vervordderen de Sacramenten te bedienen, ter tijt toe sij volcomelyken beroupen ende beuesticht sijn.” Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 196. Compare H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht* (Kampen: Kok, 1928), 1:402.

69. See note 2 above. Lieburg, “Dutch Reformed Ministers without Education,” 171.

70. Lieburg, “Dutch Reformed Ministers without Education,” 169–170.

(*proponeeren*): It is decided that only those shall be permitted in whom all these things have been found: first, godliness and humility; second, the gift of speaking well; third, good intelligence and discretion.⁷¹

This language suggests that before this decision the *propositiën* were intended first of all for the homiletical training of those who had the requisite academic training or were in the process of receiving it (like the French situation). However, other men wanted in, and were perhaps already being trained in these semi-private meetings.

One can appreciate that with the “prophesying” sessions in place, the Dutch churches had a low-cost and portable training system that had a lot of flexibility built into it. It could meet the needs of both university students (in case their university did not offer practice preaching sessions or in case they needed further training in this area) and unlettered men with special gifts. Although the ministers preferred that all of them would exegete Scripture from the original Hebrew and Greek, and would read Latin theological treatises, the needs of the day led them to make room for less educated pastors. Students could be accepted into the system of *propositiën* so long as they led exemplary lives and appeared to be able to edify fellow believers by their explanations of the Scriptures.

Lieburg notes that because they had not mastered Latin and only used their mother tongue, in Dutch these particular *proponenten* were also called *clercken*, that is, clerics.⁷² Bouwman also tells us, “These practice sermons or proposals of the unstudied were only held in the bigger congregations such as Dordrecht and Leiden, where men had ‘schools of prophecy’.”⁷³ Thus the *propositiën* were the actual practice sermons while these were held at what might be called “training centers” or “prophecy schools.”⁷⁴ The term “prophecy schools” rightly reminds us of the practices in Zurich

71. “Aengaende de propositie, Ofmen die gheene die niet ghestudeert en hebben, ende nochtans goet verstandt hebbende begheerich sijn hun tot eenighen Kerckendienst te begheuen, toelaten sal te proponeeren, Is besloten datmen die alleen toelaten sal inden welcken alle deze dinghen beuonden en worden, Ten eersten godtsalicheijt ende ootmoedicheijt, Ten tweeden, gaue van welspreckenheijt, Ten derden, goet verstandt ende discretie.” Kuyper and Biesterveld, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 68.

72. Lieburg, “Dutch Reformed Ministers without Education,” 166. This was likely an insult, meant to recall the unlettered Roman Catholic clergy of pre-Reformation times. Other terms were “layman” and “idiot.” The latter term would mean “unlettered” or “ignorant,” as it derives from the Greek of 1 Cor 14:24.

73. “Deze propositiën of voorstellen der ongestudeerden werden alleen in de grootere gemeenten gehouden, waar men, zoals te Dordrecht en Leiden, ‘profetenscholen’ had.” Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1:510.

74. Van Dellen & Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, 89, think that *propositiën* refers either to “classes for men with gifts and desires for the ministry, which men should be trained in preaching, not publicly but privately,” or “training centers . . . in Churches with gifted Ministers.” Bouwman, however, is correct; the term refers to the sermon proposals and is synonymous with *preekvoorstellen*. Even the term “training centers” for the places where the *propositiën* were held probably connotes too much of a bricks-and-mortar institution. In time, it is of course quite possible that *propositiën* became a shorthand way of referring to this entire system of homiletical training. But the basic definition, as seen from Wesel (1568) onward, is that of “practice sermons.”

under Zwingli.⁷⁵ Training sessions would normally have occurred on a market day in the larger cities or in conjunction with a classis meeting.⁷⁶

