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YES OR NO?  
A REACTION  
TO  
J. KRONENBURG  
BY  
MARGRIET GOSKER

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# **AN ECUMENICAL BISHOP, YES OR NO? A REACTION TO J. KRONENBURG**

*Margriet Gosker*

In this article various views and arguments around the ministry of the bishop will be discussed and evaluated. The discussion will evaluate the views expressed in the thesis of J. (Hans) Kronenburg *Episcopus Oecumenicus. Bouwstenen voor een theologie van het bisschops ambt in een verenigde reformatorische kerk* (The Ecumenical Bishop. Building Stones for a Theology of the Ministry of the Bishop in a United Reformational Church) published in 2003.<sup>1</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION**

After the publication of the so-called Lima Text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)<sup>2</sup> by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1982 there was a genuine hope that the discussion on the ecumenical bishop would receive serious attention. This, however, was not the case. So it was the publication of Hans Kronenburg's thesis in 2003 that reopened the discussion on this issue, as Kronenburg's dissertation proved to be a useful contribution.

On the cover of his book an image of the Good Shepherd is depicted. This is in perfect harmony with the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II *Pastores Gregis*<sup>3</sup> on the Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World<sup>4</sup> of 16 October 2003. The exhortation declares on the first page, that the image of the Good Shepherd is the most excellent model of the ideal bishop. It symbolises good pastorship in the light of hope. The ministry of the bishop, however, also evokes a number of questions that need due attention, the most prominent of them questioning the possibility and the desirability of a Protestant bishop. In order to give a well-considered answer it is necessary to explore the importance of this problem and the arguments put forward in support or in refutation of the bishop's ministry. This article attempts to make a start.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Kronenburg, *Episcopus Oecumenicus. Bouwstenen voor een theologie van het bisschopsambt in een verenigde reformatorische kerk*, IIMO Research Publication 62, Zoetermeer (Meinema) 2003.

<sup>2</sup> BEM — *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Paper 111, Geneva 1982, 1986<sup>19</sup>. K. Blei, A.W.J. Houtepen, M. Postma-Gosker, 'De Nederlandse Kerken en het Limarapport: Evaluatie door de sectie Geloofsvragen van de Raad van Kerken in Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 29/2 (1989), 148-163.

<sup>3</sup> Pastors of the shepherd.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Paulus II, Postsynodale apostolische Exhortatie *Pastoris Gregis*. Over de bisschop, dienaar van het Evangelie van Jezus Christus voor de hoop van de wereld, *rkkerk.nl* 31 (2003) no. 9-10.

Since the publication of BEM the present author worked for a few years on the Lima Text, in particular on the part on Ministry. In her dissertation<sup>5</sup> she made a plea for introducing an episcopal element in the church today named the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (Protestant Church in the Netherlands – PKN).

This church is the fruit of a long process of unification between the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church, at the end of the 19th century more liberal – NHK), the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, at the end of the 19th century more conservative – GKN) and the Evangelisch Luthersche Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands – ELK). During the last 20 years the three churches together were called the Samen Op Weg kerken (churches underway together), since in 1986 they had decided to be in a state of reunification. On 1 May 2004 these three churches were officially united in the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland.

The author also contributed to the Koffeman Report on the episcopal ministry. The Synod of the then still existing Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland had officially asked for this report in April 1994, but later on it was never discussed nor published. This discussion, however, is a very important one.

## **PROTESTANT ARGUMENTS AGAINST A BISHOP**

At first the arguments opposing the idea of a Protestant bishop will be discussed. Hans Kronenburg's thesis shows that he is dreaming about the ideal bishop. According to Kronenburg the bishop<sup>6</sup> will be chosen minister. In this way the democratic element is preserved, which will create and guarantee a bearing surface. On the other hand the Protestant bishop will have his own responsibility, will feel affection for people, and thus will possess the possibility to show something of God to us. A Protestant bishop will have a warm heart and very good ears to catch the signals of all things moving the people of our time. In spite of this many Protestant churches do not possess bishops. They do not see the need for this type of ministers. What are the arguments against the appointment of Protestant bishops? As is known, Protestants attach much value to the text of the Bible.