One notices a development in the referents for *proponenten* (or: *proposants*). First, with Bullinger's *Lectorium*, these would have been students of theology who were learning how to use all the biblical languages, could preach in German and Latin, and delivered their practice sermons in a semi-public instructional setting. The Reformed Churches of France established the same system, using French and Latin. The Reformed Churches of the Netherlands sought to copy this training system, likewise restricted it to making sermon proposals outside the worship services, and probably would have preferred to hold sermons in both Dutch and Latin. But with influence from the practices of prophesying in the Dutch Stranger Church of London, with a great need for pastors, and with less access to ministerial training before 1575, the Dutch churches opened the way for unlettered men to participate in the *propositiën*.⁷⁷ Perhaps the tradition—so prevalent in the Netherlands—of the *devotio moderna* lay preachers and their encouragement of lay piety also added to the Dutch churches' acceptance of article 8 pastors.⁷⁸

With the introduction of the Dutch preparatory exam, the terminology developed further, so that the more advanced *proponenten*, who might now be permitted to exhort in the worship services, became the public face of the whole system of *propositiën* or prophesying. Bouwman's definition reflects this period: "*Proponenten* are those students of theology or candidates for the holy ministry who, after sustaining the ecclesiastical exam, have received authorization to carry out the preaching of the Word in front of the congregation. These practice sermons (*propositiën*) or sermon proposals (*preekvoorstellen*) were an outgrowth of the old prophesyings (*profetieën*)."⁷⁹ Today, the definition of *proponent* refers only to those who deliver their practice sermons publicly. Other terms, such as "candidate," have also undergone changes in referents.⁸⁰

75. Using "prophecy" as a term for preaching was based on 1 Corinthians 14:24.

76. Lieberg, "Dutch Reformed Ministers without Education," 171–72.

77. On the influence of the practices of London's Dutch Stranger Church, see: Lieburg, "Dutch Reformed Ministers without Education," 169; Bouwman, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*, 1:510–511; Francis Bremer, *Lay Empowerment and the Development of Puritanism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 18–19.

78. For a summary of the "Modern Devotion," see Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550* (New Haven: Yale, 1980), 96–97.

79. "Proponenten zijn dus studenten in de theologie of kandidaten tot den H. Dienst die na voldoende kerkelijk examen, de bevoegdheid hebben ontvangen om voor de gemeente op te treden in de prediking des Woords. Deze propositiën of het houden van preekvoorstellen waren een omvorming der oude profetieën." H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht* (Kampen: Kok, 1928), 1:510.

80. See, for instance, note 27 above. The change of language to the present time is evident in the definition of the *Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal*, 8th ed., "Proponent: (prot.) theoloog die ten minste de graad van kandidaat heeft in die, na het afleggen van een kerkelijk examen, als predikant beroepbaar is verklaard." That is, "Proponent: (protestant) a theologian who, possessing at least the standing of candidate, after undergoing an ecclesiastical exam, is declared eligible for call as minister."

Before 1575 the Dutch ministerial students would have relied primarily upon Geneva's academy and Heidelberg's university.⁸¹ In connection with this, the allowance of the National Synod of Den Hague in 1586 for practice preaching in the church services—provided the requisite ecclesiastical exam was taken—probably also relates to the rise of the University of Leiden, founded in 1575. The magistrates of Leiden had decided that the university itself could declare the students eligible for call and ordain them.⁸² They also excluded the pastors and consistories from any role in choosing the professors of theology at the university.⁸³ In response, the churches wanted to maintain their ecclesiastical jurisdiction and so they asserted their right to examine men, permit them to exhort, and ordain them, with or without a university education. Bouwman writes, "The synod apparently wanted to maintain the right to an ecclesiastical training over against the university."⁸⁴ Perhaps the two avenues for ministry training could claim some continuity with the medieval distinction between the cathedral and monastic schools. The first was entirely ecclesiastical and prepared one for ordination while the latter was for monks and often welcomed those outside the order as well.⁸⁵

According to Fred van Lieburg, the developments just noted gave rise in particular to the preparatory exam. He explains that when the students of theology were allowed to preach as soon as they left the academy, the unstudied candidates from the classical *propositiën* followed the same practice, whereas they were only supposed to preach in private. The preparatory exam began as a way, he says, "to get a grip on both movements."⁸⁶ Herewith we gain some context for the decision of Synod Den Hague in 1586, quoted above. Preparatory exams were from then on to be administered after students graduated from a university, or, if they were among the "unstudied," after those overseeing their private practice preaching recommended them to the classis.