The Bible, however, does not offer any real argument against the appointment of bishops. Another important source of inspiration for Protestants is the 16th century Reformation. The question is whether the prominents of the Reformation were against bishops.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Gosker, *Het ambt in de oecumenische discussie. De betekenis van de Lima-Ambstekst als onderdeel van het BEM-rapport (Baptism - Eucharist - Ministry) uit 1982 van de Commissie voor Faith and Order van de Wereldraad van Kerken voor de voortgang van de oecumene en de doorwerking in de Nederlandse SoW-kerken*, Budapest-Amstelveen, Delft: Eburon 2000.

<sup>6</sup> J. Kronenburg, 'Haar weg tot het bisschopsambt. Proeve van een profiel', *Predikant en Samenleving* 81/2 (2004), 15-18.

The currently existing churches originated from the Reformation make reasonable that they were not. Indeed, it is a fact that today's reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands does not have bishops and is not eager to create them either. The new Protestant Church in the Netherlands does not even possess a ministry of superintendence, whereas the existing system of church visitation has merely an advisory competence. But in the Lutheran and Anglican churches bishops play a prominent role. Various Calvinist churches know bishops as well. The Polish, Hungarian, Rumanian, Check, Slovak, Ukrainian and Scottish Calvinists do have bishops. Furthermore, if we may believe what Ganoczy<sup>7</sup> says and in his wake J. Plomp<sup>8</sup>, E.A.J.G. van der Borght<sup>9</sup> and J. Kronenburg<sup>10</sup>, even John Calvin himself was open for a recognition of the ministry of bishops. In fact, the Reformation was merely firmly opposed against the abuse of power by the Roman Catholic bishops those days. The Reformation did not oppose bishops as such.

A third argument sometimes brought in against episcopacy is the Protestant principle of the priesthood of the faithful with in the backdrop the idea that the appointment of bishops will harm the principle of democracy within the church. This argument is only valuable when one departs from the opinion that the ministry of the bishop will always be an institute of domination. In this view a bishop is Prince of the Church who highhandedly implements his policy without reckoning with the ideas of the congregations and the congregation members. He determines on his own what is right and good. It is good to realise that such a bishop falls short, also in the eyes of Kronenburg. Kronenburg opts not for a Prince of the Church, but for a mild, wise and well communicating bishop, who listens to what lives among the people, who has gathered around himself excellent advisors, who intuitively feels in which direction he has to go and which solutions are needed. In short, in the line of the bishops in the early Christian church of pre-Constantine times Kronenburg chooses for a bishop who knows to lead his herd in a right and inspiring manner. From the democratic viewpoint there is nothing against such a bishop as long as it is possible to prove his competence and to determine his term of office.

A fourth argument used against the bishop's ministry is that Protestants have an allergy against hierarchy, in particular the Dutch Protestants.<sup>11</sup> This argument is questionable, because it may be asked whether the Protestants really do not know any hierarchy. With regard

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<sup>7</sup> A. Ganoczy, *Ecclesia ministrans. Dienende Kirche und kirchlicher Dienst bei Calvin*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder 1968, 218-232.

<sup>8</sup> J. Plomp, *Presbyteriaal - Episcopaal*, Kampen: Kok 1967, 26.

<sup>9</sup> E.A.J.G. van der Borght, *Het ambt her-dacht. De gereformeerde ambtstheologie in het licht van het rapport Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Lima, 1982) van de theologische commissie Faith and Order van de Wereldraad van Kerken*, Zoetermeer: Meinema 2000, 171.

<sup>10</sup> J. Kronenburg, 52.

<sup>11</sup> M. Gosker, 'Waarom reageren Nederlandse protestanten vaak zo allergisch op de bisschop?', B.J. Aalbers en P. Nissen, *De bisschop, kerkscheidend of kerkverenigend?*, Delft: Eburon 2002, 93-101.

to the use of power there is always an open or concealed hierarchy. Protestants do also know all kinds of methods to manipulate the church government. The consequence of the lack of hierarchy in some Protestant churches is a lack of clarity with regard to the ecclesiastical government structure. In that case people prefer to deal with a transparent hierarchy. Evaluating the arguments mentioned above the conclusion must be that none of the counter-arguments is decisive. So there is no valuable argument against the introduction of the bishop's ministry in the Protestant churches lacking episcopacy.

## **ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF A BISHOP**

Nonetheless Hans Kronenburg's plea for a ecumenical bishop remains questionable, because the arguments he brings in fall short as well. His first argument is a historical one. He rightly asserts that the episcopal tradition has the oldest credentials. This does not mean, however, that everything in the church has to remain as it always was. When circumstances alter, churches probably has to change either, as is recognised also by Kronenburg.

His next argument is ecumenical. The ministry of the bishop is rooted deeply in the main church traditions. This argument counts heavily, as there are bishops in the Roman Catholic tradition, the Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and even the Calvinistic tradition. In particular in the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches the episcopacy is so crucial that the presence of bishops standing in the apostolic tradition is a *conditio sine qua non* for the recognition of another ecclesiastical community as a genuine church as well as for the recognition of its sacraments, although it is known that there is no genuine biblical foundation for these conception. On the other hand, there are no non-episcopal churches urging the episcopal churches to abolish the bishop's ministry in order to be taken seriously as a real church, which also would be without any biblical foundation. Nonetheless, there is some sort of imbalance here.<sup>12</sup> The most important things must come first. The problem is that for certain churches the presence of a sacramental bishop standing in an apostolic succession is the most important. So these churches will accept a Protestant bishop only with great difficulty. Of course, the same goes for an ecumenical bishop. It is only possible to proceed here when these churches alter themselves and have the courage to call the subjects of sacramentality and the apostolic succession themselves into question. It is, however, an illusion to expect that they will do so. So Hans Kronenburg wisely leaves this aspect aside.

The third argument in favour of an ecumenical bishop is an ecclesiological one: the bishop as sign of unity and continuity. In this case the bishop is, following the model of Ignatius, a uniting personality important to preserve and strengthen unity within the ecclesiastical ranks. In the opinion of Kronenburg such a person is able to keep the church together and will function, in accordance with

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<sup>12</sup> A. Houtepen, *Een Asymmetrische dialoog. Historische kanttekeningen bij de onderlinge erkenning van de kerkelijke ambten*, Utrechtse Theologische Reeks 22, Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht 1994.

the model of Irenaeus, as a guardian of the ecclesiastical tradition. Of old the ministry of the bishop fulfilled an important role in keeping the unity of the young church, in determining the canon and the dogmas, and in parrying heresies. Indeed, there is much to say in favour of the bishop as symbol of unity and continuity, but it was the bishop of the early church who was acting in this manner. In the late Middle Ages the bishop developed unfortunately into a cause of rift and division.

As the focus of this article is on Protestantism, the discussion here is confined to the question whether the functioning of a Protestant bishop is a good remedy to preserve unity in, for example, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. It is surely possible, but only when the bishop has support in all levels. He must be accepted at the local level and the regional and national levels as well. A lot of water will have flowed under the bridge before this situation will be attained in the Netherlands. Furthermore there are also many practical problems. One of these is that the Dutch Protestant church, as is said earlier, consists of three components, the '*hervormden*', the '*gereformeeden*' and the Lutherans. Will a bishop originating from the Lutherans, the smallest component, receive support among the other two parts? Bigger difficulties arise when the Protestant church has more than one bishop. Which guarantee we have that they will be able to stay on the same wavelength? In a pluriform church this is not obvious, particularly not when there is some flexibility concerning the interpretation of the Holy Scripture and the confessions. This situation can ignite a fierce struggle around the episcopal sees. One of the striking examples of a similar situation is the Reformed Church of Hungary, where the relationship between the bishops is bad for a couple of years already. Not to say what will happen when the proposal to appoint a bishop for each classis is carried out. The consequence will be that the PKN will have seventy-five bishops, which is far too much. Hans Kronenburg proposes to appoint nine bishops in accordance with the nine currently existing regional service centres. At present there are already voices that these nine centres are superfluous. It is the opinion of the present author that in a small country as the Netherlands three dioceses will be enough, one in the north of the country, one in the middle and one in the south.