Still, the question was not settled: the Dutch Provincial Synod of Zeeland put the matter of student preaching in the worship services on the agenda of the International Synod of Dort insofar as it asked for some direction as to how the students and candidates ought to be prepared for ministry. The question was put to the synod on December 1, 1618. The following Monday, December 3, the chairman, Johannes Bogerman, divided the question into four: "1. May students and candidates preach in public worship services? 2. May they administer baptism? 3. Should they be admitted to consistory and classis meetings? 4. May they read Scripture in the public worship services?" In sum, the responses were:

81. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1:434; Maag, *Seminary or University?* 154ff.

82. Aymon, *Tous les synodes*, 1:246; Lieburg, "Dutch Reformed Ministers without Education," 1:172.

83. Maag, *Seminary or University?* 173–74.

84. "De Synode wilde blijkbaar tegenover de universiteit het recht van eigen kerkelijke opleiding handhaven." Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1:512.

85. Stephen C. Ferruolo, *The Origins of the University: The Schools of Paris and Their Critics 1100-1215* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 51.

86. Lieburg, "Dutch Reformed Ministers without Education," 172.

Almost all the delegations opposed non-ordained persons administering the sacraments, and this opinion carried. Regarding preaching or exhorting, this was left in the freedom of the classes, though Gomarus voiced strong arguments against it. A good number questioned the attendance of students at consistory, deacons, or classis meetings but the synod made no determination. Little was said about reading the Scriptures.⁸⁷

As the Synod of Dort drew to a close in 1619, the practice of having students who had passed the preparatory exam exhort in the worship services was not prohibited. Articles 8, 19, and 20—in line with the earlier Dutch synods—were included, as follows. They did not restrict the freedom of the classes or provincial synods to allow practice sermons in the worship services.

Article 8

No schoolmasters, tradesmen, or others who have not studied shall be admitted to the preaching office, unless there is assurance of their singular gifts, godliness, humility, modesty, good intelligence, and discretion, together with gifts of public speaking. When such persons present themselves for the ministry, the classis itself shall (if the [provincial] synod approves) first examine them, and after the classis via its examination finds them [acceptable], it shall allow them to give private practice sermons for a time, and then further deal with them as it judges edifying.⁸⁸

Article 19

The congregations shall endeavour that there be theological students who are supported from public funds.⁸⁹

Article 20

In churches where there are more competent ministers the use of practice sermons (*propositien*) shall be introduced so that by such exercises

87. This is quoted from my contribution to a forthcoming publication. *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619)*. Vol. 2: *Pro-Acta of the Synod of Dort*. Edited by Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming).

88. “Men zal gheen School-meesters, Handwercksluyden ofte andere die niet ghestudeert en hebben, tot het Predick-ambt toelaten, ten zy datmen versekert is van hare singuliere gaven, Godsalicheyt, ootmoedicheyt, zedicheyt, goet verstandt ende discretie, mitsgaders gaven van welsprekenheydt. Soo wanneer dan soodanighe personen sich tot den dienst presenteren, sal de Classis de selve (indient de Synodus goet vint) eerst examineren, ende na datse de selve int examen bevint, haer een tijt langh laten int prive proponeren, ende dan voorts met hen handelen, als sy oordeelen sal stichtlijck te wesen.” Kuyper and Biesterveld, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 228.

89. “De Gemeeynten sullen arbeeyden datter Studenten inder Theologie zijn, die *ex bonis publicis* onderhouden werden.” Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 231.

(*oeffeninghen*) some men may be prepared for the ministry of the Word, following in this the particular order specially prepared by this synod.⁹⁰

Although the number of unlettered men admitted to the ministry diminished sharply after the Synod of Dort, article 8 remains in most or all churches that still use the Church Order of Dort as the basis for their own church polity.⁹¹ Article 8's provision lies back of much of the history of the practice of seminary students exhorting God's people in the official worship services as part of their practical training for ministry.