Other problems emerge in countries with a dictatorial regime. The dangers a episcopal system causes must not be underestimated. In some dictatorships bishops have served as figureheads of the regime. These practical problems show that the functioning of a bishop is no guarantee for unity. It can even endanger unity, unless a unity is meant which is compelled by means of power. This is, however, a totally different story. In this case even a pope comes in view, but Kronenburg does not yet plead for the introduction of papacy.

A fourth argument in favour of the appoint of bishops is that a bishop can play an important role as mediator in ecclesiastical conflicts. In these situations he may act as a lightning rod. He passes his judgement and the case is decided. A bishop of the type Kronenburg is pleading for will function eminently in these circumstances, but it may be questioned whether it is realistic to suppose that a bishop will be excellent in conflict management only on the base of his ministry.

So it may be better in this case to appoint a good team of well educated mediators. The Protestant church terribly needs them today.

An argument not yet discussed is the positive value of the bishop for the recognizability of the church in society. A bishop gives the church a look and a voice, whereas everyone is able to consult him. Hans Kronenburg calls this the cultural motive. It is for him not only a matter of public relations and publicity. It is more the fact that the church can speak again in the midst of society and no longer is urged to keep silence or sinks in a cacophony of various different voices. If a church has a bishop, there is at least someone who has the responsibility and the authority to speak on behalf of the church. Although these things may not be essential, the bishopric may, in the opinion of Kronenburg, be made more recognizable by bearing bishop's garments, a bishop's ring and a bishop's crozier. Remarkably he is against a mitre, whereas head coverings possess the biggest determinant for recognizability. Examples are the crown, the veil, the fez, the yarmulka, the green beret or the cap of a general. In this case, however, it remains to be important that a bishop needs sufficient support to be capable to really with authority. So the support for a bishop is the crux. As long as he or she, or his or her ministry fails to gain this support, the bishop will not be able to function properly.

Another argument is that of the Catholicity. In this case the bishop is, following the model of Cyprian, the link of communication and contact with the Universal Church. The basic assumption behind this view is that no national or local church is isolated, but it is always related to the worldwide community of faithful Christians of all places and times. This idea counts heavily, as it helps all churches to transcend the fragmentary, to overcome the sickness often called *presbyterianitis*, and to prevent them to claim that they on their own possess the whole truth.

The last argument is the pastoral one referring to the bishop as *pastor pastorum* (pastor of the pastors). Already for more than a half century the call is heard in the Protestant church for the appointment of such an official. In the beginning of the 1960s it was determined in the *Gereformeerde Kerken* that the position of the pastor carries specific difficulties with it, for which the existing institutions of the church cannot provide sufficient help. Fortunately the national service centre of the Protestant church has a department for counselling and supervision for ministers, as there is no one specifically responsible for the well-being of the church ministers, although various of them got caught in a cleft stick. Rightly Kronenburg points out that the presbyterial-synodal system falls short with regard to this problem. Furthermore it is known that in times of shrinkage more conflicts arise in ecclesiastical congregations in which ministers are involved than in times of growth. A minister can get involved in complicated situations and become plaything in a play of diverging interests. This causes shatters against which there is hardly any protection. The minister involved has to stand firm in order to survive these circumstances

## KRONENBURG'S SANDWICH MODEL

After having dealt with various arguments supporting as well as disputing the ministry of the bishop the conclusion is the introduction of an episcopal element in the Protestant church in the Netherlands is advisable, but only if it is accompanied by well-defined competences and qualifications.