Developments after Dort in the Dutch churches included the use of non-ordained persons to catechize the youth (*catechiseermeesters*), visit the sick (*ziekentroosters*), and read the Scriptures (*voorlezers*). In addition, when pietistic practices increased in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, unlettered men called *oefenaars* would exhort small gathering of believers in private homes.⁹² Sometimes their simple, experiential, and practical "sermons" were more appreciated than the official Sunday sermons of the ministers. Whenever such persons led parts of the worship service or did other work that one might otherwise expect of an ordained minister, the idea that all preaching in the worship services, without exception, should be done by ordained men, was somewhat weakened.⁹³

The Reformed Churches in the Dutch province of Friesland may have made the most room for non-ordained men to lead their churches. They accomplished this by distinguishing "sending" and "calling." Bouwman explains this and comments on it:

The candidates who had studied in Friesland and were examined by the classis or synod, received sending, that is, 'in the name of Christ they were given authority to preach, to administer the sacraments, to exercise discipline, and in everything to do what one in the office of pastor would perform' (à Brakel, 27.4). Earlier, on Nov 5, 1661, the Classis Sneek made the formula, "After this the door is opened to the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments . . ." The Reformed churches of the other provinces examined this way of handling things. And rightly so. They took a spiritual approach. Sending and calling may not be separated from each other. Christ calls his ministers, but he calls them by means of the congregations.⁹⁴

90. "Inde Kercken daer meer bequame Predicanten zijn, salmen 't gebruyck der propositien aenstellen, om door sulcke oeffeninghen eenige tot den dienst des Woordts te bereyden, volghende in desen de ordre daer van by desen Synode speciaalijck ghestelt." Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, 231. It is not clear to me that the Synod of Dort ever prepared the "particular order" it speaks about here.

91. For more on this article, see Bouwan, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1:434–39.

92. See K. Karels, "Oefenaar," in *De Christelijke Encyclopedie*, ed. G. Harinck et al. (Kampen: Kok, 2005).

93. This comment is not designed to speak to whether this was positive or negative normatively, but only to make an historical observation.

94. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1:431. The reference to Brakel indicates a discussion about Brakel's own ordination. See Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, transl. Bartel Elshout (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1993), 2:124–25.

The practice in Friesland may represent a form of government where the classis functions a bit more like a presbytery which itself can ordain ministers, and might commission a minister to work “at large.” At any rate, we encounter here the fullest employing of the *proponenten* in the entire work of a pastor. In a somewhat similar way, churches such as Zurich and Strasbourg had utilized a lengthy process of vicarage. As we have seen, other Reformed churches were more reluctant to permit such practices.

As an aside, it seems that the more one introduces distinctions such as senior pastor, junior pastor, assistant pastor, vicar, etc., the greater the danger that a hierarchy of statuses emerges among those serving in ministry. But the French and Dutch churches did not want this; not only did their church orders stipulate that no office bearer was to have authority over another, and no church over another, but both federations had made this a point of faith, as confessed in the Gallican and Belgic Confessions, respectively.⁹⁵

We can summarize select further developments as follows: Generally, the *Afscheiding* churches were less concerned with higher education and more concerned with personal piety, and preaching to the heart. They also lacked preachers in the early years.⁹⁶ Thus, they endorsed the use of students preaching practice sermons in the worship services, but they were very clear that this practice was not the giving of a sermon, but something lesser: “speaking an edifying word.”⁹⁷ It is remarkable, in my mind, that though they had a very high view of worship and of the regulative principle, their practical bent led them to endorse student exhorting.

The *Doleantie*, led by Kuyper, was more academically and less experientially oriented. It did not favour student exhorting.⁹⁸

95. This point was ensconced in the first article of the *Dicipline Ecclesiastique* of 1559 and the first article of the Synod of Emden of 1571. Article 30 of the Gallican and article 31 of the Belgic Confession oppose hierarchy on the grounds that the church has only one universal Bishop or Head, namely Christ. This point was strongly contested by the English Bishop George Carleton at the Synod of Dort. See André Gazal, “George Carleton’s Reformed Doctrine of Episcopal Authority at the Synod of Dort,” in *Beyond Calvin: Essays on the Diversity of the Reformed Tradition* (s.l.: The Davenant Trust, 2017), 107–126.

96. For examples where the need of the churches functioned as a ground for allowing students for the ministry to lead worship services, see Didier Poton, “De l’élection des proposants en Cévennes au XVIIe siècle,” in *Études théologiques et religieuses* 60, no.2 (1984): 180; H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1:514; Karlo Janssen, “Speaking an edifying word,” *Clarion* 46, no.7 (April 4, 1997): 146; *Acts of Synod 2016, Free Reformed Churches of North America*, 105. This ground, however, did not mean that Reformed churches easily accepted anyone who desired to enter the ministry. See, for example, Ingrid Dobbe, “Requirements for Dutch Reformed Ministers, 1570–1620,” in *The Pastor Bonus* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 191–92.

97. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 1:514; Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkorde der Gereformeerde Kerken* (Kampen: Kok, 1952), 88–89.

98. Van Dellen and Monsma summarize this. “The churches of the Secession in Holland, 1834, again permitted the practice. The Churches of the Doleantie, 1886 . . . did not favor this practice. In the united Churches, the Gereformeerde Kerken, the practice varied from time to time, but in 1908 they definitively decided against “student preaching.” Thus it has been in these Churches ever since.” This was written c. 1940. Van Dellen & Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, 90.

As for the *Vrijgemaakt* churches, Rev. G. Van Dooren wrote in 1974, “this issue of ‘preaching students’ has been a zig-zag operation in recent decades. Dr. K. Schilder was an enthusiastic supporter of it. One Synod opened the way. The next one closed it again. Later it came up again and a switch was made.”⁹⁹ Had he been writing today, he could have added that in 1996 Synod Berkel en Rodenrijs finally stopped delaying the execution of a long-standing decision, and thus denied permission for students to speak in the worship services—only those eligible for call would be granted this privilege and those who were interning in a particular congregation, within the Classis that had examined them.¹⁰⁰ Synod 1999 Leusden allowed graduates of the Kampen seminary who were subsequently serving as teaching assistants, to speak an edifying word in the churches of the Classis wherein they resided (without having to undergo a preparatory exam).¹⁰¹ Synod Harderwijk in 2011 once again opened the way for the licensure of Kampen’s students, with even a limited licensure after the first year of their three-year M.Div. program.¹⁰² The Canadian Reformed Churches, meeting in a general synod in 1971—the synod that immediately followed the formation of their own seminary—permitted the practice for students who have completed three of the four years of seminary, provided they sustain the stipulated ecclesiastical exam.¹⁰³

The United Reformed Churches of North America do not stipulate how long a seminary student must study before seeking licensure, but since the student must provide a seminary faculty recommendation, one may assume that he must have studied for at least one year.¹⁰⁴

5. Conclusion

In sum, the more recent practices of Reformed churches regarding student practice preaching in the worship services reflect something of the ambiguity of the earlier practices. Some of the churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rejected the practice on the basis of the principle that the public worship services must be led by ordained men. Other churches argued that if men had their hearts set on gospel ministry and had passed the requisite ecclesiastical exam, they should be permitted to deliver practice sermons in the worship services. Important in either case was the critique of the pastors, with the elders and deacons. But whatever practices were

99. Van Dooren, “No Place in Public Worship for an ‘Edifying Word’ and ‘Training’?” 12.

100. *Acta Generale Synode Berkel en Rodenrijs 1996*, art. 58

101. *Acta Generale Synode Leusden 1999*, art. 78.

102. *Acta Generale Synode Harderwijk 2011*, art. 22 (see also appendix 3.1). The history of this matter in the *Vrijgemaakt* churches was thoroughly discussed in *Acta Generale Synode Groningen-Zuid 1978*, art. 109.

103. *Acts of General Synod 1971 of the Canadian Reformed Churches*, art. 76. The decision actually required only two years of seminary training, but the program at the time was a three-year program. After Synod 1974 the churches decided to add a propaedeutic year to the program, and the understanding followed that consent to “speak an edifying word” would thereafter require three years of the four-year program to be completed.

104. “Church Order of the United Reformed Churches of North America,” 7th ed. (2016), Appendix 2.

followed, the churches were determined that their students for the ministry should undergo a vigorous training in preaching.