In the third part of his thesis<sup>13</sup> Kronenburg gives an insight in his view on the concrete implementation of the ministry of a bishop in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. He distinguishes the following seven tasks: 1) *pastor pastorum*; 2) missionary leader; 3) teacher and preserver of the tradition of faith; 4) minister in the service of the Word of God and of the sacraments; 5) link between the local church and the universal church; 6) a person who discerns the signs of time and is a voice of the conscience; and 7) ordinator and guide of church officials who as maintains discipline. The sequence of the tasks is not arbitrary, as they are placed in what Kronenburg calls a 'sandwich-structure'. Task 4, minister in the service of the Word of God and of the sacraments, is located deliberately in the centre, for it is around this predominantly liturgical task that the other tasks are clustered. The heart of the local church beats in the service at the Table. Kronenburg emphasises that assignment of these tasks to the bishop does not mean that other church officials and church members are excluded from them. 'In the terminology of BEM: the leadership of the bishop is personal, fraternal and communal.'<sup>14</sup>

As is obvious, of the seven tasks put forward by Kronenburg the first, the third, the fourth, the fifth and the seventh are already discussed before. In fact, only two tasks are new: the bishop as a missionary leader and as a person discerning the signs of time and being a voice of conscience. The tasks may sound beautiful, but unfortunately it remains misty what is actually meant by them. What is their concrete implementation? In the Netherlands we know one good example of a bishop as a missionary leader, the Roman Catholic bishop of Breda, M.P.M. Muskens, who is able to communicate the views of his faith and his church in an excellent way in the media. Besides he reorganises the church of his diocese in order to make it better equipped for its parotal tasks and its role in society. It is very difficult to develop a concrete implementation of this task, whereas persons who are a source of inspiration in this field are very scarce. So with regard to this task the church will become very dependent of the personal talents of its bishops.

The second new task mentioned by Kronenburg is being a person discerning the signs of time and acting as a voice of conscience. This sounds also beautiful, but what is exactly meant? For there will rise many problems, if the voice of conscience has to be a real ecclesiastical conscience. When the bishop utters his personal views in this role, he will not function properly. And what when one of the other

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<sup>13</sup> J. Kronenburg, 381.

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bishops gives a different opinion? Here it is more important that good agreements are made between the bishops among themselves and between bishops and other church officials.

In other words, the tasks of a bishop lack a sharp definition in the profile designed by Kronenburg. When analysing the other tasks the problem of a lack of sharpness in the definitions with Kronenburg emerges again. Two examples: what does it concretely mean when a bishop is teacher and preserver of the tradition of faith in a church as the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Presently in this church the so-called *Formulieren van Enigheid* (Forms of unity)<sup>15</sup> function hardly, the Bible is interpreted in various ways and the ecumenical symbols play hardly any role as a preserver of the tradition of faith. In order to fulfill this task properly the bishop must possess an enormous spiritual authority.

The second example has to do with his task to be a link between the local church and the universal church. It certainly is an important task. In the Roman Catholic Church it is easier to give proper implementation to this task than in Protestant churches, where the local church councils still have a strong position and where there is already a great distance between a local general church council and the church councils in the neighbourhoods. Moreover the Dutch Protestant church is not a world church: there is no papal authority. So the question rises with whom and on which level the bishop has to make contacts and develop relationships, when a clear hierarchical structure including a pope is missing.

The third example deals with the bishop's task to be an ordinator and guide of church officials who as maintains discipline. Kronenburg unfortunately does not explain what he exactly means. It remains a question whether he prefers a bishop who ordains all church officials or only the ministers. Moreover Kronenburg does not speak of a term of office. Does he mean that bishops are appointed for life? This will certainly result in so many difficulties that the present author cannot agree.

## CONCLUSION

So, in conclusion we may say that the profile designed by Kronenburg is not appropriate. In his views it remains unclear what is permitted to a bishop and what forbidden. His 'sandwich-model' may be a proper description of the tasks of a bishop, the expectations with regard to the bishop remain obscure. So the present author sticks to what is concluded earlier in the article: an episcopal element in the Protestant church in the Netherlands is advisable, but only if it is accompanied by well-defined competences and qualifications.

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<sup>15</sup> What is meant here are three forms of unity: the Heidelberg Catechism, the *Confessio Belgica* and the Doctrines against the Remonstrants.

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